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The Exhibition as Hypothesis

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- ¹ The history of contemporary Chinese art is once again considered through exhibition history. The title is strangely reminiscent of the first avant-garde Chinese art exhibition held outside of China: *Art chinois 1990 Chine demain pour hier* [*Chinese Art 1990, China Tomorrow for Yesterday*], curated by Fei Dawei, who only considers history in relation to its future. Biljana Ciric, an independent curator and researcher, has developed a research platform which brought together the St Paul St Gallery AUT in New Zealand (2013), the Rockbund Art Center in Shanghai (2018) and the Times Museum in Guangzhou (2019), around the subject of exhibitions focusing on China and South-East Asia, with a didactic view to organising exhibitions in the future. More than anywhere else in the world, this area, whose institutional network is not as recent nor as closely knit as its Western counterpart, seems to consider exhibition history as an aesthetic and historic fact that is quite distinct from art history proper. This phenomenon is made particularly noteworthy by the fact that this vast area has yet to train professionals, whose numbers are currently insufficient. Western professionals are tolerated in order to transfer their skills, whereas Chinese artists hope to see their events, actions, performances and exhibitions all listed in the same way. Therefore, exhibition history seems on the one hand to hold the performative dimension of creation, a material that is too much alive to be reduced to an object in a museum; while on the other hand it carries along all the social and cultural issues harnessed by curating artists. The likening of the archive to these same features crushes the space-time which is supposed to justify the contribution of historians rather than critics or artists, although Gao Minglu seemed to initiate his timeline of Chinese contemporary art (1978-1989) on the occasion of the first exhibition outside of China,¹ using a historic model which was promptly given up after the gunshots fired by Xiao Lu and Tang Song on the occasion of the first “exhibition of contemporary Chinese art” at the Chinese National Museum of Art on 5 February, 1989.²
- ² It appears that artists subsequently curating exhibitions, along with the fact performances became events located in the same space-time whose immediacy was

guaranteed by archives, transformed exhibitions into autonomous objects which were, however, contextualised, as they were separate from institutional and political time. Exhibitions had become artistic stances which controlled their own location in time, gaining independence through the exclusion of politics. Therefore, they could no longer be considered through the lens of Western exhibition history. Whereas the latter may seek to be performative, the former avoids performativity so as not to be dissolved by political power. One might therefore hypothesise that through Chinese exhibition history, an alternative relationship to time and history is developed. One of the differences between the two is to be found in narrative unity, and this goes far beyond the claims for a plurality of narratives within art history.

- 3 In their approach, Eastern European historians attempt to define a reality distinct from the narrative of modern art as well as from the extension of history towards Africa and other non-Western areas, because Eastern Europe refuses to see its “primary visionary potential” negated by the very mainstream narrative that it seeks to rewrite (Zdenda Badovinac). Similarly, Chinese artists endeavour to update past works, be they installations, actions or performances. But China wants to develop its relation to the world by connecting the local to the global, as suggested by Hou Hanru during one of the first symposia held before the creation of the platform. Thus, research into exhibitions and situated curatorial practices leads to the story of an ecomuseum in an isolated village museum of Yunnan. The paper recounts the creation of the museum at the beginning of the 2000s, and delves into its architecture and its collections centred around an ethnic minority that practices slash-and-burn agriculture. It also alludes to the group’s advanced assimilation, the disappearance of the museum’s collections and the museum’s usefulness regarding the growth of tourism that it initially sparked.
- 4 The periods under discussion vary from one contribution to the next, constructing as many examples of conquests as there are histories of modern and contemporary art. Seng Yujin thus contrasts the exhibitions of the Singapore universalist Modern Art Society (1963) and its cult of novelty with Kaisahan, a group of Filipino artists connected to the communist party and concerned with reality, as well as with the Indonesian GSRB group (The New Art Movement, 1974), whose manifesto states: “Research into Indonesian art history should be carried out by Indonesian art historians and critics. Universality of art is rejected, implying that Indonesian art cannot be studied from imported foreign books.”³
- 5 Patrick D. Flores⁴ examines the complexity of the history of modernity in South-East Asia from the time of the “First exhibition of non-objective art in the Philippines” in 1953 in Manila, as well as the individual and institutional networks that were simultaneously being developed (contacts in Paris, the location of the future Guggenheim museum, international Biennials) with the postcolonial leanings of contemporary international conferences [the First Asia Conference, Manila (1956), the Asian African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (1955)]. Biljana Ciric, who published *History in the Making, Shanghai: 1979-2006* in 2006, reveals that the development of contemporary art centres, improperly called museums, were often the work of real estate developers, resulting from the market economy which emerged following an experimental period after the 1976 Cultural Revolution, in order to share initiatives with state institutions. *Masterpieces from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* was thus hosted by institutions in 1979, following the opening of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China on the initiative of the Carter

administration. The exhibitions allowed the Chinese audience to see works by Robert Rauschenberg in 1985. The latter's visit to China made it possible for artists in Beijing to organise an exhibition in an American journalist's flat. This was the starting point for what Gao Minglu termed Apartment Art, one of (many) forums for artists, which became a specific type of public space. "As a result, the way in which the white cube space attempts to divide what is outside from what is inside as a usual mode for exhibiting is also brought into question."⁵

- 6 Following this general approach to the development of exhibitions and associated institutions and practices, Biljana Ciric's contribution focuses on the para-conceptual work of artists active in Shanghai, complementing the detailed history provided elsewhere by critics, curators and historians. Although the papers collected in this volume all question the expansion of exhibitions and the contemporary art they display, each contribution focuses on specific places and artists, such as Cambodia, for example. The conversation (2016-2017) between Erin Gleeson and Ly Daravuth discusses the history of the Situation Gallery in Phnom Penh. Julia Hartmann examines feminist issues, and other contributions explore the experiments and installations of the Big Tail Elephants group in the Guangzhou area, the transition from academic exhibitions to contemporary and thematic models in Taiwan, and the links between archives and works (Wang Ziyun). Time, narratives, and the development of practices and approaches to the subject of exhibitions and their new definitions, which are more theoretical and communicable, end this rich and engaging volume, whose result exceeds the sum of its initial parts.

NOTES

1. *Art chinois 1990 Chine demain pour hier*, Paris: Carte Segrete, 1990. Curated by Fei Dawei for Les domaines de l'art in Aix en Provence.
2. See: Poinot, Jean-Marc. "Histories and Archives of Chinese Contemporary Art: New and Disparate Elements", *Critique d'art*, no. 51, Autumn/Winter 2018, p. 30-44
3. Seng Yujin, "The Age of Manifestos: the discursive Struggle between the 'New' and the 'Real' in Exhibitions", *From a History of Exhibitions towards a Future of Exhibition-Making: China and Southeast Asia*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020, p. 63
4. D. Flores, Patrick. "The Demands of Abstraction: Exhibiting the Non-objective in Manila in 1953", *op. cit.*, p. 73-95
5. Ciric, Biljana. *Ibid.*, p. 101