

## Prospectives about the New Chinese Art

### LECTURE ABSTRACT

**Weng Ling.** Directora de la Shanghai Gallery of Art, Three on the Bund, Shanghai.



My topic today is to build up an idea of art space in China. China's growing position in our life is a reality, as China has an open China's door to the international world. We have inherited a destroyed art history. Nevertheless, in comparison with Western countries, our contemporary art scene has developed very fast in the last 25 years. This outburst can also be seen in our daily life in China.

Concerning contemporary art, there are three main spots which concentrate art activity in China: Beijing, Shanghai and Gwangju. Actually, we didn't have any idea of what's contemporary art. I think that, if you had been in China during the 70's, you'd have seen how Chinese art education system belonged to the Communist Party and it simply educated art students about art as

something beautiful, something real. Most academies focused their education on tradition, based on working on technique discipline instead on art theory. And, moreover, all references from Western art came from Russia and its education system. Then, nowadays, all art students have now good technique to draw or build something beautiful. This is like when we started art in middle school and even I started in the Central Academy of Fine Arts department of Art History, our history stopped by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. So that means we really don't know what's happening in the international art world, what's modern art, what's modern art to contemporary art, there's a lack of all that in our education system. How society during and after our '49 liberation, during and after Cultural Revolution, how society was there to fight for some political issues. Certainly, it was late for our historical education we really later for the historical educated. Cultural Revolution not only destroyed what was happening with our real art, it also destroyed our history of art. After '78, China started to have university again, so our education system started again. After that, we still have art professional students in the academy, to learn technique. But since China opened to the world, some art students and professors went abroad, came to Western counties and touched what was happening, what was the real situation in Western countries.

Chinese contemporary art is growing very fast, the same as China economic and political system, changing and growing up, changing very, very fast in the last 20 or 25 years now. Some of our artists took this chance to work out, on works that are really brilliant. These master artists have been shown, not only in the Chinese art field, also in the international professional art field, museums, biennials... Some of these artists have been in venues like the Smithsonian Gallery, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Venice Biennale... In the last 25 years Chinese artists have done a great job and have had new opportunities. Now we can say we have contemporary art really because China opened the door to Western countries. In like the last 10 years, new Chinese art has been often requested by Western scholars, curators or museum people, even collectors, all from Western countries.

I started in the Central Academy for Fine Arts, from 1985 to 1989 that was an icon at the time for China, even though we didn't have great museums to support, we don't have so many people who understand what contemporary art is. In 1989, I started teaching at the Art Department of South China Normal University and the Chinese Movie and Art Research Center. I started working for the art gallery in 1996 of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where I organized nearly 40 important domestic and foreign contemporary art exhibitions. As there was a lack of structures for developing art and promoting artists, in 2000 I established the Beijing Contemporary Visual Arts Development Co., Ltd. As most well-known in Western countries Chinese artists (institutionally recognized) were ignored in mainland China, I organized the exhibition *Towards a New Image – Twenty Years of Contemporary Chinese Painting*, which was a turning point in the consideration and view of Chinese art, and was on tour through the four most respected national galleries in China: the National Art Museum, Shanghai Art Museum, Sichuan Art Museum and Guangdong Art Museum.

*Autora: Weng Ling*

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In the last decade and in the context of this growing contemporary art scene, art institutions have struggled to promote and encourage new talents, as well as create a market structure, and lots of cutting-edge galleries, museums and art spaces have emerged. Society itself has made an effort in this sense. Every year new galleries open, some of them very commercial, others highly experimental, but only a few survive. Nevertheless, Shanghai is becoming very receptive in the field of arts, people attend to exhibitions. In 2002, I became the director of the Shanghai Gallery of Art in the Three on the Bund and I directed the *Shanghai Biennale – Urban Creation*, a stage for discussion on the fast changing cultural pattern and life style around the new urbanization and urban architecture in China.

The Shanghai Gallery of Art is located in the third floor of a huge building concentrating various activities like best fashion design, restaurants and diverse creative and free-time activities. The elegant post-renaissance building of Three on the Bund was built in 1916 by the Union Assurance Company, and has been re-designed by the world famous architect Michael Graves. The SGA aims to be an open platform where society can meet new art tendencies, by promoting Chinese and international contemporary art. Our gallery wants to become a top name-brand gallery of Chinese art, and as a private institution, collaborate with major museums, art foundations, galleries and critics from around the world. Since its opening in January 2004, SGA has produced a series of interdisciplinary as well as provoking projects which reflect the dynamics of current culture. The opening exhibition, *Beyond Boundaries*, was enormously successful. It gathered works of 26 main artists like Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Lin Tianmiao, Xu Bing, Yang Fudong, Wang Xingwei, Xu Jiang and Zhang Peili, among others. The next exhibition was *Tradition, Poetry and Sensibility*, including names such as Liu Wei, Zheng Zaidong and Zhou Chunya. Our third exhibiton *Dialogues* was focused on installation and video art from artists like Zhang Peili, Gu Dexin, Wang Gongxin and Yin Xiuzhen. The show *Odyssey 2004* gathered works of 9 contemporary Chinese artists based in France in order to make their work known in China. Also SGA has organized many solo shows for important artists such as Xu Bing, Tan Dun and Gu Dexin.

I understand that contemporary art should be easy for everyone, because it is related to our real life and it's open to the material and the subject. But because our traditional official education taught us beauty is art, nowadays mainstream people, don't understand what modern art, what contemporary art should be. They come to our space and want to see something painted or also something beautiful. When I first went overseas, I was really surprised all the cities have a traditional museum, an art museum and so many different spaces, like art centers, foundations, etc. and sometimes even tax free rules to support art. More than that, everybody knows what art is, its history and modern art in Western countries. Currently, I think there're a lot of talented and creative artists in our country because they reflect what's happening with our lives and society. That's the goal of our gallery, too. And I reckon we're in the right way. What we need now is more professionalism, more cultural exchanges and more support for artists.

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