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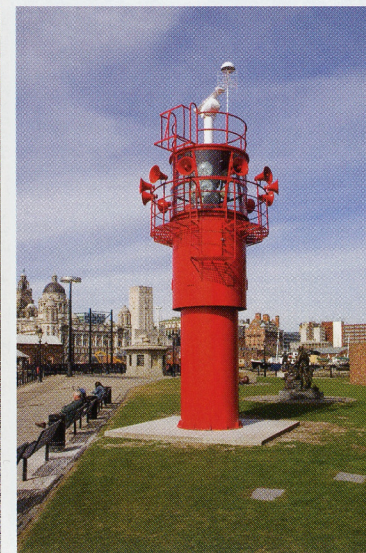


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“The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China”

TATE LIVERPOOL, UK

Philip Tinari

THE INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCE of “Chinese contemporary art,” first as a sphere of cultural activity, then as a category, and most recently as a market sector, has been driven by what we might term the “China show.” The China show typically presents a sprawling assemblage of works by a large number of artists, which is taken as illustrative of larger historical conditions and contemporary social realities. Since the early 1990s, this exhibition has been through dozens of incarnations—at museums of greater and lesser heft, mediated by curators with different tastes and diverse institutional imperatives, and with various degrees of connection to the larger geopolitical context. The first wave of China shows—which began with “China’s New Art, Post-1989,” Johnson Chang’s agenda-setting 1993 exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and ended with Gao Minglu’s “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center and the Asia Society in New York in 1998—grew out of a

particular moment in late Western liberalism, in which a desire to display art created under a repressive regime (especially given the post-Tiananmen context) fortuitously conjoined with the prevailing multiculturalist imperative to open up the Euro-American conversation. But the former is largely gone, and the latter has largely been undone by the inherent globalism of the art world since the mid-’90s. Where, then, does the China show stand now?

The theoretical problems that underlie the China show were clear before one was ever mounted. In Fredric Jameson’s 1986 tract “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” which dates to shortly after his landmark lecture tour in China and takes as its main subject of analysis Lu Xun’s 1918 story “Diary of a Madman,” Jameson argues that works from the periphery tend to appear as though “already read,” pale imitations of trends that have long ago run their course in the West. He goes on to state that “third-world texts . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory.” Indeed, on both counts: Throughout its short history, the China show has been taken as interesting mainly for the twin virtues of presenting modern (if sometimes “derivative”) art from China and for what the works are seen to say about current social realities in a vast country in the throes of “a profound cultural revolution,” to quote the somewhat curious wording of the jacket copy to the catalogue for “The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China,” which opened last March at Tate Liverpool.

In spite of the problems inherent to the genre, however, the China show has proved remarkably durable. This is perhaps not so surprising, given how Western

indignation at the lack of freedom in the country has given way to what now seems more like a heated fling taking place amid the rising skyscraper forests. The China show has been there through it all: The domestic legitimization of contemporary art was completed in June 2003, with official PRC sponsorship of the Centre Pompidou’s Year of China bazaar “*Alors, la Chine?*” The next year, curator Fei Dawei mounted a quiet protest against the China show’s excesses in “The Monk and the Demon: Contemporary Chinese Art,” at the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon, claiming that his was really an assemblage of miniature solo exhibitions (albeit culled entirely from the collection of Belgian baron Guy Ullens, whose investment in Chinese contemporary art has led him to found a new museum in Beijing, which opens in November). Also in the summer of 2004, the most canonical of recent China shows, Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips’s touring survey “Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China,” opened at the Asia Society and at the International Center for Photography in New York, garnering significantly more mass-media coverage and in the process effectively opening the market for contemporary Chinese photography. Two years ago, former Swiss ambassador to China Uli Sigg presented his take on the China show, with works from his collection of Chinese art (the world’s largest), in Holderbank, Switzerland, under the title “Mahjong,” including in the catalogue the responses of participating artists to a questionnaire titled “‘Chineseness’—Is There Such a Thing?”

Now, however, as auction prices for Chinese art continue to surprise even the most seasoned observers of the scene, the notion that there is a need for national narration



Opposite page, from left: Xu Zhen, *8848 Minus 1.86*, 2005, mixed media. Installation view, Tate Liverpool, 2007. Ai Weiwei and Fake Studio, *Working Progress (Fountain of Light)*, 2007. Installation view, Liverpool. Gu Dexin, *2007, 3, 30 (Light Funnel)*, 2007. Installation view, Liverpool. This page, left: Qiu Zhijie, *Railway from Lhasa to Kathmandu (detail)*, 2007, performance and mixed-media installation. Right: Qiu Xiaofei, *Art Class*, 2006, paintings, easels, lights, chairs, and fabric. Installation view, Tate Liverpool, 2007.



triangulated by foreign critics and curators is becoming increasingly absurd. As a result, an exhibition such as “The Real Thing”—organized by a museum of a higher caliber than the usual institutional interlocutors and away from the collector- or gallerist-driven motives that often underlie such exhibitions—demands a serious engagement with the question of how the China-show paradigm can be adapted to the situation in 2007. The curators—Simon Groom, Karen Smith, and Xu Zhen—offered some revealing answers.

An emphasis on novelty still seems to be necessary, for starters. We are told that this is “the first comprehensive exhibition of contemporary art by Chinese artists in the UK” (a dubious claim in light of the Serpentine Gallery/Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art collaboration, “China Power Station: Part 1,” which took place last fall in London). A catalogue that presents a long view of each featured artist’s practice (the list was kept to a tight: eighteen), written by Smith, the leading lady of first-generation Chinese contemporary specialists, certainly helps. So does an oblique title—a fashionable conceit, perhaps, but certainly preferable to titles like “Our Chinese Friends” (Bauhaus Weimar, Germany, 2000), “China!” (Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany, 1996), or indeed “China Welcomes You,” which opened this past June at the Kunsthaus Graz in Austria. Groom, who is head of exhibitions at Tate Liverpool, mounts a persuasive defense of his institution’s choice of title in his catalogue essay: “In its invocation of the Coca-Cola marketing slogan, the title of the exhibition acknowledges that for many, Chinese art operates on the level of a brand, its complexities reduced to familiar codes legible only for what they

purport to reveal about that greatest of all contemporary brands, China.”

Perhaps it was appropriate, then, that the highlight of the opening night of “The Real Thing” involved the indictment of one Chinese artist’s “brand.” The Yangjiang Group—artists Zheng Guogu, Chen Zaiyan, and Sun Qinglin—set off more than twenty thousand fireworks in a six-minute-long pyrotechnic battle between two imagined armadas. (The exhibition later featured video documentation of the event.) The piece, titled *If I Knew the Danger Ahead, I’d Have Stayed Well Clear*, 2007, was instantly evocative of Cai Guo-Qiang’s more famous “explosion events.” It thus set up a productive polarity between Cai as the shining star of the expatriate ’80s generation (he has recently been embraced by officialdom, chosen to design the opening and closing ceremonies of next year’s Olympic Games) and this group of Cantonese newcomers. From his base in the third-tier coastal city of Yangjiang, Zheng in particular has built up a carefully calibrated outsider stance, which he has parlayed into fame through gestures such as the absurdly over-edited photographic series *Ten Thousand Customers*, 1997–2000, consisting of ten thousand prints. He has also produced a number of “anticalligraphy installations,” together with his Yangjiang confreres. Such self-conscious positioning seems to neatly parallel the critical and institutional acclaim Cai so resolutely cultivated over his two decades of residence in Japan and the United States.

Does the China show need, per the title of Geng Jianyi’s brilliant video installation, *An Unapologetic Act of Sabotage?*

Another outdoor pairing matched Ai Weiwei and Fake Studio’s *Working Progress (Fountain of Light)*, 2007, a steel-and-crystal floating sculpture in the style of Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, with an exact replica of the funnel from the last working floating lighthouse in Liverpool, by Gu Dexin. Gu’s *2007, 3, 30 (Light Funnel)*, 2007, was installed on the riverside promenade outside the former warehouse that is home to Tate Liverpool. Its proximity to Ai’s work evoked the scene outside the 1st Guangzhou Triennial in 2002, where an understated text piece by Gu reading IN GOD WE TRUST was mounted on the Guangdong Museum of Art facade above Ai’s *Chandelier*, 2002. These two Beijing stalwarts strangely mirror each other, not least because Gu’s practiced refusal to narrate his own work—most of his pieces are titled simply with their completion date—puts him effortlessly into dialogue with Ai’s notorious habit of noncooperation.

Perhaps the most revealing pairing, however, involved two works about trips to Tibet—one journey real, the other fake. *8848 Minus 1.86*, 2005, Xu Zhen’s celebrated, simulated excursion to the top of Mount Everest to cut off and bring back a chunk of the icy peak equivalent to his own height, was presented here as a video projection and a heap of climbing paraphernalia surrounding a “refrigerated” glass case bearing the supposed trophy. The joke at the heart of the work—the video is digitally manipulated, and the peak is made of something like papier-mâché—is repeated almost completely deadpan in



Left: Zhou Tiehai, *Le Juge, Le Ministre, Le Diplomate* (detail), 2007, 3 wax desserts and book, dimensions variable.
Below: Wang Wei, *Temporary Space* (detail), 2003–2007, video and 12 light boxes, dimensions variable.



the catalogue (perhaps owing to the artist's status as one of the exhibition's curators). But perhaps more remarkable was Qiu Zhijie's installation documenting a walk from Lhasa to Kathmandu, throughout which he wore a pair of shackles connected by a thirty-three-inch chain, in reference to the expedition made in 1863 by Nain Singh, an Indian working for the Royal British Engineers on a cartographic survey of the Himalayas, who trained extensively to ensure that his strides were of a consistent length. Qiu's project, documented in photographs and on film and memorialized in a metal beam forged from items bought or bartered for along the five-hundred-mile route, is titled *Railway from Lhasa to Kathmandu*, 2007—a jibe at the Qinghai-Tibet railway that opened last year and which represents the most significant penetration of Tibet by outsiders in recent history. The tension between these two works is buttressed by the knowledge that Xu and Qiu occupy positions of similar critical and curatorial authority in Shanghai and Beijing, respectively, and that their agendas, while contradictory, have been effective in expanding the space for interesting artistic production and display inside China. That a prankster and a wunderkind can coexist so productively is revealing of the exhilarating possibilities of the current moment.

Other works, perhaps generally less remarkable but rarely outright bad, fleshed out the exhibition. Zhuang Hui's *Factory Floor*, 2003, filled one room with a trompe-l'œil-painted foam replica of a room in the East Is Red tractor factory, where the artist once worked, evoking the scene of an accident there in which a worker lost his legs.

Wang Wei's *Temporary Space*, 2003–2007, a series of twelve black-and-white light boxes and a video documenting the construction and destruction of a brick box inside a Beijing gallery by migrant brick harvesters (a project I curated at the time), never looked so good. Yang Fudong's *East of Que Village*, 2007, provided a bleak northern counterpoint to the artist's acclaimed south-of-the-Yangtze films: Instead of the perfectly styled urban youth on an extended rural sabbatical who populate the *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* cycle, we get a pack of wild dogs scavenging for food outside a village in Hebei Province, not far from Yang's birthplace. Cao Fei's ubiquitous *Whose Utopia?*, 2006, a video produced in and with the support of the Siemens Osram lightbulb factory in Guangdong, showed itself, once more, as an earnest ode to the hopes and dreams of an underclass with whom we are asked to believe the artist feels solidarity. The young painter Qiu Xiaofei fabricated a painting classroom out of oils, wood, and cardboard, in a feat of eminently marketable mimesis (*Art Class*, 2006). Zhou Tiehai served up three wax-model slices of decadent cake named *Le Juge, Le Ministre, Le Diplomate*, 2007, in a tired indictment of nouveau-riche extravagance—perfect to serve to the VIPs at the ShContemporary fair that he helped organize, which opens in Shanghai this month. China-show veterans such as the painter Yang Shaobin, with his socialist-realist meditations on the fates of contemporary mine workers, and old-school video artists such as Wang Gongxin, Li Yongbin, and Wang Peng appeared strangely out of place among so much new work by their younger, hipper peers.

Does the China show need, per the title of Geng Jianyi's brilliant video installation, *An Unapologetic Act of Sabotage?* (In Geng's 2007 piece, the conversations and actions of customers at a foot-massage parlor are recorded by surveillance cameras, transcribed, and then reenacted by their original protagonists, which turns an originally organic stream of events into something curiously false and stilted. The work might almost be said to mirror a curatorial pathology whereby the same bunch of artists have been dragged out time and again to make the same few points about history and memory, self and society, destruction and construction in the Middle Kingdom.) Judging from the quality and the presentation of the works on display in Liverpool, however, the genre, if intrinsically outdated, can still be made to work successfully—maybe not forever but probably for a while longer, particularly given how invested newly ascendant Chinese players, including the PRC state itself, seem in maintaining some sort of distinction from the wider art-world fray. In art, as in geopolitics, the rise of China continues to reaggregate global value chains, to test the limits of the nation-state as a meaningful concept, to upend once-axiomatic understandings of postcolonialism and multiculturalism, and ultimately to alter subjectivities and material realities worldwide. That the China show itself often now appears “already read” says as much about how far those changes have proceeded as it does about how far they may still go. □

“The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China” travels to the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Spain, Feb. 8–Apr. 27, 2008.

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