
New Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art

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REFERENCES

Jane Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era (1978-93)*, Leiden: Brill, 2014, (Modern Asia Art and Visual Culture)

Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art : A Critical History*, Londres : Reaktion Books, 2014

Wu Hung, *Chinese Contemporary Art 1970s-2000s*, Londres : Thames & Hudson, 2014

L'Art chinois : regard contemporain sur 6 000 ans d'histoire, Paris : Phaidon, 2014

Made by Chinese: Architecture, Paris : Galerie Enrico Navarra, 2014. Sous la dir. Frédéric Edelmann. Texte de Jérémie Descamps

- 1 The recent spate of publications on contemporary Chinese art speaks to not only its continued global popularity, but also a new stage in the development of its scholarship. Publications over the past decade—focused on specific mediums and artists, or couched within exhibition themes—have been joined in recent years by broad authoritative accounts in English such as Lü Peng's 2010 *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, Gao Minglu's 2011 *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art*, and Richard Vine's *New China New Art* (first edition: 2008; revised and expanded edition: 2011). The books under review here, signal yet another stage in this process of canonization and critique. They mark a new point in the field where authors are now challenging established ideas and proposing alternative narratives of interpretation.
- 2 The vast range of formats and organizational structures represented in these publications demonstrate an impulse to experiment visually, reassess critically, challenge and present anew. These agendas and experiments pay testament to the enormous growth of the field. In particular, its expansion into new audiences and positioning within ever broadening contexts. Authors are not only responding to an increasing demand for informed

readings of contemporary Chinese art and its history, but also the need to frame these accounts based on a widening readership.

- 3 Over the past decade, contemporary Chinese art has experienced an astronomical rise in global exposure, best evidenced by its remarkable ascent in the art market. While initially the purview of Western collectors, in recent years, wealthy individuals from China have busily built collections and founded private museums. The range of readership for texts on contemporary Chinese art thus extends from students and scholars to collectors, art fund managers, curators, art critics, and general art enthusiasts. Just as significantly, people are arriving to contemporary Chinese art from distinct discursive and cultural backgrounds—students of art history, specialists from area studies, practitioners of contemporary art, China-watchers, etc.—who are equipped with different points of references, assumptions, expectations, and motivations.
- 4 Richard Vine addresses this head-on in *New China New Art*, where he offers Western newcomers reassuring words : "...seeing through Chinese eyes may yield only part of the rewards offered by this work—and arguably only a secondary part at that."¹ Richard Vine seeks to dispel two presumptions: first, that only people fluent in Chinese culture and language are equipped to understand this art; second, that a localized cultural context is preferred, or even sufficient, for grasping its meanings. He significantly premises the justification for his refusal of these positions on the claim that because Chinese artists have already merged into the "international monoculture", then : "Any viewer familiar with today's visual *lingua franca*, derived primarily from Western avant-gardism of the turn of the last century, will find contemporary Chinese art accessible."² Even as Richard Vine productively works to dispel Western perceptions of China as distinctly other and exotic, he also points out how its recent history has seen it entered into the voracious appetite of a global hegemony of Western taste, styles, and consumption. From the question of audience alone, this already delves into the complicated historical problems of access, inclusion, and authority around which China/West and local/global relations in contemporary Chinese art have revolved. And, as Richard Vine raises, continue to inform the writings of its history.
- 5 Historically, when contemporary Chinese art was first exhibited abroad, artists bristled at a host of inequalities from being seen as derivative of their Western counterparts to having their works glossed as simplistic political illustration. Since the 1990s, contemporary Chinese art has been drafted into projects that set out to expose and reorient the Western-centric global art world into one comprised of multiple art worlds. This initiative towards decentering has been championed most recently in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel's exhibition *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds after 1989* (2011–2012) and its accompanying publication *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (2013). The inclusion of contemporary Chinese art into this discourse signals the continuing geo-political stakes of interpretation.
- 6 Richard Vine himself offers a unique framework to relay the complicated contexts of contemporary Chinese art while eschewing the more conventional decade-by-decade format. Organized by medium, *New China New Art* has chapters devoted to painting, sculpture and installation, performance, photography, and video. While further organized into a few overarching subthemes, largely based on visual and material concerns, his discussions are very much artist-based. Some artists receive more attention than others, such as Zhang Huan, but for the most part, he centers on one or two of his/her most representative work. Richard Vine intertwines biographical details with socio-

historical context to explain the significance of a work's subject matter and salient formal qualities. Though frustratingly lacking in footnotes, the author's readings are insightful and concise as he moves quickly from one artist to the next. The rapid-fire artist-by-artist and medium-specific format lends to the text's clarity and ease of use as a quick reference guide on the 125 artists covered.

- 7 We see this artist-oriented approach shared in Wu Hung's *Chinese Contemporary Art 1970s-2000s*. While Wu Hung follows the standard chronological ordering, progressing according to major movements and historical events, these contexts are told through lengthy accounts of artists' lives and oeuvres. While Wu Hung integrates more dedicated discussions to cultural context and institutions than Richard Vine, his focus on individual artists allows him—like Vine—to communicate two key ideas: first, given the distinct power structures against which artists have historically negotiated—whether it is Western hegemony of the international monoculture, or censorship by the Chinese state—the focus on the artist emphasizes an individual's sense of agency in the face of dominant forces. Second, it promotes a view of contemporary Chinese art as vastly heterogeneous. In this way, art history emerges not as a series of depersonalized political illustrations, but rather comprised of a multiplicity of figures who work, challenge, and negotiate with their surrounding circumstances. Just as this allows for a showcasing of multiplicity in artistic experimentation, this also relatedly allows Wu Hung to show the blurring of global/local boundaries through an individual's life.
- 8 In contrast to these artist- and object-based studies, Jane Debevoise focuses on the institutional superstructure for art in *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era (1978-93)*. Jane Debevoise joins the other books reviewed here in showcasing the ever-shifting nature of the contemporary art world in China. She reveals the complicated armature of state support and growing commercial endeavors that these artists alternately benefited from and challenged from the 1980s through the early 1990s. Her detailed analyses of the programming of national museums and across the pages of prominent journals tells a story of negotiation and navigation, of economic reform, and the tensions over enacting cultural authority.
- 9 Even while couched within histories that proclaim "contemporary Chinese art", it is clear by all of these accounts, that there is a continual effort to challenge any pretense of a monolithic understanding of this art or even its contexts. As Paul Gladston shows in *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*, this challenge is directed as much at Chinese authors as Western publics. Paul Gladston's historiographical critiques fill in the stakes and consequences surrounding the cultural insider/outsider dyad that Richard Vine alludes to in his introduction. This is part of his larger project to reveal and redress how historical conditions and ensuing theoretical discourses have shaped the production and perceptions of contemporary Chinese art. Paul Gladston cites the rise of the postmodernist/poststructuralist discourse of the 1980s and 1990s as the source of two prevailing agendas for the interpretation of contemporary Chinese art. The understanding of it as a "localized variant of international postmodernism"³ has led, on the one hand, to a deterritorialized, counter-essentialist understanding that dissolves any claims for art as an expression of a geographically circumscribed cultural identity. On the other hand—in the hands of Chinese critics and art historians—this same claim for pluralistic postmodernist thinking has been employed to uphold an exceptionalist reading enacted through emphatic accounts of the "importance of a 'granular' understanding of localized conditions surrounding the production and reception of

contemporary art in the PRC"⁴ or what Paul Gladston refers to as an "essentialist counter-deconstructivist view."

- 10 In particular, Paul Gladston challenges authors such as Lü Peng and Gao Minglu for their "explicit or implicit resistance to non-Chinese perspectives", including their eschewing of Western theory and subsequent reliance on "largely un-reflexive forms of historical narration." In his final chapter, Paul Gladston continues to perform productive analyses of critics' and art historians' debates and stances on contemporaneity and postcolonial legacies. This address of different discursive perspectives signals the importance of recognizing the competing stances that exist, as well as how their motivations and histories bear serious consequences on maintaining cultural divisions.
- 11 Following a decade-by-decade account, Paul Gladston's narrative is focused on tracing discursive formations that have shaped contemporary Chinese art. In doing so, he offers interventions into and rigorous analyses of existing accounts. For example, in his first chapter "Chinese Art in Context" (p. 41-83), Paul Gladston goes back and forth between points of convergence, divergence, and exchange between the meanings and intentions behind Western and Chinese avant-gardes and modernist practices. His discussion of the alignment between radical Western art and Maoist ideology, as well as the influence of Chinese non-rationalist philosophy on Euro-American modernists challenges the assumption that they are wholly separate cultural discourses.
- 12 While both *L'Art chinois: regard contemporain sur 6 000 ans d'histoire* and *Made by Chinese—Architecture* both fall outside of the purview of contemporary Chinese art history, they show the extent to which contemporary art has affected adjacent histories. Characteristic of Phaidon's large-scale, lavishly illustrated—one image per page—publications, *L'Art chinois: regard contemporain sur 6 000 ans d'histoire* privileges image over context. However, the visual narrative told through these images thumbs its nose at a chronological, medium-specific, or stylistic ordering of a typical visual encyclopedia. Rather than based on historical and stylistic continuities or ruptures, the images of the book are organized by pairs without any discernible master narrative. Images on facing pages are paired to surprise, delight, and invoke curiosity. With over 6000 years of Chinese art history from which to choose, there are some pairings that are temporally close such as Tang with Ming, but the most jarring are those that include modern or contemporary Chinese works.
- 13 The conceit will delight, but this is more than just provocation for the sake of provocation. *L'Art chinois: regard contemporain sur 6 000 ans d'histoire* reveals several fascinating tendencies. First, by the very inclusion of contemporary art, this already assumes that the contemporary is not temporally bracketed off from a longer art historical continuum. Second, the pairings suggest that these contemporary works are not only part of, but also share resonances with its long 6000-year past. And, conversely, the authors suggest that these pairings also make one think about the resonances of the past with the present. That is, when paired with objects that are distinctly of the here and now, is antiquity injected with new relevance and interest?
- 14 While *L'Art chinois: regard contemporain sur 6 000 ans d'histoire* is a reminder of a vast history into which contemporary Chinese art is only the most recent entry, *Made by Chinese: Architecture* showcases the immediacy of the present. This is emphasized in the foreword, where the authors write: "some structures and projects will surely have been destroyed during the creation of his volume."⁵ While there is a brief recounting of the history of architecture, it is focused on interviews and work by a very new crop of

architects in China. The vast attention paid to the newest constructions for art districts, museums, galleries, pairs well with the discussion of new commercial infrastructure that appears in all of the accounts of contemporary Chinese art. *Made by Chinese* offers a visually stunning reminder of the physical structures, built environment, and rapid pace in which the development of contemporary Chinese art is situated.

NOTES

1. Vine, Richard. *New China New Art* (Revised and Expanded Edition). New York: Prestel Publishing, 2011, p. 9
2. *Ibid.*
3. Gladston, Paul. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014, p. 11
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28
5. Edelman, Frédéric. *Made by Chinese: Architecture*. Paris : Galerie Enrico Navarro, 2014, n.p.