HIS CHINESE LEGACY: ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG’S IMPACT AND INFLUENCE IN POST 1985 CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART AND ART POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The Robert Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative (ROCI) was a catalyst/source of reflection in the evolution of modern Chinese art from Soviet-inspired socialist realism to more avant-garde modes of expression. This thesis will explore the motivations that led Rauschenberg to create ROCI and the subsequent influence of ROCI on the China/Avant-Garde Art Exhibition and the issues that it raised up to the present in comparison to the environment during the pre-ROCI Third Stars Exhibition.

Much of the research was based from perspectives and analysis of available art sources to determine Rauschenberg’s role in the formation of an experimental art climate in China in the mid to late 80s. In researching his exhibition and goals, primary news reports from magazines and arts journals, cultural policies of the time, and other arts criticism were used.

ROCI’s founding aims and questions to its success were hotly debated by critics and public alike throughout Rauschenberg’s world journey in the 80s and 90s. In the specific case of China, his work and presence sparked an intimate look within a newly-opening
arts environment for the local government, local artists, and Rauschenberg himself. As the first Western contemporary artist to personally exhibit in the People’s Republic of China, the showcasing of his works prophetically raised relevant issues regarding the commodification of art, its relationship with the government, as well as the relationship with the self, all of which Party leaders together with modern artists in China, grapple with today in expressing their personal vision for the country’s future.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Few things can provoke as much passionate debate as the definition or notion of place and identity. At present, it seems that non-Chinese have newly discovered China as an emerging economic dragon born from a modern history of only 60 years. For many Chinese however, China is an ancient civilization of a five thousand year history, one rich in art and aesthetics. Either way, both can agree that much of the 20th century was not a proud epoch of the country, and the reverberations from that dismal time shaped the founding ideology of the People’s Republic of China, attitudes of which can be traced to this day.

Robert Rauschenberg was already globally recognized as an artistic dynamo when he committed himself to the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or ROCI. His ambitious aim was to reconcile, for large groups of audiences around the world, some of their preconceptions of each other and offer a vision of a common humanity. This vision proved to be rare and subsequently influential, particularly to insular countries like China.

Because of his efforts, together with evolving system of government cultural policies and an emerging domestic avant-garde art scene, he also became known as the first Western contemporary artist to personally exhibit in the People’s Republic of China. The act of showcasing the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative (ROCI) there truly marked a turning point in the evolution of modern Chinese art from Soviet-inspired socialist realism to more avant-garde modes of expression.
Short History of Experimental Art in China

For Chinese artists, the impact of their country’s wrenching change during the twentieth century has been a brutal one. During the 1930s-1940s, artistic freedom was sacrificed to wartime crisis; during Chairman Mao Zedong’s years as head of the People’s Republic, guided by Leninist doctrine, the rule was that art had to be the servant of State and Party policy. Dante Alighieri’s western concept of ‘art for art’s sake’ is fundamentally opposed to this mandate and was therefore found intolerable. Until the break with the Soviet Union in 1956, Socialist Realism, which comprised of using subjects like spirited workers, heroic soldiers, uplifting leaders, was the officially enforced style. Posters of “shock workers” (people who worked tirelessly for Socialism) showcased smiling square jawed, muscular men and ruddy faced women performing menial chores in front of glistening factories.

During the last ten years of Mao’s life, the Cultural Revolution imposed further suffocating artistic restrictions and severe punishment to those who violated them. Universities and other cultural institutions were closed, and many thousands of artists and intellectuals were imprisoned or sentenced to years of hard physical labor. The most extreme efforts were made to cut artists off from all foreign contacts and to completely purge every trace of non-Chinese, especially western, influence from all areas of arts and culture except Soviet-inspired Socialist-Realism. Thus every manifestation of what could be termed modern art was forbidden, from Impressionism to Pop to Abstract art. Even the
painting of nude figures was taboo. The humanistic, universal, creative qualities of Chinese culture, one of the oldest in the world, were under tremendous assault.

Awareness of this dramatic and tragic background is key to understanding the significance and the impact of Chairman Mao’s death. The change in the nation was swift: within a year the directors of the Cultural Revolution, the infamous Gang of Four, had been deposed, the Cultural Revolution was declared over, and revolutionary fanaticism was outlawed. Succeeded by a new and very different leadership group headed by Deng Xiaoping, the resulting policies were defined by a moderate and pragmatic approach, dedicated to modernizing and developing the country by various measures of liberalization, and to the reopening of economic, scientific, and cultural contacts with the outside world.

There remained caution and even skepticism among artists because, as one university professor put it, “there are memories which do not fade quickly.” Indeed, old ideological and bureaucratic influences were not immediately dissipated, nor did the whole generation of artists and art administrators brought up in the period of Soviet influence (thousands of whom had received scholarships for travel and study in the Soviet Union) instantly disappear from the scene. As a result there were various aberrations--cancellations of some exhibitions of unconventional art, and public criticism of some artists who pressed the limits of official acceptability too far.¹

Pre-1949

Throughout its history, Chinese art was never isolated from outside influences. By the 1930s, the Chinese artistic horizon had expanded beyond its own indigenous heritage to embrace many new ideas and diverse currents from the West. Examples include Chu-tsing Li’s catalogue of the Drenowatz collection of twentieth century painting, along with Mayching Kao’s account on the impact of Western art on Chinese artists and the Chinese public in the early 1900s, as well as the eventual inclusion of art classes in the school curriculum, the establishment of formal art schools, art societies, art journals and pictorials, public museum and exhibition galleries—all concepts imported from the West. By the 1920s, as a result of the May Fourth Movement/New Culture Movement\(^2\), more and more artists were studying in Europe and Japan. There and at home they were exposed to the varied trends of the contemporary European art world. It was the 1930s that saw the polarization of art and the rise of opposition to personal expression or art for art’s sake. Opposition to this theory came from young Chinese artists, many of whom were influenced by Marxist-Leninist interpretations of art that reflected social realities. This new attitude was also fostered by China’s most gifted modern writer, Lu Xun, who was instrumental in the 1930s in introducing European woodblock prints into China.

With the Japanese bombing of Shanghai and the Japanese occupation of Beijing and other northern and coastal cities during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, came damage or destruction of many private art studios, public art schools, teaching facilities,

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\(^2\) The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement growing out of student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919 protesting the Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles.
and art works; artists and teachers were hence scattered around the country. Some moved inland with the Nationalist government to Sichuan in southwest China, where they reconstituted versions of the art schools they abandoned in the face of the Japanese invasion. Others chose to remain in the occupied zone. As for the rest, it was said that many artists wandered throughout China for the duration, all to keep ahead of the Japanese invaders and out of the lines of battle.

At the conclusion of the civil hostilities between the Communists and the Nationalist government, artists returned to the major cities to resume their teaching and art careers either in association with the art schools or in independent studios. Despite the massive disruptions of the war years, by 1947 the arts began to recover. In the 1946-47 *China Art Yearbook*, the biographies of some 1,760 contemporary artists are recorded. Among them are representatives of all mediums of art: calligraphy, traditional style Chinese paintings, oil painting, watercolor, sculpture, photography, commercial art, and design. In addition, during 1946-47 alone, 152 public art exhibitions were held throughout the country.3

As part of its strategy to forge a united front with as many Chinese social sectors as possible, the developing Communist Party deliberately tried, through those who openly sympathized with it, such as Guo Moruo and Mao Dun, and through its

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underground networks, to win the support of artists and writers working in Chungqing, the temporary Communist capital in China’s interior.⁴

Post-1949

When Mao Zedong established the People’s Republic of China in 1949, his belief that New China could be entirely self-sufficient and self-cultivating was not an entirely deluded ambition. With the support of the Soviet Union, and an innate confidence in the enduring prowess of Chinese civilization, Mao did not fear isolation for the new republic.⁵ At this time, the Communists already held control over the arts in Yan’an, their isolated village, wartime capital. Now they had to exert this control over all artists throughout the entire, vast country. An advantage for the Communists was the inheritance of a system of art schools and trained teachers. Also inherited was a receptive attitude on the part of the public toward art exhibition and the exhibition review, along with the acceptance of art journals as primary vehicles for the dissemination of art and art information.

The main disadvantage for the Chinese Communists laid in the fact that most of the artists, both Western- and traditional- style, were either unsympathetic to or ignorant of Communist ideological goals. Regardless of what their orientation might have been during the 1930s, both groups still often held the goal of art as art for art’s sake or as a means of personal expression. Socially, both groups were often made up of scions of the


⁵ But as the Cold War deepened the nations of Western Europe and North America colluded to keep communist China at arms-length, effectively isolating the country.
elite gentry, a group ordinarily contemptuous of the worker or peasant. The Communists were completely and wholly committed to changing these attitudes.

In their eyes, artists belonged to the intellectual class, and likely to harbor independent ideas. Furthermore, since most do not depend upon their own physical labor for their livelihood, they are thought to naturally harbor bourgeois ideas. To safeguard against the emergence of these bourgeois ideas and attitudes, artists in China were expected to forgo their prior privileged status and align themselves with the peasants and workers by sharing the same political and ideological viewpoint. It was believed to be very simple for intellectuals and artists to stray from this position and to promote the ideas and sentiments of the bourgeois class, such as those “old habits and incorrect ideas” which “propagate the ideals of individualism, the cult of the outstanding personality and self-complacency; they inculcate the ideology of indifference to the state of the country and the people, and disbelief in the success and of the struggles of the masses.”

Because of this belief, artists and intellectuals were periodically subjected to rectification campaigns and programs to eradicate these ideas, educating them along the Communist ideological lines. These have purges include hard labor and even times execution.

More insidious was, according to John Starr,⁶ was that at time, “the Chinese have greatly expanded the realm of the private life into the political, as the concern for private pursuits and private interests is regarded as characteristic of the bourgeois class and is denounced. Selfishness is regarded as a quality that must be rooted out and replaced with

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Therefore, artists aside, it was stated that any subsequent small groups to which everyone in China belonged to in essence effectively reduced the individual’s ability to retreat into a private, individual world.

At the same time, aware of the crucial role that intellectuals could play in legitimizing the regime’s position of power and promoting its policies, the Party leaders aimed to mold these intellectuals ideologically into a malleable group that would help implement policy. Those involved in the arts, for example, possessed the cultural means to propagate ideas among vast numbers of people. (In this way, art had a particularly important role to play. Since the main target for the Party’s political message was China’s millions of illiterate peasants, art had a natural advantage over the written word as a vehicle for propaganda; for example, it was a much speedier way of reaching a large audience compared to a drama troupe, which by necessity must perform for limited numbers of people at a time.) Therefore, while stressing the need for a strong political dimension in the arts, the Party also saw the wisdom in allowing some degree of debate on aesthetic standards, in order to ensure maximum effectiveness of the arts as a means of spreading its political message.8

Although many artists felt ideological pressure, the government recognized their potential aid by using incentives to induce artists to offer their support to the regime. These mainly took the form of positions of importance, particularly in the newly established Artists’ Association. In this way, better-known individuals were thus assured

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a prominent place in the new system and the chance to maintain, even enhance, personal prestige.\textsuperscript{9} Though they were only at a formative stage in the 1930s and 1940s, three features were to play a crucial role on the comprehensive system of control established by the Party after the founding of the PRC: ideology, organization, and political campaigns.

I ideological Campaigns: Mao’s Yan’an Talks

All of the subsequent art policies originated from the 1942 Yan’an Forum on Literature, which marked the basic guidelines outlined by Chairman Mao. He used this two-week-long workshop as a mode not only for disciplining the urban, Westernized writers who veered from Marxism, but also as an opportunity to set forth his ideas on the position of art. Mao’s two speeches at this forum, especially his concluding oration given on May 23, 1942, contained the basic guidelines for art under the new republic.

Influenced by early Russian Marxists like Plekhanov and Lenin, Mao pointed out the class basis of art and insisted that art must serve the masses, specifically the workers, peasants, and soldier.\textsuperscript{10} In this context the art of the bourgeois and intellectual, because of the pronounced “individualism” and “self expression” which tends to portray only the bourgeoisie, cannot serve the people, because it neither depicts them nor educates them.

This is the result of failure on the part of the artists to understand the common man, who do so by ignoring them and overlooking the “nascent literature and art” such as folk songs, folk tales, or murals. Yet Mao underscored the “rich legacy and the good traditions” in literature and art from China’s past and from foreign countries; this respect

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 13.

is permitted as long as these mediums serve the masses. The old forms should be “remolded and infused with new content” to “become something revolutionary in the service of the people.”

The origin of all art, according to Mao, is the life of the people: everyday phenomena, contradictions, and struggles. Based upon the life of the masses, art should “awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment.” Here, art is meant to instruct the masses to strive for improvement by casting off the old habits which kept them bound and destitute, economically subservient to the landlord class. Therefore, art cannot simply parallel life; to be effective it must “be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life,” akin to Claude Debussy’s extolment of the beautiful lies that constitute art.

Mao also addressed the question of whether artists should either, on the one hand, strive for popularization, or, on the other hand, work to raise artistic standards. According to Mao, neither should be done in isolation because they are interdependent. One cannot raise the artistic standards of one’s audience until one understands the base (workers, peasants, soldiers) from which the standards are to be raised. This also meant raising standards in the correct class direction, “along the direction in which workers, peasants, and soldiers are themselves advancing.

So again, artists must learn from the people (tiyan shanghuo). As such, art cannot be not independent of politics, for artwork is meant as “a definite and assigned position to

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11 Bonnie McDougall, Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1980), 70.
the Party revolutionary work” and “is subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period.” Artists thusly cannot act or work on their own.

A final point to be noted in Mao’s Yan’an Talks is the question of the criteria of criticism, political, and artistic. It is especially vital to recognize his stance in regard to the question of political content combined with “unity of motive and effect.” If neither the motive nor intent is good, then the art will be incorrect. The subjective intention of the creator, or what he says about the intention is not the matter of judgment but rather on the result of his work and the perceived effect it will have on the audience. This is why paintings and other art works are carefully analyzed by the PRC for their political messages, and this is also why they are critiqued for the way in which that message is conveyed visually; the form must be correct for the content. This is follows Mao’s demand for the “unity of politics and art, the unity of form and content, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form.”

The concrete elements were reflected in the middle of Mao’s statements: “If everyone agrees on the fundamental policy [of serving the workers, peasants and soldiers and of how to serve them,] it should be adhered to by all our workers, all our schools, publications, and organizations in the field of literature and art and in all our literary and artistic activities. It is wrong to depart from this policy and anything at variance must be duly corrected.”

A more ground-level look of these new policies on art education can be seen from a set of regulations drawn up in 1951 by head of the Artists’ Association Jiang Feng, for

the East China Campus of the Central Academy of Fine Art. The curriculum was rearranged and teaching methods modified: rather than aesthetic theory, art practice via political criterion, was taken as a cornerstone, with realism as the main creative style. In addition, students were to focus on more “popular” art forms, such as New Year pictures, picture-storybooks, folk paintings, and portraits of Party leaders. Outside of art schools, the public was flooded with propaganda-laden flyers, Da Zi Bao (opinion/propaganda posters that were written with calligraphy), blackboard newspapers, street performances, theater, film, music, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Every available medium of Cultural Revolution art thoroughly blanketed the masses.

From these reforms it was clear that the authorities were determined to exert influence in all aspects of art education. They placed their most reliable and active supporters in key positions of authority and insisted only art designated as politically desirable should be taught while anything else should be criticized and rejected. Finally, through the selection and training of art students, teachers, and cadres from good political backgrounds, the Party aimed for the continuation of left-wing policies in the art academies and colleges.13

Very tellingly of the commitment to the new mission, the Party began to carry out small-scale purges against non-conformists within its ranks, the most extreme example being the criticism and execution of the writer Wang Shiwei for his heterodox views and independent thinking.14


14 Ibid., 5-6.
However, when artists, even very talented artists, attempted to portray the new socialist China in the “most perfect artistic form possible,” the results were rarely aesthetically successful. This must be at least partly stem from the fact that the individuals who produced the great religious and landscape paintings were steeped in cultural traditions and values they were trying to convey; they truly believed in what they were trying to paint. In contrast, during the early years of the People’s Republic, most artists had, at least initially, an extremely poor and superficial grasp of Marxism, a foreign system of thinking suddenly transplanted to the Chinese mindset. How were they to express something they did not necessarily understand, let alone feel committed to? With this, many artists tended to fall back on standard, formulaic conventions, which rendered their work dull and lifeless, more political propaganda than art.\(^{15}\)

**Organizational Structures**

Mao’s actions in the new republic were initially salutary, involving the role of industries, collectivization of farms, organization of the populace into closely monitored communes and work units (*danwei*), substitution of ration tickets for currency and an “iron rice bowl” policy guaranteeing lifelong employment and care (education, medical treatment, retirement) in exchange for unwavering devotion to the common good, as determined by the cadres of the Communist Party.\(^{16}\)

Cultural and artistic policy in the PRC at this time was set by the Department of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. Under its office are the Ministry of Culture

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and its various departments and bureaus, which is the state administrative organ responsible for implementing the policies. The Ministry of Culture guides art professionals in accordance with the current principles and policies, promotes artistic creation and production, and discovers and trains talented writers and artists. Cultural bureaus or sections are found in government organizations at the provincial, municipal, autonomous regional, prefectural, and county levels. They are one of the channels through which policy reaches the artist.

The Chinese Artists’ Association, along with other professional literary and art associations (such as the Chinese Writers’ Association, the Chinese Musician’s Association, the Chinese Dancers’ Association) is under the umbrella of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, founded with a slightly different name, in July 1949. This and its subsidiary associations are considered “people’s organizations,” and as such, they are not connected with either the Dept. of Propaganda or the Ministry of Culture, but are under the supervision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

The Chinese Artists’ Association is the agency most involved in fostering the professional life of its members, whose membership is gained through application only. There is a nationwide network of branches of the Chinese Artists’ Association on every administrative level: province, city, autonomous region, and prefecture.

These professional artists, masters of western and Chinese art, are paid by the state and art assigned work by the state. They might be assigned to reach and create in one of the art institutes or academies, such as the prestigious Central Art Academy in
Beijing, the Lu Xun Academy in Shenyang, etc. Various museums and specialist research institutes use professional artists to provide pictures supplementing exhibitions of artifacts. Local cultural halls also may have them on staff as well.  

To reach the general public, art exhibitions and publications became the main channels for the Communist government to get its political message across in a visual form. They were also the two key channels by which artists were able to gain regular access to the public. If denied access to these channels, an artist would lose the most important means of sharing his or her work with the wider public, arguably the main justification for creative expression itself. The authorities thus ensured that strict control was maintained over these channels through the Ministry of Culture and the Artists’ Association. Without the official approval of, or sponsorship by, one of these organizations, it was virtually impossible for artists to have their work published or exhibited at the national or even local level. By exercising strict control, the Party was guaranteed authority over the aesthetic ideas and ideological principles to which art was required to conform.

As the second major channel by which Chinese artists gained access to a public audience, exhibitions also came under the strict control of official art organizations at the national and local level. These organizations included the Artists’ Association and all of its branches, the China National Art Gallery and all of its branches, and the various art colleges nationwide.

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18 Only professional artists associated with art academies were able to do so.

The selection of works for any exhibition involved a lengthy process of assessment by a variety of officials, not all of whom were art experts. The process was particularly complicated and laborious for national art exhibitions. Works were first submitted, usually by art teachers and students, for approval at the county level; if they passed this initial test, they would then be scrutinized by officials at a provincial level and, if successful, they would receive final approval or rejection by a panel of judges, comprising of leading members of the Artists’ Association in consultation with the head of the Central Academy of Fine Art, the head of the College of Arts and Crafts in Beijing, the fine art editor of the People’s Daily, the head of the People’s Fine Art Publishing House, and a number of well-established artists. Artists were themselves effectively precluded from organizing their own exhibitions due to the monopoly exercised by the Artists’ Association and the Ministry of Cultural over all suitable public display areas.\(^{20}\)

**Political Campaigns**

Between 1949 and 1956 there were three major political campaigns that particularly affected the intellectuals. Although it was not originally aimed at the art world, they eventually developed into wider movements embracing all cultural endeavors, including art. The three were criticism of the film *The Story of Wu Xun* in 1951; criticism of Yu Pingbo’s research into the *Dream of the Red Mansion* in 1954; and the campaign against Hu Feng in 1955. These political movements shared certain common features, which also characterized several later campaigns. They all began from one particular event which then caused reverberations throughout the intellectual-cultural

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world, becoming ultimately nationwide political movements. Academic discussions always finally turned into political discussions, that is to say, the intellectual debate acted as a prelude to a political movement. The method of severe widespread criticism of intellectuals was then utilized to eradicate any signs of dissent and to force intellectuals into making self-criticisms.  

Hundred Flowers Movement

It was during a meeting of the Supreme State Conference held on May 6, 1956, that Mao first put forward the idea of “Letting a Hundred Flowers Bloom, Letting a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend,” which signaled a new direction in policy, one often referred by Mao and other Party leaders on several occasions over the next few months. Party Propaganda Chief, Lu Dingyi, gave a speech on May 26 of that year, explaining Mao’s ideas in greater depth. He emphasized the need to secure a united ideological front with all sectors of society, and advocated a diversity of themes in cultural and intellectuals endeavors. He went so far as to say that it would be permissible in cultural work to refer to “celestial beings in heaven, and birds and bees that can speak,” a sign of exuberant encouragement for writers and artists to use their creative imagination beyond the collective framework. Shortly after this, Zhou Yang, the Deputy Chief of Propaganda, echoed Lu’s sentiments. While chairing a meeting on the “Preparations for the Twelve Year Development Plan for Culture and Science,” he stated

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that “If you want artistic activities to flourish and artistic levels to improve, then the best line to take is liberalization.”

Considering the previous strong emphasis on political art for edification’s sake, there are general factors which most agree contributed to the Hundred Flowers policy. The first was the international dimension: the denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Union caused great confusion in socialist countries and later instability in Eastern Europe. Therefore, doubt was cast on Stalinist policies; in China, this led a re-appraisal of the ideological orthodoxy that had been imposed 1949.

Also, the creation of a highly centralized political system had started to generate a host of bureaucratic problems. Those reforms affected the interest of certain social groups, and mistakes that had been committed in the process began to damage the Party’s credibility among certain sectors of society. They became aware of the pressing need to improve the old functional mechanism of its organization in order to solve these social problems, and that a more relaxed policy was needed.

One of the developments of this led to an increase in the number of exhibitions displaying art pieces from countries other than the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These shows were said to have “contained something new, something entirely different from anything we have seen before.” An exhibition of British graphic art was staged in Beijing in 1956, the first of its kind in China. The 220-piece exhibition, including woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, silkscreen prints and book illustrations, covered the last

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23 Ibid, 56-57.

five hundred years of British graphic art. Particular mention was taken of the political and social caricaturists such as William Hogarth (political satirical art founder), Thomas Rowlandson, James Gilroy, and Richard Newtown, perhaps because they echoed the political satire that permeated the work of many Chinese cartoonists during the Hundred Flowers Movement.

That same year also saw the first ever exhibition of Mexican art in China, featuring work from the last twenty years by thirty artists, including the woodcuts of Leopold Mendez and the lithographs of Pablo O’Higgins. News of the exhibition and reproductions of exhibits appeared in the *People’s Daily*, *the Guangming Daily*, *the Peking Daily*, *Fine Art*, and other publications, and the exhibition boasted among its viewing public several prominent Chinese graphic artists. It was followed in succession by displays of the work of six Italian artists, a Vietnamese exhibition, an exhibition of Greek art and a second Mexican comprising paintings, murals, woodcuts, engravings and featuring the work of amongst others, Diego Rivera and D.A. Siqueiros.  

However, it must not be forgotten that this liberalization of western art only lasted the one-year term of the policy of 1957.

Theoretically, Mao’s justification for the Hundred Flowers policy was based on Lenin’s “Theory of the Unity of Opposites,” whereby truth could only be highlighted by comparison with ugliness, goodness with evil, and so on. A “fragrant flower” in the cultural realm could only be regarded as such by comparing it with a “poisonous weed.” Therefore, from a philosophical point of view, these opposites were necessary for the

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healthy development of positive and desirable conceptual categories. He also still harbored his own suspicions about intellectuals, and believed that “bourgeois” and petty bourgeois” thinking would always be reflected in political and cultural ideology in one form or another, and that one of the best ways to deal with it was not through suppression, but by allowing its full expression and then by giving it “appropriate criticisms.”

In this light, the Hundred Flowers policy was, for intellectuals, somewhat double-edged. It allowed for greater relaxation in cultural circles, but largely in order to bring dangerous tendencies in the arts out into the open so that they can act as a foil for what was considered beneficial. Once exposed in this way, these dangerous tendencies were then criticized: people who came forward with complaints and suggestions, as they did in great numbers and with great élan—were soon entrapped. An “anti-rightist” campaign deprived some 400,000 of jobs and homes, dispatching most to labor camps or forced “re-education” in the remote countryside.

One of the most comprehensive and audacious diatribes exposing the more glaring shortcomings of the art world was written by Jin Ye in 1956, a highly outspoken lecturer from the Zhejiang Academy of Art. In his article published in *Fine Art* journal, he tried to tackle some fundamental questions of concern to artists. His assessment of the Chinese art world was extremely pessimistic, and he declared that work with unimaginative repetitive content expressed in tasteless forms was a virtually universal

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phenomenon. His view was to why this had to come about (and was a view expressed several times by other artists and art critics) was that artists were not allowed to carry on their profession according to the natural laws governing art, nor was their starting point a “a real feeling for life.” The artists’ perception of reality, he said, had been relegated to an insignificant position, forcing artists into producing empty themes from abstract political concepts. Jin claimed that the aesthetic dimensions of art had been ignored, and he stressed the need to produce a vivid visual image if art was to portray real life successfully.

Speaking from his own experience as an art teacher, he believed that art colleges were not paying proper attention to cultivating the creative individuality of the students. In addition, there had been too narrow an understanding of the social function of art, so that the only way for artists to serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers was by directly depicting the activities they were involved in.

Jin’s answer to these problems was to focus more on the technical skills of the artists, as both content of and means of expression in art were equally important and interrelated. As he stated, “Even Socialist Realism requires a variety of forms and expression.” So, rather than setting political content and technical methods against each other, as had too often been the case, Jin argued that the importance of both should be recognized. Having said that, he nevertheless emphasized that, in his opinion, what made

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a good artist was not his political commitment but the level of his professional artistic skills.\textsuperscript{29}

**Great Leap Forward**

The next year following the Hundred Flowers policy, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward (1958-60), which forced farmers into agricultural communes, drafted huge numbers of workers into often ill-conceived dam, canal, and irrigation projects, and directed country folk to set up backyard furnaces for the production of steel. As a result, agricultural output fell, steel production faltered, and famine set in. To maintain the illusion that quotas were being met and exceeded, grain was shipped in disproportionate quantities to the cities. Nearly 40 million people died as a consequence to this plan.\textsuperscript{30}

The Great Leap Forward’s impact on the art world was just as widespread. The emphasis during this period was to be on quantity rather than quality, a complete turn-around from the Hundred Flowers movement. “Redness” or glorifying Party leadership and policies, was now to take precedence over the “expertise.” Figures for art production were set in the same way as for agricultural and industrial production, without any great discussions on “quality control.” The aim was to create a competitive atmosphere between regions, so that each area would attempt to out-do others in terms of the sheer number of pieces to be produced.\textsuperscript{31}

Internally, they pursued a deliberate policy of manipulation and indoctrination, placing severe constraints on what kind of artwork was politically acceptable. When the


\textsuperscript{30} Vine, *New China Art*, 229.

audience was foreign, it was conversely suggested that the artistic dimension of exhibited artwork could be at least as important as the political dimension, revealing that the ideological principles of the Chinese authorities could, when necessary, be flexible. It also reflected that the authorities were not ignorant or blind to the aesthetic value of art, and could have been aware that maximum propaganda value abroad could not be reaped from exhibiting heavily political works. The conclusion was that high quality art with less marked propagandist overtones would show China in a more favorable light on the international stage.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1959, the disaster of the Great Leap became so undeniable that Mao resigned his chairmanship of the state but retained that of the Communist Party.

\textbf{Social Education Movement of 1963}

Without the leadership of Mao, the Social Education Movement began in early 1963, to “revitalize a collective spirit and consciousness.” by “counter[ing] the bureaucratization of Chinese political life,” and reversing socio-economic policies may create new forms of capitalism. After the liberalization of the Hundred Flowers Policy and the disaster experienced with the Great Leap Forward, the leaders became concerned that China’s future leaders lacked the fervor to carry the revolution forward, especially in the context of a “revisionist” Soviet Union under Khrushchev.

According to Merle Goldman\textsuperscript{33}, Tao Zhu, first secretary of the Central South region, delivered a lengthy speech at the meeting of Literary and Art Circles of


Guangdong. In it, he called, as Mao had done long ago, for art to serve as an effective weapon in class struggle, now to help counter trends toward capitalist ideas and old ways: speculation and profiteering, superstitions, blood feuds between clans being the evils mentioned by Tao. In April 1963 it was reported that teams of cultural workers from the theatrical, literary, and artistic professions were sent into the countryside, suggesting a widespread deployment of such people in the campaign.  

However, in 1963 the National Conference of Literary and Art Workers recognized that the existing art could not fulfill the functions of art demanded by the Socialist Education Movement. Among the shortcomings of the artistic products were that they did not reflect real struggles, that they were simplistic in content, that the ties of artists with peasants and workers were weak, and that “harmful bourgeois influences and unhealthy phenomena have developed.” In short, the policy was found to have failed in all of its aims.

After allowing others to deal with economic recovery for seven years, Mao reclaimed authority in 1966 by supporting the radical student Red Guards in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76). This social upheaval, which cost several hundred thousand lives, was directed not only against “rightist” (i.e. moderate) elements within the party and the government but against all remnants of the feudal past, including classic works of art and literature; religion objects, buildings, and practices; rich peasants; and intellectuals of every stripe. Professors were beaten, some even fatally by their own

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students; universities were closed, artworks were shattered and books burned; the intelligentsia was largely exiled to the countryside, to learn from farmers and workers; self-criticism sessions became de rigueur and offenders were often humiliated before large crowds. The Little Red Book, a compilation of excerpts from Mao’s speeches and writings, became the only fully sanctioned volume in print, one that had to be carried at all times and cited religiously.

Within three years, Mao began to distrust the mass hysteria he had unleashed, but the fervor was sustained—even after his death on Sept. 9, 1976—by his wife Jiang Qing and three colleagues known collectively as the Gang of Four until the group’s arrest in October 1976.³⁶

Four Modernizations

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping’s call for modernization—motivated by the need to redress the national economic weakness and to make up for lost time and lowered world status—set in motion a massive reflective pendulum swing toward the First World. Where the outside world had once been thought primitive, it was now only cutting edge and therefore, no longer forbidden fruit. The Chinese people were shocked and appalled to discover that they were the ones who had much to learn and everything to gain from post-industrial nations like Britain, America, and even Japan; a situation which horrified, shamed, and stimulated the people by turn. Providently, where Deng Xiaoping’s

³⁶ Vine, New China Art, 229.
“opening” revealed how far behind the world Mao had allowed China to slip “reform” which promised retribution. A better and “modern” tomorrow was on the agenda.  

The Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists, called together by the Third plenary session of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art workers (May-June 1978) drew delegates from all nine affiliated organizations to review the state of cultural work since 1949 and to discuss new cultural policy directives. Following the virtually mandatory criticisms of Lin Biao and “the Gang of Four,” Deng Xiaoping stressed that, “Our policy on literature and art was on the right course and our achievements in this area were remarkable during the seventeen years prior to the Cultural Revolution.” His comments confirmed that the aim of the new leadership was to discredit those associated with the radical policies of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, without unduly damaging the reputation of the Party as a whole.

Deng declared the energies of the writers and artists should be channeled into ensuring the success of the Four Modernizations. In fact, he stated: “The sole criterion for deciding the correctness of all work should be ether that work is helpful or harmful to the accomplishments of the Four Modernizations.” The political restraints on cultural activities clearly remained, but he emphasized that there was a great deal of scope for what would be regarded as “helpful” to the reforms: “Geared to reach the common goal of realizing the Four Modernizations, writers and artists should broaden the horizons of

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their work; their creative thinking; themes, and techniques should change and adapt to the changing times, and they should be able to plough new ground.”

Mao’s original formula of “literature and art to serve the people” and in particular “the workers, peasants, and soldiers” was again extolled by Deng, but it was balanced by his call to “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom” once again. His entire speech was in many ways a re-working of the original Hundred Flowers policy, emphasizing as it did a rejection of undue political interference in cultural activities and encouraging writers and artists to widen the scope of their creative work.38

Ye Yushan, former director of the Sichuan Fine Arts Academy and participant in the 1979 conference, shared some of his own historical observations: “One of the most important issues of the 1979 conference was to criticize Chairman Mao. Before, the Communist Party said that whatever Mao said was always right. We should follow whatever he said. At this conference, Deng Xiaoping said, ‘Whatever Mao said that is right, we will do. If it’s not right, we won’t do it.’ The effect on art was tremendous, like a burden lifted. Before, art was required to have subject matter, but during this conference they said this was wrong—it is permissible to have subject matter, but it is also alright to have art without subject matter. This liberation in policy gave freedom to the artist. Another major theme of this conference picked up on something Mao himself once said: ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom.’ That was taken as another direction for the arts

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in China. One hundred different types of ‘flowers’ would make for rich diversity in all of the arts.”

Spiritual Pollution Campaign

During the early 1980s, the influence on Chinese cultural circles of modern western cultural products in the form of western avant-garde literature, films, plays, and western abstract painting did not go unnoticed by the authorities. Following the closing down of Beijing’s Democracy Wall, the kind of self-critical self-exploration that had been a marked feature of dissident activities came under attack in the form of “Campaign Against Bourgeois Democratism.” Script writer, Bai Hua, was initially singled out for condemnation for his controversial screenplay, *Bitter Love*, which depicts the young idealistic painter Ling Chenguang and his life of persecution in the PRC after living abroad.

Authorities sensitive to criticism, overt or otherwise, suppressed the film in 1980, despite protests, because of its “negative” message. Other literary works were subsequently attacked, including in particular several somber and introspective poems

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40 The Democracy Wall was a long brick wall on Xidan Street in Beijing, which became the focus for democratic dissent. Beginning in December 1978, in line with the Communist Party of China’s policy of “seeking truth from facts,” activists in the Democracy movement — such as Xu Wenli — recorded news and ideas, often in the form of big-character posters (dazibao), during 1977-1978.

41 The protagonist of *Bitter Love* leaves a comfortable life in San Francisco to return to China in 1950, only to be imprisoned in a labor camp during the Cultural Revolution because of his foreign connections. Ling finally dies of exhaustion while fleeing from the camp and from individuals he erroneously believes to be labor camp guards, but who ironically turn out to be cadres who have come to tell him that he has been exonerated from committing any crime.
written in 1979 and 1980. Then, in July 1981, Deng Xiaoping issued a document titled “A Talk on Problems on the Ideological Front,” in which he criticized by name Bai Hua and the theoretician Wang Ruoshui, amongst others. A new ideological campaign was clearly gaining momentum and finally, in October 1983, at a meeting of the Party’s Central Committee, the conservatives, Deng Liqun and Hu Qiaomu, called for the elimination for what they called “spiritual pollution.”

Although artists were not prime targets of the Spiritual Pollution campaign, they were by no means unscathed. In addition to the authorities’ general condemnation of “decadent artistic practices” certain individuals were cited as the main purveyors of “spiritual pollution” in the art world. The editorial board of Fine Art was criticized for providing a platform for “erroneous views” and one of its editors, Li Xianting, a consistently staunch supporter of modernist trends in art, was temporarily “relieved of his duties.”

The unfortunate trend became that artists and art institutions took it upon themselves to subject and condemn their colleagues before the authorities did, to ward off and deflect attacks on their own character and ideology. At the end of 1983, the Artists’ Association called a working meeting in Suzhou to discuss the problem of “spiritual pollution” in the art world, with the main targets of attack was those theories and works that reflected a “bourgeois artistic standpoint” and the “bourgeois” ideas of humanism, freedom, and individualism. An editorial in Fine Art reiterated the point:

Some comrades have a mistaken understanding of creative freedom, and they have confused it with bourgeois liberalization. In their art, they advocate abstract “humanity,” “the value of human existence,” “self-expression” and “pure art” that transcends class and politics. In their creative work, they blindly model themselves on
western modernist schools. Over the past few years, there has appeared in our art a minority of works which are ideologically unhealthy, and which, in terms of form, are so strange that the masses cannot understand them, so that a certain extent they have given rise to spiritual pollution.42

The broader impact of the Spiritual Pollution campaign was perhaps most evident in the Sixth National Art Exhibition in October 1984, the largest one held in the PRC. Shortly thereafter, a meeting was held to discuss the oil paintings in the exhibition, several problems were highlighted, the most serious being the influence of Communist concepts, an over-emphasis on the didactic function of art to the detriment of its aesthetic function, and the formal dimension of the painting being overly bland and simple. Art theorist Gao Minglu pointed out that the traditional Chinese paintings in the exhibition were even less satisfactory, with much of the audience complaining that they revealed nothing new or fresh. Of the 207 traditional Chinese paintings that finally won awards, approximately 70 could be defined as “grand themes” or depictions of socialist construction, 60 were depictions of China’s minorities or rural scenes and 60 were landscapes, flowers-and-birds from antiquity.

On January 5, 1985, long after the campaign had ended, another meeting was held at the Central Academy of Fine Art to review the exhibition in its entirety. Scathing comments emerged from the discussion regarding the harmful influence the campaign had on the preparatory process of the exhibition by inhibiting the creative experimentation of participating artists. The episode demonstrated that the Communist leadership was clearly still prepared to use the political movement or campaign as a

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means to bring those involved in cultural activities into line if it was politically necessary, relying on the established organizational structures to achieve its intended aims.

Despite of this, what was noticeably different about the Spiritual Pollution Campaign when compared with earlier ideological movements (and this also applies to other political campaigns throughout the 1980s, with the exception of the conservative backlash following the Tiananmen Incident in 1989) was the speed with which it fizzled out. Quickly broadened to encompass the economic, scientific, and agricultural fields, as well as cultural activities, the campaign finally met with opposition from the reformist faction of the Party, most notably former Premier Zhao Ziyang\textsuperscript{43}, and it was brought to an end after a mere twenty-eight days.

Though ripples were still felt throughout the art world for some time once the campaign had been halted, as can be seen from the quality of the work that appeared in the subsequent Sixth National Art exhibition, the campaign was not sufficiently prolonged and thorough to put any real brakes in the long-term on artistic experimentation. In fact, by the end of 1984, some may say that the art world had recovered almost completely from this temporary setback; by 1985, an art movement had evolved which, in terms of creative innovation and confident maturity in style, surpassed anything previously witnessed in the People’s Republic of China.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{43} Considered one of the most liberal of the Old Guard, he later lost his political power due to his economic reform policies and public sympathy for the student protestors in the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. His name continues to be an official taboo subject in the mainland.

\textsuperscript{44} Galikowski, \textit{Art and Politics in China 1949-1984}, 233-236.
CHAPTER 2
THE AVANT-GARDE IN CHINA

Before reviewing the impact Rauschenberg was to have to the country, one must gain an understanding of the political and philosophical issues that faced the avant-garde arts community prior his coming. In examining the subsequent efforts and innovation of the avant-garde under the context of the demanding politics of the period, what becomes most striking is the demonstration of the true spirit of enterprise of all those involved.

The term “avant-garde” or (qianwei yishu), used later in this paper to define contemporary independent Chinese art, is problematic in terms of its social definition. According to Sheldon Lu, the avant-garde has become part of the historical past within western art history, with its uncompromising, rebellious character given way to the eclecticism and pastiche of postmodernism, otherwise known as the “silence of the avant-garde.” Yet under the scrutiny of cross-cultural analysis, it is necessary for these Western-based artistic and cultural categories be viewed in the light of the sociological formations of Third-World, non-Western nation-states toward the end of the century. In the Chinese context, Lu cites how the avant-garde is a distinct feature of Chinese postmodernism, a movement that started as a protest of society's values. These artists generally used Western art language; while the language may be imitative, and the forms similar, it had a distinct meaning of its own. Due to specific social and cultural conditions, twentieth-century Chinese art does not exactly follow the pattern of the
succession of periods and styles in Western art such as modernism, avant-garde, and postmodernism.¹

Therefore, present Chinese artists and art critics have been increasingly using the term “experimental art” (shiyan meishu) for its looser and broader implications. Terms like “unofficial art” and “avant-garde art” have been argued to be misleading: the former exaggerates the political orientation of this art and the latter exaggerates its artistic radicalism. Any artistic experiment, in the present critical view, can be about almost anything related to art, both major and minor, and can associated with any particular artistic style, subject matter, or political orientation. To Lu, it is defined by its relationship with four other major traditions in contemporary Chinese art, namely, (1) a highly politicized official art directly under the sponsorship of the party, (2) an academic art that struggles to separate itself from political propaganda by emphasizing technical training and higher aesthetic standards, (3) a popular urban visual culture that eagerly absorbs visual images from Hong Kong, Japan, and the West, and (4) an “international” commercial art, that, though often initially part of experimental art, eventually caters to an international art market.

Lu addresses how art experimentation in China is generally motivated by the desire to break away from the visual modes and vocabulary of these four traditions, though the focus of experimentation may be an art medium or style, new ways of presenting art to the audience, or even the identity and social function of the artist. During the 30 years since its emergence, the content of Chinese experimental art has been

constantly changing as its relationship with these other art traditions changes. Generally speaking, this art has shown three consistent characteristics: a penchant for new art forms and materials, an interest in reinventing the language of artistic expression, and the self-positioning of the artist outside, or on the border of, official and academic art.²

**Stars Exhibition: 1979**

Any discussion of modernist or avant-garde art in China of that time period should begin with the group of artists made up of Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Yan Li, Wang Keping, Yang Yiping, Qu Leilei, Mao Lizi, Bo Yun, Zhong Acheng, Shao Fei, Li Shuang, and Ai Weiwei, who collectively called themselves the *Stars*, or *Xing xing*. When they first came to the attention to the general public in 1978, they were mainly young amateurs under the age of thirty, with disparate personalities and artistic styles that achieved a kind of cohesion only through their shared aim of marrying a new vitality to the Chinese art scene with the democracy movement during 1978-79.

It was the latter goal that was risky, as the implementation of such ideas was thought highly dangerous and could result in arrest. Romantics might venture that the *Stars* tried to actualize the utopian belief in the modern liberation of the Chinese people, determined to make way for freedom of spirit and expression in a society that did not allow original thought or creativity.

Because of the Star’s collective ties with Beijing dissidents and the political content of much of their work, the *Stars’* initial attempts at arranging exhibition space through the official channels proved fruitless. Finding all official avenues closed to them,

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² Hung Wu, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 64.
the *Stars* took the bold step of arranging by themselves an open air exhibition outside the China National Art Gallery in Beijing. News of the exhibition held between September 27 and October 3, 1979 was disseminated through an underground dissident movement network. In order to increase its impact, the exhibition was arranged to coincide with a preview of the officially organized National Exhibition for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC, whose conventional themes and styles of the officially sanctioned exhibits contrasted sharply with the varied and experimental work intended for exhibition by the *Stars*.

More than 33,000 visitors attended this dissident, twenty-three man show, whose 150 plus works ranged from experimental oils and Chinese painting to woodcuts and sculptures beyond the Beaux Arts tradition. Explored within the exhibition were themes like the awareness of political criticism, pursuit of enlightening spirit, and explorations of formal art.

Ma Desheng explained how they received their name in a later interview: “Every artist is a little star. Even the greatest artists are still little stars from a cosmic point of view. We called our group 'Stars' in order to emphasize our individuality. This was directed at the drab uniformity of the Cultural Revolution.”

This ideal reinforces their attempt to re-establish the idea of *ziwo* – “I myself,” a theme that prevailed through their works and aspirations, a contradiction to the concept of the kind of community-minded idealism espoused during that time. As one man who lived through the 1940s and 50s of the PRC once told the New York Times, “Art back

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then was only a reflection of beautiful dream—not of the slave labor of collective farmers or those who dug the canals, mines and built factories.”

While they wanted to take ownership of the kind of selfhood and individuality necessary to expressive art, the *Stars* desired to accomplish more than simply create art for art’s sake: “[It is t]he darkness of the past and the brightness of the future,” wrote the sculptor Wang Keping. “This should be our lesson and our responsibility.”

This duty was deeply felt, for many of the *Stars* came from unorthodox backgrounds, without formal art training or unaffiliated with any official art institution. One of the chief organizers, Ma Desheng, who walked with crutches, had been refused admission to art school on account of his disability; later, he worked as an industrial draughtsman and woodblock print artist before beginning to paint with traditional Chinese ink. Another prominent member, Huang Rui worked as a farmer in Inner Mongolia from 1968 to 1975 and then in a leather factory in Beijing until 1979. In 1978 he published the significant post-Cultural Revolution magazine, *Jian Tian* (Today).

**Significant Time**

Again, it was through Deng Xiaoping’s accelerated efforts in the modernizing China that gave rise to the subsequent but surprising results in the fine arts. According to art critic Huang Zhuan, the 1980s became known as an era of the strongest reformative significance in the modern history of China, a creative era in the true sense, a time that laid a deep spiritual foundation whereupon China truly became a modern country. Despite the lackluster efforts of the Spiritual Pollution Campaign, it was during this open

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time when artists were avidly absorbing current international styles, which inspired
themes that were had been unarticulated within their own culture in decades. Awareness
of “difference,” of insularity, and of the people’s sense of shame at how under-developed
China had become, underscore the aesthetic evolution in New China, inalienable to the
mindset of the avant-garde.5

To foster this atmosphere of tolerance, the students and professional painters were
permitted and even encouraged to experiment freely from the late 1970s on. Though
outright political and protest art was still banned, stylistic restrictions had largely been
eliminated, cultural contacts with the outside world were welcomed and even the
formation of private groups and associations of artists, amateur and professional which
had begun to sprout up all over the country, was permitted. Art publications likewise
began to contain articles and photographs which underscored the fact that the boundaries
of art and artistic discussion had widened to an imaginable degree only a few years
before.

Given the enthusiasm for change, there were still the difficulties: there were no
museums or art galleries in China where they can regularly become exposed to original,
high quality western works, and it was mainly through art magazines and printed
reproductions that artists could study with some degree of scrutiny the various styles
from abroad. Furthermore artist materials were also hard to come by and those without a
substantial position in an art academy were at the end of the supply line. To this must be
added pressures particular to the artist in China at the time.

In response to the lifting of official constraints and of official blockage of foreign
contacts, many artists and writers alike plunged enthusiastically and unreservedly into
experimentation with all manner of western styles, classical and contemporary, taking as
their models painters ranging from Goya and El Greco to Van Gogh and Picasso, to
Francis Bacon and Salvador Dali. “This is a rare and wonderful opportunity. There has
been too much looking backward and looking within. I want to look forward and reach
out.” Another, a young woman, explained her turning away from Chinese models: “Here
in China the weight of our own traditions is so great that we have to make a conscious
effort to break free of it. If we don’t, it will smother us.”6 What was considered
traditional and backwards ineffably meant what was considered modern was western, and
with it, western ideals.

The democracy movement was coming together in China’s main cities of people,
particularly the young, to demand greater political and cultural freedom following the
discrediting of the “Gang of Four” and the Cultural Revolution. Centered on the
“Democracy Wall” at Xidan7, Beijing, the movement originally received benign approval
from Deng Xiaoping and his supporters, who hoped that it would help expose the
remnants of the old Maoist guard and secure Deng’s position as leader of the Party to

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6 Richard E. Strassberg and Waldemar A. Nielsen, Beyond the Open Door Contemporary
Paintings from the People's Republic of China, 19.

7 The Democracy Wall was a long brick wall on Xidan Street in Beijing, which became the focus
for democratic dissent. Beginning in December 1978, in line with the Communist Party of China's policy of
“seeking truth from facts,” activists in the Democracy movement — such as Xu Wenli — recorded news
and ideas, often in the form of big-character posters (Dazibao), during 1977-1978. Later, it was moved to
Ritan Park prior to being closed down, where visitors must to show identification to enter the park the open
and free access to the wall was curtailed.
oversee China’s ambitious modernization program. It created a flourishing atmosphere where intellectual ideas and cultural activities of dissidents were welcome.

This ferment led to the Stars’ dissident, open-air exhibition, which began to attract ever-increasing crowds, so that officials were finally unable to ignore the event. However, the initial official response appeared to be somewhat confused. On one occasion, Jiang Feng, chairman of the Chinese Artists’ Association, upon viewing the exhibits, immediately gave his approval of the exhibitions and amateur artists who had not undergone formal institutionalized training. He even later directly enabled the group to launch an official space inside the China National Gallery months later. At the same time, he also reflected the purpose of such exhibitions would be ultimately self-defeating: “When [the Stars] realize that the mass of the people don't understand their work,” he said, “they will learn and change their ways.”

In comparison, Yu Feng, Vice Chairman of the China National Art Gallery praised the exhibition in more glowing terms following a separate visit: “There are some exhibits that, if they were included in international exhibitions, would not be inferior.” However, only one day after Yu’s visit, the exhibition was closed down by the Public Security Bureau, casting wide suspicions that the order could only have come from the Artists’ Association or the Ministry of Culture.

Subsequently, although the order was rescinded and a promise given that the Stars would be provided with proper gallery space for an exhibition at some later unspecified date, the group, with much encouragement from the leading figures from some

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underground journals, decided to protest against the enforced closure of their exhibition on the grounds that it contravened the new constitution. The protest eventually took the form of a demonstration, deliberately organized to coincide with the National Day celebration on October 1, 1979.

The demonstrations, provocative in its timing and its prominent slogans demanding artistic freedom and political democracy, attracted a good deal of interest from foreign journalists, students, and diplomats, as well as locals, whose curiosity was aroused by the novel spectacle of the first unauthorized demonstration in the People’s Republic. It also, naturally, became a matter of prime concern for the authorities and was considered a sufficient importance to warrant the convening of an emergency meeting of the Politburo on the morning of October 1, 1979.

As a measure of the relatively tolerant attitude of a majority of the Politburo members at that time, it was decided, largely no doubt from political considerations, that demonstrators would only be arrested if they persisted in their protest. Later, at the Fourth National Congress of Literary and Art Workers convened in mid-October, a divided reaction to an event whose impact had not yet died down was apparent. Secretary Xia Yen’s opening speech at the Congress criticized the *Stars* for diverting people’s attention, and particularly that of foreign journalists, away from the main National Day celebrations and speeches; but later, Zhou Yang made a more positive assessment of the *Stars*, stating that there were “people of talent involved in the *Stars* exhibition, and they must be protected.”
Whatever the disagreements amongst the cultural authorities, it was finally decided by Jiang Feng, Chairman of the Artists’ Association, to allow the Stars to freely exhibit without governmental censorship in Beijing’s Beihai Park from November 23 to December 2, 1979 and again from August 24 to September 7, 1980, this time inside the eminent China National Art Gallery, Beijing.

Argument of Originality

Most of the exhibited works were non-political and distinguished themselves from official art rather by their choice of style and subject matter. The Stars artists rejected the socialist realist style and instead developed styles deriving from Western modernism, from post-Impressionism to Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism, all of which stemmed from the desire to express their own personal feelings in their art.

Despite their experimentation in modernist styles, the Stars were still concerned to emphasize the strong social significance of their work, if not overt political criticism, denying that it would be irrelevant to most Chinese people. A statement by Wang Keping, encapsulates this concern: “Kathe Kollwitz is our banner and Picasso our pioneer. But we must place more emphasis on Kollwitz. We must not be like the scholar artists of the Ming and Qing times who, when complex social struggles took place, hid themselves away and pursued pure art.”

Interestingly enough, the meaning behind this ringing declaration would be later echoed in the words of Rauschenberg, in defending his goals for world peace via the ROCI project.

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Certainly, a large proportion of the Stars’ work reveals a preoccupation with political and social questions, crouched in a modern stylistic idiom.\textsuperscript{10} Evidenced by their interest in the work of Picasso, was that their own work should always be fresh and innovative; the conscious aim of the group as a whole was to challenge their audience with new and exciting art forms, while remaining socially relevant.

This was the challenge to the artists of the period that contemporary artists in China still face: how to produce art that has social worth or significance, while still ensuring a high level of freshness and vitality through constant change and innovation. If art was to have social meaning in China in the 1980s, could it do so and yet develop along the lines envisioned by the Stars? And when they and other artists talked about wanting their work to have relevance to society, what did they actually mean by the term society? Does it really need to include everyone, even workers and peasants?\textsuperscript{11}

Government Reception Afterwards

When news spread of the Party’s approval, the exhibition henceforth attracted a large audience. The figures for the second viewing reportedly reached 200,000, by far the largest number ever to attend an exhibition in China’s most important art gallery at the time. This audience also left behind a sizeable record of fourteen books filled with comments, seventy to eighty percent of which, according to official reckoning, were favorable.\textsuperscript{12} Chairman of the Artists’ Association Jiang’s initial assumptions that the


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 219.

\textsuperscript{12} Shaoxia Zhang and Xiaoshan Li, “Zhongguo Xiandai,” \textit{Huihuashi} (Beijing), 23 December 1985, 24.
people would not understand the art, was proven wrong; very simply, they proved that they understood at the least what the exhibition represented, if not the individual works themselves.

The first article on the Stars to appear in an official Chinese periodical was a favorable review of the November exhibition was provided by a Fine Art editor, Li Xianting, who commented that it had:

Virtually become an important conversation amongst the public and the art world, and especially amongst the young people. There were those in agreement and those who opposed it. Opinion was not unanimous, but the reaction to it was surely strong.  

This reaction was in response to both the political content of much of the work and the sheer range of experimental western-inspired styles. As a western observer enthusiastically commented:

Cut off from their ancestral roots by the Cultural Revolution, they looked to the West and in a few months re-invented everything: fauvism, cubism, impressionism, surrealism, Dada, expressionism, pop-art, and hyper-realism.  

Although the Stars’ exhibitions attracted an unprecedented level of interest, their influence was short-lived. By the end of 1981, the official criticism of Bai Hua’s screenplay, Bitter Love, and subsequent Spiritual Pollution Campaign altered the political atmosphere once again, and the group was refused official permission to hold further exhibitions. In addition, following their second showing, they lost the support of their most important and influential sympathizer, Jiang Feng, chairman of the Artists’

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Association. They ignored his advice and included in the exhibition various works that he considered too abstract, including Wang Keping’s controversial bronze sculpture, *Idol*.

When the matter came to Jiang’s attention, he was extremely displeased claiming that since it was he who had granted official approval for the exhibition, he was ultimately responsible for everything shown there. Consequently, he apparently came under attack from more conservative minded colleagues in the Artists’ Association for allowing those dubious works to be exhibited. Huang Rui, one of the *Stars*, cited no names but claimed that “some bureaucrats” used the exhibition to attack Jiang, accelerating the decline in Jiang’s health. Whatever the case, the withdrawal of his support and his death soon after ensured the decline of the group, and by 1982, the *Stars* collectively disappeared from the active art world.

Wang Keping

Born in 1949 in Beijing, Wang Keping was unlikely to imagine that his work would elicit such a divided reaction; in fact, it was not originally destined to be shown at all. The *Stars* had initially decided would be best to leave *Idol* out of the first unofficial exhibition entirely, as it was still considered too great a political risk even in the daring atmosphere of the time. This decision was later rescinded, although it would be another year before the public at the China National Art Gallery was allowed to see the piece.

The great controversy stemmed from how the wooden sculpture features a face with the familiar features of Chairman Mao. Unlike popular incarnations that boast the leader in the height of his vigor, this is a bloated form similar to the leader’s visage during his later years, with one lazily closed eye unmatched with an open peering one.
The grim gaze is topped off with an eastern-style headgear with red star attached, presenting a fused image of Mao and the Buddha, a parody of Mao’s cult of personality.

Wang’s *Idol* completely shocked the art world in Beijing, for it was the first publicly exhibited work of art to mock the hallowed leader, and caused a great deal of excitement amongst the audience and consternation amongst the gallery authorities.

It was that exactly that public excitement that may have posed the greatest consternation to the Party, as revealed by one of the many positive comments left by the public after the second *Stars* exhibition addressed to the young sculptor:

Comrade Wang Keping: I salute your courage. Your ruthless [sculpting] knife dissects society’s cruelty, vanity, and deceit. Of those so-called sculptors who have been walking corpses for a long time now, their hypocritical souls will tremble before your works, so full of life! Painting and sculpture as art is not just a color to decorate society! It must…enlighten the people. You have done well and I hope that even more wonderful works will emerge.15

Other comments were not as charitable, being focused more on the aesthetic form rather than the function of the work. One viewer described the natural knots in Wang’s wood sculptures as looking like “a skin tumor, so ugly! After seeing them one wants to vomit as through one had eaten a fly!”16

**Analysis of Idol**

The public shock from such a piece such as *Idol* is difficult to imagine now. For decades in the 1960s and 70s, Mao’s ruddy-faced image was widely reproduced and hung near the entrances to millions of homes, schools, factories and government buildings; it seemed as if the entire nation had set about drawing a cultish Mao portrait, or at least


honoring one. If Mao's Little Red Book was the considered the national bible, Mao's official portrait was its stamp.

For outsiders, Mao’s face embodied China, serving as its first and even now, its only global brand. Even with its status as a rising economic power, the country has still yet to sell an identifiable brand to the rest of the world. “This is the most important painting in China,” stated art historian Wu Hung. “This is not an artistic judgment. But look at how many people have seen this image over the last century.”

Even now, Mao's colorful oil portrait over Tiananmen came down only once, briefly, after his death in 1976, when it was replaced by a huge black and white photograph, a sign of mourning. Growing numbers of its citizens may consider it a cultural relic, but for others, the portrait serves as a powerful reminder, and its absence would inevitably signal the demise of the party. “It's a very complex image,” said Wu. “It has different meanings to different people. To the party, it symbolizes the party and the nation’s founding. But to a lot of people it symbolizes China, or it has very personal memories.” 17 From this light, the public clamor around Wang’s Idol can be better understood.

Stars Artists Afterwards

In 1983, Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, and Wang Keping held a joint informal exhibition in Beijing, but it was soon closed down by officials. The Stars could no longer generate the kind of excitement they had in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Only a few years after their dazzling debut, the group’s political attitudes were considered passé and

their experiments in modernism had compete with other avant-garde trends that were becoming increasingly fashionable. Frustrated with the difficulties of showing their work in public and faced with the continuing uncertainty of cultural policy, the core members of the group began to leave China in succession and settle abroad. The high profile they had attained among the foreign community in Beijing, the interest of foreigners have for art and artists considered “dissident,” and the undoubted ability of several members of the group, secured their relatively easy passage out of China.

By 1988, nine of the core members left China in search of a more conducive cultural atmosphere. Huang Rui moved to Japan in 1984, where he broadened his scope from painting to photography, installation and performance art. In 1984, Wang Keping moved to France where his sculpture became less political and more elemental. In 1985, Ma Desheng moved to Switzerland and in 1986 to Paris. Li Shuang also settled in France in 1983. Four Stars artists emigrated to the USA: Ai Weiwei, the first to leave, in 1981; Yan Li in 1985; Zhong Ahcheng in 1987; and Shao Fei in 1988. Qu Leilei moved to England in 1986. Only four, Bo Yun, Mao Lizi, Yin Guanzhong and Yang Yiping, remained in China to carry on their work.  

In the last 25 years, several of the Stars have progressed from being minor artistic dissidents to internationally recognized artists. Due to the fluctuations of the present Chinese art market, this fame has brought much fortune. Together, this historic group have ironically become more than the eponymous stars as they once aspired to, but have

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truly established themselves to becoming veritable superstars of the Chinese contemporary art scene.
Figure 1. Wang Keping, *Idol*, wood sculpture, 1979, private collection.
CHAPTER 3
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

An ocean away, the Stars’ artistic fearlessness was unknowingly matched by the creative zealousness of Robert Rauschenberg. Where they proved hungry for outside perspectives, he was at the time, in preparations to directly meet them.

By the 1980s, Robert Rauschenberg established himself as one of the best-known artists and most prolific of the post-war period. Rose into public prominence during the 1950s transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art, Rauschenberg is perhaps most famous for his “Combines” of the 1950s, in which non-traditional materials and unrelated objects were used in innovative combinations of both paintings and sculptures. This synthesizing approach been adopted with his other favored mediums of photography, printmaking, papermaking, and performance, often in conjunction with each other. Fellow artist Jasper Johns, once said, “Since Picasso, no one has invented more than Rauschenberg.”1

Such a life was previously unimaginable for a boy born as Milton Ernst Rauschenberg in Port Arthur, Texas, in October 22, 1925. According to an interview with close friend, Barbara Rose, Rauschenberg did not grow up wishing to be an artist; in fact, his first encounter with formal art began during a leave as a neuropsychiatric technician in the Navy, when he recognized a Reynolds painting in the Henry E. Huntington Library and Museum.

from playing card pictures. This moment of identification proved to be life-changing, altering his course forever.

After a brief stint in the Kansas City Art Institute, with the help of the GI Bill, Rauschenberg was able to go to art school in Paris in 1947, specifically the Grande Chaumiere and Academie Julien. Unfortunately, without the typical art student background, Rauschenberg felt lost in the world of art theory and criticism. Instead, more time was spent instead absorbed in museums and painting on the streets. Acting on the need for more control and formal technique, Rauschenberg was led to the Black Mountain College, headed by the famed Bauhaus disciplinarian, the artist Josef Albers.

Instead of control, it was here that that people like John Cage who fostered and encouraged his sense of unbound artistic freedom and expression. This sense became the driving force throughout his work, marked by spontaneity and action through experimentation. Rauschenberg was the first American artist to unashamedly snatch his imagery from reproductions, but his attitude and techniques differed radically from current concerns with “appropriated” images, in the way that he paraphrases instead of directly simulate earlier art, which are recombined as elements of a unified, private but personal language.

Ideology

The reason to why he had to engage in so many mediums was due to a postmodern recognizance that each involved had their own history and place in time.

All material has history. All material has its own history built into it. There’s no such thing as “better” material. It’s just as unnatural for people to use oil paint as

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it is to use anything else. An artist manufactures his material out of his own existence—his own ignorance, familiarity or confidence. I came to terms with my materials. They know and I know that we’re going to try something. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t, but I would substitute anything for preconceptions or deliberateness. If that moment can’t be as fresh, strange, and unpredictable as what’s going on around you, then it’s false.³

For Rauschenberg, these works inspired “action paintings,” fundamental to an aesthetic where the function of the artist is to activate not only his own canvas but the world around him as well, as an ethical imperative or the basis for his personal morality. Among the last group of ‘famous’ artists who truly believed that art can change the world, he had began to dedicate to using his work for that task.

In the latter half of his career, Rauschenberg traveled nomadically around the world with his project, *ROCI* (pronounced “Rocky”)—Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange from 1984-1991. *ROCI* was a constantly mutating exhibit of 125 plus works that took place in eleven countries, involved hundreds of individuals, all motivated by an almost naïve, idealistic aim to improve the possibilities for world peace and friendship through the exchange of art communication.

The exhibition’s emphasis was placed on sharing experiences specifically with societies less familiar with non-political ideas or communicating “worldly” through art. It was important for him to travel to what he calls “sensitive” areas—developing countries or countries under totalitarian governments that have not been exposed to American art or too many images from other countries.

Rauschenberg would be responsible for a selection of arts done in, or influenced by, participating countries will then continue to travel, including videos, photos, sound,

drawings, prints, and catalogues, to the next country, systemically eclipsing the opening exhibit, which functions as a catalyst, enabling the international exhibition and collaboration to exist and grow.

He wrote: Art is education, provocative, and enlightening even when first not understood. The very creative confusion stimulates curiosity and growth, leading to trust and tolerance. To share our intimate eccentricities proudly will bring us all closer. When I was a student […] I was surrounded by groups of artists, all investigating the comparable similarities and likenesses between things. It was not until I realized that it is the celebration of the differences between things that I became an artist who could see. I know _ROCI_ could make this kind of looking possible.4

_ROCI_ exemplified Rauschenberg’s desire is to reach out to the multifaceted world, learn from it, and give back to it in the form of his art. Once asked what he feared most, the artist responded, “That I might run out of world.”5

Throughout his career, Rauschenberg was also known as a political activist, supporting movements for peace, social justice, and preservation of the environment. By the 1980s, however, Rauschenberg said that he “had given up on the politicians” and decided that “now it’s up to the artists to wage peace.”

Rauschenberg believed that “if Israel could see India, and Japan could see Mexico, an international chain of artistic understanding might begin” with the power of art to communicate beyond language, and to break down the barriers of isolation. Rauschenberg acted on his long-held belief that “the artist must be engaged in determining the fate of the earth, that the artist cannot stand aloof, as an observer.”

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4 Yakush, _ROCI_, 154.

He once described his idea of ROCI as going to a country “which may not be familiar with contemporary Western artists, to interact with the artists and artisans there, to learn their aesthetic traditions, to make work in their settings, to talk to students, to touch on every aspect of art…” In short, to foster a dialogue with other nations through the language of art. It is quite fitting that China, with its firm grip on artists’ evolution and work, would be considered apt for the ROCI tour. It truly exemplified Rauschenberg’s standpoint on the crucial need for international communication.

ROCI Inspiration: China

This ethereal mad-cap world art tour was born by reasons much more mundane and grounded. At one point of his celebrated career, Rauschenberg had lost his way in New York. His relationship with choreographer and frequent artistic collaborator Steve Paxton had fallen apart and he was downing “more than it seemed possible for a man to drink and stay alive.” In short, in the middle of the road of his life, he found himself in the dark. When Barbara Rose asked him, in 1987, why he had left the city, the artist replied:

I was beginning to feel that so many of my friends ... were having so many problems with happiness that perhaps I was responsible for some sort of evil spirit. I got so depressed in New York that I went to an astrologer. His assessment of my situation was right on.... The advice was to not ever go to the mountains [...] and to head for the sun and sea. 

Rauschenberg promptly thrust himself into his work. This led to his 1982 experience of working at reputedly the world’s older paper mill, Xuan Paper Mill in

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Jingxian, China, also known as the site which inspired *ROCI*. Through an invitation by the print atelier Gemini G.E.L. and the Anhui Artists’ Association, the culmination of the project was Rauschenberg’s *Seven Characters*, seven suites of seventy-four works each containing silk, ribbon, paper pulp relief, ink, and gold on homemade Xuan paper, embedded with collages of Rauschenberg imagery and Chinese characters. But the five week experience of the insular culture of the society in China’s provinces completely shocked and horrified the artist. The shock was well worth it in the end, for it also demonstrated his ability and that of his staff to work smoothly despite the most bureaucratic restrictions. When Rauschenberg and his colleagues arrived, they were held for days in the close-by Yellow Mountains by the Chinese officials. So afraid were the officials, for reasons never explained, of letting them work at the paper mill, that they even had all posters referring to the town where the mill was located removed from the areas near where Rauschenberg stayed. He recalled:

There we sat getting frustrated because I had only limited time to do my project… I wanted to actually work in the mill, but it was an extremely controversial thing. They never let me go there. They tried to bring the paper mill expert to the guesthouse to make the paper, but he refused to work there. He said that he could not fabricate outside of the mill. I don’t know what happened to him. It’s never wise to disagree in China. They kept us in the Yellow Mountains or were trying to keep us there one day too long. I refused to stay. I don’t know what I was going to do but I refused to stay. I wanted to get to work. They had no choice.

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8 Xuan paper, also known as “thousand-year paper” is handmade paper still crafted as it had been for the past fifteen hundred years. The Chinese consider the paper a national treasure, for the use of scrolls and official documents. With its delicate strength paper, it is said to last forever.

9 According to Barbara Rose, it took Rauschenberg and his sponsors two years before the Chinese gave permission to work at the mill.

Although experimental art was practiced throughout the country as seen from art groups like the *Stars*, repercussions from the Spiritual Pollution Campaign in Beijing still vibrated throughout the country. Given the possible political liability of hosting unknown foreign guests, the cautious regional officials were left at a loss.

*ROCI*’s artistic director Don Saff remembered that when the Rauschenberg team finally got to Jiangxian they discovered to their horror that since the residents could not travel without permission, they seldom got more than twenty-five miles from their village. “In China the idea developed that the project would have to extend beyond simply a retrospective and it would have to have some relevance to counties with sensitive problems. By the time we arrived back to Beijing, the concept was there. You can effect change by taking imagery that they use in a very traditional way and you use it in your own way. Perhaps in doing so you give them the license to think more openly.”

Rauschenberg commented on their subsequent static pattern of living, “I think they were really just beaten down. They had exhausted any initiative, any hope of anything changing. Once you kill the curiosity, everything else goes.”

For the artist, these feelings were crystallized in a photograph that he took of a water buffalo that had been blindfolded with an old rag and was walking around in circles to power a mixing machine in a brick factory. As Rauschenberg recalled, “that was his whole life. If one isn’t moved by that….’’ The impact of this experience led Rauschenberg to the definite conclusion that *ROCI* simply had to be an evolving exhibition based on the culture of each country, one that required him to immerse himself.
in the imagery and materials of that society and through his interpretation to try to “create an opening in how they saw themselves and how they saw others.”

**ROCI Announcement**

Not known for timidity, Rauschenberg officially announced his *ROCI* plans at the United Nations in December, 1984, envisioning a five-year world tour that acted as a kind of modern diplomatic mission to twenty-two countries. More than 150 diplomats and art-world ambassadors like J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art, appeared for the reception. To the group assembled in the Delegates’ Dining Room, Rauschenberg passed around a signed lithograph he had made to celebrate the event, donating a copy to each United Nations member country. Reported by the attending press, what punctuated the cock-tail party chatter was the constant query, “Do you know what this is all about?”

Rauschenberg was said to have cheerfully and offhandedly delivered a rambling and at times inaudible speech. He opened by reading a message from Jacob Javits, the former senator from New York, whose wife Marion, was at the reception. “Javits says, ‘The art of Rauschenberg is universal and is the universal ideal that can save the world from destruction.’” The artist paused. “And he’s willing to sign this.” The joke drew laughter from Marion Javits and others but appeared to puzzle many. Next Rauschenberg said that *ROCI* was named after his pet turtle. A man in a dark suit relayed to the person next to him, “He says he named it after his daughter.” Rauschenberg mentioned the

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12 At the end, only 11 countries accepted to host, but the initial number was decided by the reasoning that 22 was his favorite number.
various countries on ROCI’s list (“China is a great thing!”) but soon abbreviated his speech and haltingly ad-libbed, “The love of everybody…against each other body…is important. And it can only happen with art.”

The disarray of ROCI’s debut may have given a misleading picture of its chances for success. Much of the machinery for the first part of the traveling exhibition was in place, and Rauschenberg had at that point, committed the next five years to the project, forgoing solo shows in the US to devote his time to the project.

This machinery had to be assembled rather quickly. Prior to that announcement, a major setback occurred two days before when a backer withdrew a substantial contribution to the project’s six million budget. The funding situation was so bleak and the spirits of Rauschenberg and his staff were so low that discussions were held about terminating ROCI after its first venue in Mexico City, the only stop for which definite arrangements had been made. There was little that could have been done: avoid criticisms of the perpetuation of propaganda, government fund were not accepted nor solicited, and many other corporate sponsors, aside from Schenkers International Forwarders who provided the exhibition transportation, were deemed conceptually and artistically unsuitable for partnership.

From this painful and chaotic period of failed negotiations with potential patrons, Rauschenberg took a positive view of the string of financial disasters, coming to believe that ROCI’s credibility depended on avoiding corporate and government ties entirely. In order to fund ROCI personally, he set up his own foundation by mortgaging his studio.

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and home on Captiva Island, and more significantly, decided to sell his beloved paintings that had been given by his closest artist friends, demonstrating his commitment to ROCI.

Simultaneously, he decided that there would be no sales of ROCI works during the tour, to avoid accusations of financial motivations. Naturally, he hoped to recoup some of his losses by selling ROCI works after the world tour ended, but the sales of these works, from reasons that they were physically quite large and their imagery is so heavily based on foreign cultures, never became strong in either the American or European markets.  

Other problems plagued the fledging tour. Following the U.N. announcement, ROCI consultant Chun-Wuei Su Chien began the very delicate negotiations with China, at a time when the recent defection of Chinese table tennis players seemed to absolutely destroy what had appeared to be an opportunity to show in the country: the Chinese government decreed that there would be no more cultural exchanges.

With no funds for the Chinese venue in hand, Rauschenberg left for Tobago to contemplate and record the philosophy of ROCI. According to Saff: “It was rather an inauspicious beginning, I’d say.” Despite reservations from the recent Spiritual Pollution Campaign and the Stars exhibition, China finally agreed host ROCI in Beijing. With the arrival of the new year, The New York Times asked a number of prominent citizens and leaders in the arts what they might wish - if all their wishes could

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15 A Chinese-American artist from Anhui Province, Chun-Wei was also Rauschenberg’s interpreter during his 1982 Jingxian trip.

16 Yakush, ROCI, 165.
come true - to happen in their particular art field, or the world of the arts in general during 1984. Rauschenberg summed up his keenest desire in his own words:

I am in the process of realizing what is known as the 'Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange.' The purpose is to promote peace through active communication with art as a catalytic interchange with at least 20 countries...Peace is not popular because it is equated with a stoppage of aggressive energies. Starting a new use, aggressively, of our unique curiosities, our impatience with ignorant cruelty and encouraging the most generous personal contributions will make war ashamed of itself and art clear.  

ROCI Work Process

Theoretically, the schedule for ROCI adhered to the following sequence. Saff would travel to targeted countries to evaluate the interest of possible hosts, search for locations for the ROCI exhibitions in that country, arrange for contacts between Rauschenberg and key intellectual and cultural figures, and suggest an author for a catalogue essay in each country. If the preliminary results were possible, Rauschenberg would then visit the country for between ten and fifteen days. He would travel extensively to selected areas, taking photographs that would eventually be used in the works, and his assistants would make videos for documentation.  

This process meant that Rauschenberg would also meet with dignitaries and local people, made up of native artists, intellectuals, and artisans, often investigating new materials that were distinctive to that area. (At each stop, Rauschenberg made a documentary videotape and produced a catalogue, in the language of the country, explaining what ROCI is all about.)

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Afterwards, Rauschenberg returned to his Captiva studio to create the works. During the time he also supervised and attended the *ROCI* exhibition held in the previous country in which he had worked, while Saff and the artist’s staff scouted out the next *ROCI* location. For the exhibition in each country, Rauschenberg personally supervised the installation. At each exhibition opening, he participated in events that ranged from formal dinners to open meetings with students.

As part of *ROCI*, one work from each exhibition was given to the host country and one work was given to the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. to form a *ROCI* study collection there.\(^{18}\)

Alongside Rauschenberg’s various works of art were hundreds of his black and white photographs made in different countries, portions of which appear as silk-screened images in paintings. Assistant Van Brunt’s videotapes also ran simultaneously on as many as ten to fifteen monitors, conveying through perpetual motion what Rauschenberg saw in a given place, what captured his attention. Color tapes of each country were strategically placed near the works from the appropriate countries. In the museums, Rauschenberg was introduced by a biographical film, exhibited together with some of his earlier works. Through *ROCI*, Rauschenberg attempted the process of revealing a country, and himself too.

To any viewer, what was immediately apparent that communication by this traveling artist was not strictly limited to art in the conventional sense: Rauschenberg made up his own rules for display and so engaged his audiences through a variety of

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 mediums, which also may include performances by the Trisha Brown Company (Rauschenberg had designed many of their sets and costumes), the jazz music of saxophonist Dickie Landry, or public forums where Rauschenberg fielded questions from other artists, writers, and students.19

Several million people saw themselves and their global neighbors of Mexico, China, Tibet, Chile, Venezuela, Japan, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, through Rauschenberg’s eyes. “ROCI tells its international audience about Rauschenberg—and by inference, about the freedom of activity and expression that is allowed to flourish on the American scene,” said Jack Cowart, curator on 20th century art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, who visited the ROCI exhibitions in Moscow and Havana. “In that subtle way, and as an entirely intentional by-product of ROCI, to foreign audiences, especially in those countries where the freedom of information is unknown, the exhibition makes a powerful statement about America itself. It also serves as an example of the range of personal initiatives that are accessible [to Americans] in an unofficial way.”

“It is the artists who will reflect change in their art,” says Daryl Pottorf, a Rauschenberg artist-assistant who has helped install ROCI around the world. Leonid Bazhanov in Moscow agreed. Once an “unofficial” underground artist, he said of ROCI, “If only this had happened twenty years ago, it would have helped me greatly. For [younger] artists, though, the exhibition shows what they can do.”20

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Rauschenberg’s ROCI show opened on November 15, 1985 at the China National Art Gallery, Beijing, which was on display until December 5, 1985. During this part of the tour, Chinese audiences were able to see his previous work 7 Characters from Jiangxian, as well as ROCI Mexico, Chile, and Venezuela. His partnership with the Trisha Brown Dance Company enabled them to perform there for the opening events. In March of the same year, Rauschenberg once again opened with his artistic impressions on the country with the exhibition ROCI China, showcasing his new work, Sino-Trolley. About 300,000 people were said to have attended the opening event.

**Thoughts in China**

Upon reflection, he noted:

I [first] found that in China you had to be speaking to somebody that had almost lost their culture, maybe even a controversial political figure, in order to have any rapport with them at all…[W]hen we were in China, we experienced the other side of human nature, no-so-human nature. People were more or less adjusted to lifelessness. It couldn’t have mattered less or more what sex you were—not that there was any sexual activity, that’s why it didn’t matter—or how you looked or smelled or walked….

I was comparing that experience in China with the Tibetans, who on the street would give you a gasoline full of chung.\(^{21}\) Part of ROCI’s business is to show people not only how others worship and what their idols are, but to show them what they eat and what they drink and what happens to them when they do those simple everyday things. This was before the new breakthrough—before they had new freedoms and began moving toward Western ways and being a little more capitalistic. It hadn’t gone very far that way yet.\(^{22}\)

When ROCI returned in 1985, Rauschenberg felt a bit wary of the experience a few years later: “It was just at the moment of change toward openness. In fact, I think that because the plans to change were made is the reason that ROCI was acceptable to

\(^{21}\) a kind of barley beer

\(^{22}\) Rose, Rauschenberg, 104.
then. We even suspect that the latest student revolutions and uprisings are part of a political cosmetic to make them look more tolerant and open-minded."  

Given the vacillating government cultural attitudes at the time, there might have been truth to that statement. A carefully written and dutiful review was written by a fellow from the Art Research Institute of China, roughly translated, states:

Rauschenberg is the first Western contemporary artist who came to exhibit. This exhibition was funded and prepared and installed by himself. It provided us with a window on art. It enabled us to develop a deeper and objective understanding of the overview of modern Western art. Rauschenberg’s technique and materials and aesthetic pursuits inspired us. A new style often appears concomitant with new materials and techniques. The opposite is the case with many of our artists who use classical techniques, traditional tools and materials which tend to be restricted in form. 

This new style took some adjustment by locals accustomed with layers of bureaucratic approval. One of the anecdotes that Rauschenberg and Saff recounts in the *ROCI* catalogue was how, on one of the trips, someone yelled at Rauschenberg in Chinese that he was wasting film when he was shooting a garbage pail. Yet after a while, after being in his company, the folks tried to soon helpfully point out things in the landscape they thought might interest him, things that were previously not viable subject matter for themselves, but were now possible Rauschenbergs, as it were.

The notion of a painter who imitated life was fundamentally against Rauschenberg’s values, who found that Chinese artists were restricted, that the tools acted as constraints, and that everything was a “given.” “It’s no wonder that the teachers teach the same things day after day and treat the materials the same way. Those are the

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people called “talented” if they can treat their materials the way they were treated a thousand years ago. Well, a thousand years is a lousy definition of avant-garde.”

In an interview with Saff, he made an inverted Oscar Wilde remark when seeing the mist and the verticality of the famed Yellow Mountains: “I’m disappointed again. I thought they were being innovative but they were just copying nature. The mountains actually looked like all these fantastic prints and paintings that I had been in awe of. The artists were just painting old barns or something…excuse me, Andrew Wyeth.”

With its ideals, ROCI was posed to offer an alternative viewpoint to the visiting 300,000, to “[remind] them of some things they hadn’t seen in a long time. That’s a kind of individual sensualness…Also, it’s not just to influence artists and writers. Certainly in China there is no elite. There’s power, yet the reality for those in power at that time was just about as grim as it was for the rest of the country.”

Initial Impact on the Chinese Public

When thinking after the events of ROCI, Rauschenberg recalled that it was his exhibition in Beijing in 1985, which brought back to China the art he made in 1982 including the Seven Characters and a hundred-foot color photograph, which made him “nearly bankrupt.” The works filled most of the China National Art Gallery; for those unfamiliar with the venue and its size, the ninety-eight creations took up an entire Boeing 747 cargo jet.

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25 Yakush, ROCI, 16.

26 Rose, Rauschenberg, 89.

As part of his exhibitions, he had to meet with the local students, something he found particularly agonizing to do in China. He once stated:

That was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life because there I am in China and I’m not there to offend or criticize anyone, just to show them some things. But it’s been very hard to leave quickly any one of those countries that are so starved for outside contact. The professors picked the cream of their student crop and these anxious young people were waiting for me to say something about their work. The reason the work looked like it did was because that was the only thing they were allowed to do. So you couldn’t praise them but, on the other hand, you couldn’t deny them or put them down. It was right there in front of you.\textsuperscript{28}

Despite his difficulty to relay true critical remarks, it was an exceptional opportunity for the Chinese students to have their work be acknowledged by a person outside of the country, let alone by a renowned artist. Journalists like Mary Lynn Kotz remembered similar humbling situations like Rauschenberg’s, relaying the eagerness from the locals for any opinions outside the academy.

On the part of the students, they were said to be initially not very receptive or even responsive when Saff revealed a number of Rauschenberg paintings and sculptures during a lecture. But it was the collaged photographs that changed their attitude completely. Of course, Rauschenberg saw the difference as a kind of blindness in perception: photography allows for the same complexity as an abstract painting, but somehow it is accepted to having a higher form of truth-telling. What gets lost to the viewer is that the medium may not have as unimpeachable record as thought, as shadows, highlights, etc, all can project different kinds of distortions.

Regardless the difference in perception, it was the exchange that was most important. In the same way he admired Olympic athletes (he sent his works of art to each

\textsuperscript{28} Yakush, \textit{ROCI}, 65.
participant one year) Rauschenberg believed the language, energy, and spirit of cooperation within art transcended human tongue. A statement to Newsweek was made after departing from China’s Anhui Providence, “After the third day we almost weren’t talking through a translator. If you get used to inventing and adjusting as any artist should be, then you go right to whatever has to be done. Actually the translator confused us. He told us that it was easier to translate for diplomats. That’s a wonderful statement and for me it is the pivotal point in the change of philosophy from the Rauschenberg Round the World to the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange.”

While the pace of life was slow in the eyes of Rauschenberg, there were signs that the emerging avant-garde was organically and rapidly forming by 1985. The launch of new art magazines such as Art Trends in Wuhan and the revamping of others such as Fine Arts in Beijing, which provided a platform for promoting new theories, as well as for displaying the growing crop of domestic artworks were promising signs. Additional reports on international events and news updates on leading trends and the artists driving them defined the broader international landscapes, afforded Chinese artists a sense of where they themselves stood vis-à-vis the progress they were making in “catching up with America.”

To a society cautiously exploring the concept of human beings as individual as drops of water, after decades of moving as one ocean, modern ideas of art seemed curious. Questions that may have been broached to Rauschenberg may have been something like this: What purpose of modern art, as evolved did modern art serve? Who

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29 Yakush, ROCI, 159.
was it for? Who could understand it? Who would buy it? The unfamiliar currents of modern art, as evolved in the West, raised official apprehension and perplexity, especially when artists began to explore conceptual approaches, including performance art, installation and site-specific intervention.\(^{30}\)

**Pros and Cons to ROCI**

The major criticism that has been leveled against *ROCI* was that Rauschenberg could not possibly learn enough about a country to represent it accurately in the time allotted, and that the works created were too much Rauschenberg and not enough of the culture of the host country. With such a set of American-based democratic ideals combined with the prejudices of the European and American avant-garde movements, it would take much education to recognize and appreciate the disparate cultural and social values of the particular region.

Statements such as “to introduce the peoples of a country to themselves and to each other” by showing them “things so familiar that they've lost their meaning” did not armor Rauschenberg against stinging reviews that slated him as culturally arrogant. One wrote:

*When Rauschenberg's in Rome he does not live as Romans do, but rather as a big-time visiting American aided by ambassadors and surrounded by his entourage. The artist is no snob. His heart is in the right place, he is famous for his friendliness, and he's given away millions. He is certain that his *ROCI* tour has added something real to world peace. And yet he sometimes seems to be a sort of art imperialist...The artist as ambassador-at-large. It's a parody of the old Grand Tour...This work isn't so much an interpretive essay as a long, garrulous scrapbook of images and image-clichés cast in his characteristic style....* \(^{31}\)

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It is slightly ironic that these concerns echo Mao’s refrain regarding art, in the way that one cannot raise artistic standards of an audience until one understands that base completely. One would assume that this writer would not similarly share in Mao’s view that only through years of physical labor can this understanding be achieved.

Yet the opposite argument may also be made: that Rauschenberg’s lack of deep familiarity with the different cultures allowed him a fresh and novel approach that may not otherwise be able to organically manifest itself. The immediacy and intensity of his exposure to non-familiar situations yielded observations and insights that might have been lost on those numbed by repetitive experiences. From this perspective, Rauschenberg’s disposition toward lateral thinking and intuitive working procedures as explored earlier, is essential to the manner in which ROCI was conceived and executed.

Whether sound or flawed, Rauschenberg’s approach to ROCI was consistent with his art-making career as demonstrated in the following aspects. Once underway, the speed of ROCI was a prime characteristic: Rauschenberg shifted rapidly from visiting foreign countries in order to collect information to creating the works to installing exhibitions, sometimes overlapping as many as three countries at once. As a consequence, there was little time for internal reflection. Instead, the artist relied on instinct and immediate response, as has been his custom throughout his career.

Rauschenberg consistently believed that surface knowledge, rather than exhaustive research, provided fresh perspectives. In accordance with the interactive and performance aspects of his work, he felt that all the experiences of organizing ROCI, not just the art objects themselves, were parts of the work. In this regard, Rauschenberg
wrote to his friend Pontus Hulten, the newly appointed director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, “I conceive of the tour as a giant creative piece on the hoof, supported by intrigue, deceptions, misunderstandings, and para-political maneuvers.\(^{32}\)

One possible immediate effect from a kind of *ROCI* legacy might be found in the end of Pinochet’s reign as Chile’s dictator, which came in a peaceful manner that surprised everyone. During the summer of 1988, Pinochet’s advisors convinced the aging leader to conduct a second plebiscite that would further legitimize his position, one that was scheduled five weeks away from *ROCI*. Based on a decision that the only way to beat Pinochet was by his own rules, fourteen opposition parties gathered around a “no” vote. The “no” campaign was denied access to the media until just before the election, one where ninety-two percent of the electorate voted.

When finally given last-minute television time, the coalition stunned the nation with its “unity and a series of upbeat, appealing advertisements that stressed harmony and joy in a reunited Chile,” a message similar to Rauschenberg’s works, which focused on restorative themes that included the church, women, and nature.

By contrast, the government’s grim advertisements reminded people of the violence and disorder before Pinochet’s coup and suggestion of more to come.

When asked about the final aim of the ROCI/Chile works, the artist, rather than his usual lengthy anecdote, simply answered that they were intended “to show my solidarity with the Chilean people.”

Although ROCI was said to have took him out of the art world and earned some of the worst reviews he ever had in his career, when asked by the New Yorker of the project towards the end of his life, Rauschenberg said it had done what he wanted it to do—“except that I don't see any excess of world peace”—and that, in any case, he wasn't interested in regretting things. “If it's a successful mistake,” he said, “then you applaud.”

Mistake of not, nine thousand people came to the China National Art Gallery in Beijing on its opening day, November 15, 1985. Before the show’s end a month later, more than three hundred thousand people had seen ROCI, an audience hungry for western information. It must be clear that Rauschenberg’s art was not wildly received by all. Many foreigners, like many Americans, were puzzled or offended by it. Some Chinese viewers, according to press accounts, were critical of the notion that cardboard boxes were “art.”

Yet one Chinese university brought its entire art department to Beijing for a month to study the exhibit. “Rauschenberg brought an impetus so that Chinese artists can look forward with full force,” wrote artist Yao Qing-Zan. “They can walk out of the threshold of old ideas and forms, so as to face the world.” And critic Zheng Shengtian


wrote, “Rauschenberg takes the Chinese across a hundred years of art. It is very important to know who our neighbors are, what their faces look like.”

When news of the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square reached Rauschenberg, he was outraged. Yet upon reflection regarding Tibet and China, places where his art had produced such curiosity and hope, he was said to have remained optimistic before his death. The door, as it were, had been opened.

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36 Ibid., 41.
Figure 2A. Robert Rauschenberg, *Sino-Trolley* / ROCI China, acrylic and fabric collage mounted on aluminum support with objects, 1986, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Figure 2B. Robert Rauschenberg, *Sino-Trolley/ROCI China*, acrylic and fabric collage mounted on aluminum support with objects, 1986, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
To the local arts community, not only did Rauschenberg’s actual presence prove that they were not forgotten by the outside world, it signaled that there was more than a glimmer of possibility that those other, powerful, modern countries were also interested in them and their art. This real validation, and a stream of other secondary sources of western art in the form of copied pictures and art journals, immeasurably bolstered the artists’ confidence, to the degree that by the mid-1980s, the activities of new artists were of such voluminous proportions as to merit the term “movement.” It was not an organized or seditious revolt against the old order; while artists sought to change outmoded official attitudes towards artistic form and content, they believed their advance in culture to be in line with that of the nation’s program of modernization.

It was the start to the wildly optimistic belief that their art would do for culture what Deng’s 1978 reform policies were achieving for economic growth. This renewed focus allowed for an expanded realm of individual freedom and space, giving permission to experimentation outside the function of propaganda and morality. During the heady days of the 80s, before the advent of the government crackdown in 1989, China’s new artists were as fervent in their nationalism as they were competitive in their enthusiasm.

There was much evidence of things in ferment. After the 1979 exhibition by the Stars, came the establishment of Fine Arts (zhongguo meishu bao) in 1985, a weekly arts newspaper, the formalization of official channels for sale of art by the New York-based Hefner Gallery in 1987-89, and of course Robert Rauschenberg’s 1985 exhibition at the
China National Art Gallery. Combined, they helped lead to the culmination of what some consider the art world’s foreshadowing of the events of Tiananmen: the socially critical, highly controversial *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in February 1989.¹

Seen from the idealistic eyes of the participating artists and intellectuals, its name signaled a heroic struggle against an oppressive academy. “Chinese artists in 1980s, although inspired by new ideas from the West, had begun to write their own story, and this was the real beginning of Chinese contemporary art,” said Fei Dawei, Chinese art critic.²

The origins of the 1989 exhibition came from then-unknown artists like Xu Bing, Wu Shan Zhuan, Huang Yong Ping, Gu Wenda, etc, all of whom gained later renowned as a member of the ‘85 New Wave art movement. In an effort to draw scattered groups into a nationwide movement, the leaders proposed as early as 1986 to hold a national exhibition of experimental art in Beijing. The aim was to organize a major survey of new art and to create an opportunity for society in general to appraise the dynamic strides towards the modernization of art. Together, it was envisioned as a grand but temporary event—another triumphant moment of “taking over” a primary official art institution.

The China National Art Gallery was transformed upon the opening of the exhibition: long black carpets, extending from the street to the entrance of the exhibition hall, bore the emblazoned logo was of a “No U-Turn” traffic sign signaling “There is no

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turning back,” a symbolic emblem of their mission. The exhibition displayed works dating from 1985 to 1987, including happenings, events, and performances. About 186 artists from all regions of China took part, showcasing a wide range of styles in 297 paintings, sculptures, videos and installations. Some of these works were influenced by and critical of such Western modes as Dada, Surrealism and Pop, while others sought inspiration by looking backwards to ancient Chinese forms of expression rooted in Taoist philosophy and mysticism.

The event revealed a rare glimpse of shocking works such as a flesh-colored inflatable object with obvious sexual connotations, flanked by blown-up condoms and surgical gloves. Receiving the most attention were three portraits of Chairman Mao with pane patterns on the paintings by artist Wang Guangyi.

Artists who were not part of the official exhibition showed their work outside, desperate to be a part of this unprecedented platform to establish their reputation, to just to be “part of the moment.”

The authorities were very nervous about the exhibition, not only because of the spontaneous interventions by non-official artists. Many incidents happened during the exhibition that made a big stir in the capital. Approximately two hours after the official opening, two artists, Tang Song and Xiao Lu, well-connected children of army generals, fired gunshots at their own installation, Dialogue—two telephone boxes with a mirrored

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3 Logo designed by Yang Zhiqun of the Nanjing Arts Institute.

4 According to Li Hui’s article, Fei Dawei remembered being moved by an artist, who borrowed 5,000 yuan ($658 US dollars) to attend the exhibition. His monthly salary was only 50 yuan ($7 US dollars) at the time.
panel in between—in a deliberately provocative gesture which led to their arrest and a brief closure of the exhibition because of police investigations.\(^5\)

The dramatic activism and sense of happening associated with this exhibition closely paralleled the political situation of the time: a heightening pro-democracy movement was preparing itself for a major confrontation with the hard-liners in the government. Although *China/Avant-Garde* was later reopened, the show was permanently shut down two weeks later after reports that the gallery, the municipal government, and the Beijing Public Security Bureau had received bomb threats.

Three months after the exhibition, many of its organizers and artists participated in the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, which ended in bloodshed on June 4, 1989.\(^6\)

Without compromising the seminal importance of this exhibition in the history of contemporary Chinese art, Karen Smith points how it is necessary to recognize its limitations. First, although *China/Avant-Garde* included many works that were radical and even shocking, the notion of a comprehensive, “national” exhibition was traditional and, ironically, found its immediate origin in the official *National Art Exhibitions*. Second, although organizers gave much thought to the exhibition's location, they offered little discussion about how to change the entire system of art exhibition in China.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Xiao Lu claimed not to have known that the bullet was other than a blank; it was later known as “the first shot of June 4.”


Significant Time

1989 has been widely taken as a turning point in China's cultural and intellectual history, a time of possibility which 1979 only offered a glimpse of. More euphemistically speaking, Chinese historians and critics have drawn a dividing line between what they call the “New Era” and the “post-New Era.” The New Era is the post-Mao period that begins with the Reform in the late 70s, which included experimental arts and ideologies, attitudes that were greeted with a certain wariness from intellectuals and authorities alike, an example of which can be found in this 1985 editorial in *Fine Arts* journal:

Some comrades have a mistaken understanding of creative freedom, and they have confused it with bourgeois liberalization. In their art, they advocate abstract “humanity,” “the value of human existence,” “self-expression” and “pure art” that transcends class and politics. In their creative work, they blindly model themselves on western modernist schools. Over the past few years, there has appeared in our art a minority of works which are ideologically unhealthy, and which, in terms of form, are so strange that the masses cannot understand them, so that a certain extent they have given rise to spiritual pollution. 8

This intellectual experimentation and artistic commingling came to a sudden end in 1989 as a result of the Tiananmen Square incident. Government policy then heavily popularized a new maxim: “to get rich is good.” Previous reservations about the political function of art or western corruption were thusly disregarded. The post-New Era witnesses the rise of consumerism, the commercialization of cultural production, and the expansion of the mass media and popular culture. With the populace bombarded with sound, images, and messages emitted from electronic media, the self-reflective cultural critique of the “deep structure” of the Chinese nation in the 1980s was largely over. On

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the surface of present day art and literature at least, there remains a sense of general
depoliticization in both public culture and critical discourse.9

How the Exhibition Happened

Whether it was intended by its organizers or not, the China/Avant-Garde art
exhibition became a symbol to the end of a phase of development in modern art in China.
Gu Dexin, who specializes in environments and installations, explained that it took three
years for a group of artists working with Li Xianting and his fellow critic Gao Minglu to
organize the exhibition. The process would have not been achieved without the final
approval of the Ministry of Culture and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles,
who only agreed when the artists found the much needed financial backing of
businessman Song Wei and the support of Feng Jicai, a well-known writer who published
a literary journal based in Tianjin.10

Location

As the site of the previous 1979 Stars exhibition and the 1985 ROCI show, China
National Art Gallery was and still is considered the most important and prestigious
gallery in the country11, housing both the national collection of Chinese art and visiting
exhibitions.12 Unlike western public museums, the venue follows the murky local
practice in the way that venue’s availability for rent extends not only august private and

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9 Lu, “Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China,” 121.


12 In 2003, the museum underwent its first restoration in its 40-year history, a 15 month restoration
costing $18 million.
corporate parties, but exhibitions for the right price. Nevertheless, the museum retains its prestige for the Chinese, as well as its significance as a barometer of the political mood.⁠¹³

At the time of the China/Avant-Garde exhibition, due to considerable media coverage, even those who knew little about modern art were aware that something of note was happening at the 1989 show, and they came in droves as witnesses until its abrupt end.

Argument of Originality

Given the various styles and mediums displayed within the 1989 exhibition, it is difficult to directly point to one outside movement or artist that influenced the artists as a whole. When the show later traveled abroad, certain western critics accused them and other such artists of being derivative, an interpretation that did not consider the works in their own cultural context. These criticisms may have stemmed from not only an unfamiliarity with the relative newness of oil painting to the country, as it was introduced in the last century, but that in traditional Chinese painting, imitation of the masters is not only encouraged but almost necessary to bolster and validate one’s personal interpretation. There, the concept of “originality,” such as such to the tenet in Western art, can be thought of no more than a few decades old and far from universally accepted in China.

Furthermore, in a world increasingly dominated by global communications networks, shared visual references surpass physical distances so that art must be assessed

as having beauty, impact, meaning and depth, not by whether its iconography or aesthetic language is influenced by East or West.\textsuperscript{14}

Wang Guangyi

Although the origins to \textit{China/Avant-Garde} may be varied, Robert Rauschenberg, as the first Western contemporary artist to previously exhibit in China, can be attributed to sparking the movement known as Political Pop\textsuperscript{15}, the leading exponent of which is Wang Guangyi. The movement is distinguished by a Rauschenberg-like juxtaposition of images of revolutionary enthusiasm blended with appropriated commercial symbols, and can be seen as a precursor to contemporary China, or its unfolding of as a postmodern culture.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Analysis of Chairman Mao AO}

Wang’s Political Pop style began to develop around 1987, when he overlaid black grilles and single letters, to what was later known as his \textit{Chairman Mao AO} paintings. These three portraits caused considerable comment, one of the most of all the pieces in \textit{China/Avant-Garde}. Rather than the normally vivid reds\textsuperscript{17}, Wang replaced them with cold, bluish greys and by way of the lines, literally put up a barrier between the identical Mao images and the public, pushing viewers to deconstruct a popular, deified image, suggesting a Mao being held behind bars.

\textsuperscript{14} Iola Lenzi, “The Quest for New Individuality in China,” \textit{Asia Times}, 30 May 1997.

\textsuperscript{15} The term ‘Political Pop’ is now considered one of the two main tendencies of the Chinese avant-garde.

\textsuperscript{16} Lu, “Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China,” 114.

\textsuperscript{17} For certain images, the color red was synonymous with the little red book, one’s love for the Party, and by extension, China itself.
A review of the paintings contemplated further its meaning:

Maybe this grid is a kind of railing. For so many years we said that Mao Zedong was our most intimate relative, or something like that. So close to us. Maybe this railing is to separate us from him. In fact, this is all untrue, and he concealed something. Why paint three paintings? This makes one feel that the traces of this formerly noble personality can now be found everywhere.18

The triptych’s political wariness and double-meaning foretold Wang’s later defining style of Political Pop, best encapsulated in his Great Criticism series of large-scale paintings in 1990. At the start of the ‘80s, China’s cities began to be festooned with commercial billboards, where “the visual effect of the advertising signs was so strong, it reminded us of the [political] posters in the past,” Wang reportedly told Art in America.

“Two periods of history had come together. Everyone had to react...An artist had to face it directly, had to take an attitude to it.”

Thus was born the mixing of worker, peasant and soldier heroes commemorated from the posters of the Cultural Revolution with the images of Marlboro, Kodak, and United Colors of Benetton symbols that dominate commercial marketplaces, much like Rauschenberg’s carefree derivation of culturally foreign symbols.19

Like Rauschenberg, Wang is careful to point out that his own work differs from the “happy acceptance of commercialism” of Andy Warhol. “Some Chinese at least are still revolutionary romantics, uneasy about the spiritual confrontation between East and West and worried that commerce pollutes people's minds and spirits,” he said. At first glance, his works seem like shallow and cliché-ridden depictions of East-West

18 Martina Koppel-Yang, Semiotic Warfare (Hong Kong: Time Zone 8, 2004), 16.

confrontations, but on a deeper level they bear complex socio-political exploration. In articulating the artist’s memory of the dogmatic period of Chinese communism around the desire for material satisfaction newly appearing in a consumer society, the works describe the heroic illusions of the past, and their degeneration in a material society.

With this body of work, even his recent pieces have ranged from $25,923 - $38,885 in December 1, 2008, in a contemporary art sale in HK at Christies.\(^\text{20}\) Considering the origins of mass-produced works from large, art making factories in demand by Chinese contemporary artists today, these auction numbers can be considered generous.

**Political Pop Art**

It is important to reiterate that the language of the Cultural Revolution was a very visual one, necessary for its ideology to reach as wide an audience as possible. The reuse of popular symbols of the socialist realist and propagandistic visual production in the late 1980s and 1990s has been discussed by the critic Li Xianting, the first to provide a critical frame for this new production and the one who dubbed this genre, Political Pop:

> An existence saturated with politics has become the accustomed state of being for most contemporary Chinese. . . Efforts to avoid this political reality . . . are only further evidence of the power of the system. Political Pop uses the acknowledgment of this political reality as its starting point, but then proceeds to satirize politics, providing an effective (but by no means heroic) means of neutralizing the hold of a politically saturated mentality on the inner mind. . . In a sense, “Mao Fever” and Political Pop art are linked in that there is inherent in both the use of past icons or “gods” to criticize, or in the case of the latter, to satirize, current reality.\(^\text{21}\)


A constant aspect within the production of these works is the ironic dimension attached to the representation of the Chairman, serving as a liberating experience in relation to the dark psychological mood of coercion and regulation of the previous totalitarian period. The cheeky irreverence expressed in these works by Wang Guangyi and others in the Political Pop movement could be compared to the ambiguous parody relating by Wang Keping’s *Idol* in the early 80s, in using mockery that provides a kind of transgression and release that facilitates the subsequent secularization of the Chairman’s image.

As Karen Smith writes, these Mao portraits once gave “the same access…as altarpieces provide the faithful to Jesus.”\(^{22}\) For those who lived through the Cultural Revolution as young adults, it can be difficult to separate the figure from the doubled sense of exhilaration and disillusionment associated with those years. In the works made by these particular artists, Mao’s figure is commonly treated with a critical depth and a sense of psychological involvement mostly absent in the works of younger artists. Zhang Hongtu, an older artist now based in New York, said “When I first cut up a photo of Mao’s face to make a collage, I felt as if I were sinning. Such feelings have made me realize how my work is really an effort to break the psychological authority that Mao as an image continues to hold over all Chinese. For me, working on Mao became a form of exorcism.”\(^{23}\)

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There remain remnants of the power of Mao’s image. In 2006, an outcry erupted after a state-controlled Beijing auction house presented an old 1950s official portrait of Mao for sale\textsuperscript{24}. After internet critics lashed against the planned sale, the Huachen Auction House withdrew the item, saying the government had intervened and “suggested” the work be placed in a national museum.

That same year, outrage for Gao Qiang’s painting of a sickly Mao swimming in a blood-red Yangtze River, was raised in an exhibition space in Beijing’s trendy Dashanzi area. Police promptly appeared at the gallery and had the image removed\textsuperscript{25}.

For a later generation who were children or teenagers at the time of his death, Mao is largely an icon in the popular sense of the term, like idols such as Marilyn or Elvis in the West. To these artists born after a certain age, Mao might act more as an impersonal wall decoration rather than a form of sympathetic power.

In contrast, there is nothing in Rauschenberg’s works that suggests an intentional manufacturing of a single-minded cult of personality. Throughout his artistic life, his concentration was set on assembling illustrative, figurative imagery that featured disparate scenes into a layered, polyglot union of comparison, contrasts, random chance, and worldly chaos. This purpose to capture conflicting visual life oddities lends itself to becoming a more multi-dimensional experience for the viewer, a natural match to the layered juxtapositions and confusion within Political Pop and Cynical Realism. For these same reasons, Rauschenberg’s works has never been readily identifiable nor able to

\textsuperscript{24} This work was said to have been painted by Zhang Zhenshi, one of Mao’s first official portrait makers and the artist credited with the model for the painting that hangs in Tiananmen Square.

\textsuperscript{25} Barboza, “Chameleon Mao, the Face of Tiananmen Square,” 2006.
embody the kind of ‘magic’ or symbolic power these Mao images once had for the mainland Chinese.

Government Reception Afterwards

The fundamental ethos on the part of the organizers of *China/Avant-Garde* was to challenge outmoded attitudes towards art that were the legacy of the past, rather than confront the present regime. However, the installation shootings instantaneously brought the avant-garde into conflict with the authorities, acting as a cataclysmic wake-up call to the party regarding the dangers of unsupervised culture.

After this incident, authorities sought to impose a heavy fine upon the exhibition organizers and a two-year ban on all the artists connected with the event from exhibiting in the China National Art Gallery. While polluting notions of western thought bore the brunt of the State’s wrath, the avant-garde found itself effectively ostracized.  

Following gunfire at Tiananmen Square, the art scene returned to normalcy after a brief hiatus. For most artists, this meant eking out a self-supporting life; meanwhile, the government continued with its tradition of keeping and supporting a list of ‘important artists’, all members of the China Academy of Chinese Painting, who were given salaries, housing, and health benefits. In the proceeding decade, art galleries with international ties, such as Red Gate Gallery and Courtyard Gallery in Beijing, and ShanghART and Eastlink in Shanghai, began to grow and emerge, with a growing client base that includes influential foreign collectors such as Uli Sigg and Pierre Huber.

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27 Macritchie, “Precarious paths on the mainland,” 15.
Towards the late 90s, artists began really test the limits of their precarious freedom with exhibitions such as the *Fuck Off* biennale satellite exhibition curated by Ai Weiwei at Eastlink in 2000, and Cang Xin’s performance piece *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain*, where he piled the summit of a mountain with the bodies of his friends -- a reference to the terror induced by the Cultural Revolution. Though artists experienced a palpable growth in artistic freedom throughout the 90s and onwards, plainclothes spies from the cultural bureaus still made their presence felt, asking to speak to artists, removing works, shutting down exhibitions and occasionally holding artists in prison.

*China/Avant-Garde* Artists Afterwards

Certain *China/Avant-Garde* artists who played a considerable role in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of May and June 1989 subsequently found it difficult to leave the country. Artists who took part and survived had to write self-criticisms, all with the refrain: “I was only looking.” From then on, Chinese artists focused on more inward themes, using their work to analyze the life of ordinary Chinese; many born in the sixties developed a fierce cynicism about all forms of authority or politics. Coupled with a determination to use their work to explore the feelings of bitterness, anger and betrayal, these artists formed the most powerful current in contemporary Chinese culture of the late twentieth century. Other participants of the exhibition, like the two artists of the fateful *Dialogue*, Xiao Lu and Tang Song, left China for Australia and other parts abroad to form new diaspora identities.

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While the artworks in *China/Avant-Garde* were not allowed to be openly exhibited in the mainland for most of the nineties, they traveled outside China and been shown all over the world: Hong Kong, Venice, Berlin, Sydney, Melbourne, Oxford, Barcelona, and many other cities.\(^\text{29}\)

Time has brought a renewed interest in the works and the artists. Evidence of the rising opinion of the Chinese contemporary art can be seen from the 2006 auction hosted by China Guardian Auctions Co. Ltd, allegedly the largest art auctioneer in China, titled “20 Years of Contemporary Chinese Art.” It involved dozens of the *China/Avant-Garde* artists who shot to stardom since the debut. The landmark artwork comprising of the installation and bullet shot, *Dialogue* by Xiao Lu, was estimated at that time to reach US$262,500-$387,500.\(^\text{30}\) It currently stands in the permanent collection in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as a gift from a donor.

Although these avant-garde artists may have presently found commercial success, present authorities continue to be wary of any, even recessive political implications. A 20\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary was declared for the exhibition on February 5, 2009 at the National Agricultural Exhibition Center in Beijing. The curator Gao Minglu; daughter of the former premier Zhao Ziyang, Wang Yannan; artist Xiao Lu\(^\text{31}\) and more then 100 others assembled for that was to be opening ceremony. As sign of the authorities’ extreme sensitivity over the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary of the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests, 

\(^{29}\) Lu, “Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China,” 132.


\(^{31}\) The ever flamboyant Xiao Lu chose to celebrate the occasion as a performance piece. She was garbed in a wedding dress, accompanied by a traditional Chinese wedding band, and caged doves.
the police barred the commemoration of the exhibition entirely. According to organizers, officers also prevented another art gallery from showing a documentary film titled *Seven Deadly Sins*, which focused on performance art in 1989 by filmmaker Wen Puli. Conversely, an exhibit that featured photographs of the works shown from 1989 was held without police interruption at a private Beijing gallery later that week.\(^{32}\)

Up to the writing of this paper, any discussions of the student-led protests and the June 4 military crackdown remains officially, if not publicly, taboo in China.

Figure 3. Wang Guangyi, *Chairman Mao AO*, oil on canvas, 1988, private collection.
CHAPTER 5
WHY RAUSCHENBERG?

Even after the auspicious start of the China/Avant-Garde exhibition, the lasting effects of Rauschenberg’s legacy were not yet readily apparent compared to the subsequent outcomes from issues that he intentionally and perhaps unintentionally raised from his visits. Before exploring that further, one must first wonder why was he allowed to be there by the Chinese officials in the place, out of any other western artist at the time?

Very simply, they rightly saw him as an established star: Robert Rauschenberg had cemented a reputation of being an artistic genius in the West since the 1950s, whose assorted work in various mediums, particularly his “Combines” were said to have changed the general course of modern art.¹

In an article memorializing his life and artworks after his death on May 12, 2008, wrote: “I thought they were wonderful,” said Nan Rosenthal, curator of Robert Rauschenberg: Combines at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. While artists such as Pablo Picasso and Paul Brach used everyday articles in their collages, their intent was to make a tableau or still life. “[But] Rauschenberg does something very different,” she said. Instead of one meaning, his combines show that a work of art can have many meanings.²

¹ His most famous combine is the 1959 piece “Monogram,” which utilizes a stuffed goat and a tire.

This recognition enabled Rauschenberg to be embraced, even if tacitly so, as a cultural ambassador in regions that shunned the concept of Americanism and democracy. His international standing as a master artist gave welcome in countries like Cuba, Berlin, Chile, and China, who at that time mandated that all cultural endeavors act as a concrete reflection of society and that form was subordinate to content. The Chinese authorities, even though they may have not fully appreciated his aesthetic point of view, wanted to attach his prestigious name to their own, as an example of their proposed national initiatives towards “modernization.” Perhaps less cynically, they really did honor Rauschenberg’s artistic beliefs and the personal sacrifice ROCI entailed.

His works also serve as visual metaphors for his particular brand of humanism; it was his methods, his political and cultural awareness, and ultimately, his empathy, that distinguished him from others at the time. In the way how John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, made the point that we should not divorce art from life, Rauschenberg takes as his subject the fate of human beings, seeing that they have desires beyond the reach of advertising and propaganda as emotive pictorial devices. Instead of using the metaphor of art as a window into reality, art was to be an experience directly felt.

What was most important to Rauschenberg was his collaboration with artists and artisans in the various ROCI countries. This broad international cooperation matched with his intense curiosity proved challenging for the organizers at times; in Venezuela, for example, he chose to go down to the Amazon to meet with the native tribes, against the advice of Caracas intellectuals who then had no connection with the peoples. In Santiago,
Chile of 1985, due to armed soldiers and gunfire everywhere, Catholic churches were the only places where Rauschenberg could safely meet with artists, students, and political activists. To the wary students who directly questioned the purpose of his visit, he replied: “Why not? I am happier to be here than in the Louvre.”³ Chile, he felt, needed his particular window to the outside world.

Time between Policies

After the early eighties, which saw the grimness of the Spiritual Pollution Campaign, the pendulum quickly swung the other way for more modern or western efforts by the Party, one of which was the approval for Rauschenberg’s ROCI.

Suddenly, all of western art, philosophy, and literature became available to Chinese citizens all at once. The slogan “Two hundred years in two days” sums up the avid, even bulimic intake of previously inaccessible knowledge. This plethora includes the exposure to some new-found ideas and philosophy as well. Artists, critics, and architects alike drew from thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Deleuze-Guattari to name a few, and in the process, discovered structuralism, semiotics, and deconstructionism, or tools they needed in order to posit their own works and thoughts within the global cultural, social, and politics fabric.⁴

Inspired by the following artistic and intellectual discourse, the result of that period is the creation of an alternative and parallel contemporary art history to the West, a mixture of Chinese and western thought, often radical and subversive, but sometimes also

³ Kotz, Rauschenberg: Art and Life, 56.

⁴ UK art critic Karen Smith argues that the idea of contextuality in regard to the purpose and function of an artwork is not only recent in Chinese art history, but is a recent one in western art history, stemming from the sixties onward.
deceiving or outright opportunistic, qualities which Chinese art came to represent in the following decades. In the years after Rauschenberg’s ROCI, between 1985 and 1990, more than 1,000 young Chinese artists, living in an environment without galleries, museums, or systematic support for the arts, formed groups with independent manifestos, which comprehensively led a fundamentally influential artistic movement by spontaneously forming of collectives and instigating debates relating to art and its function.

Some critics say that the ‘85 New Wave art movement took just five years to imitate the hundred years of history of Western contemporary art, and should not be claimed as the start of Chinese contemporary art, but critic Zhou Yan says it enriched China’s art scene through both Western and classical Chinese expression and elements.

In fact, many modern Chinese art critics have come to regard this time as a golden age, when artworks were inspired by the passion to create for arts’ sake, rather than money or government. Artist Gu Dexin has said that in 1989 that he believed, “Chinese artists [then] had everything that was the best in the world, except money and large studios.” Likewise, critic Wang Mingxian finishes: “Chinese artists nowadays have nothing except money and big studios.” These voices sound the general disappointment in the way how the market has become an incentive for the development of Chinese contemporary art, rather than artistic or academic aptitude.  


Subsequent individual migrations and a large number of lost or internationally dispersed artworks have determined this period as one largely unaccounted for in Chinese art history, according to Chinese art critic Fei Dawei. This unfamiliarity is most evident among people in the mainland, particularly the young generation of Chinese artists, who see that the story of Chinese contemporary art began in the 1990s. It has become a task for many of the artists of that time and present-day critics to revise this opinion, as Fei noted: “Chinese artists in 1980s, although inspired by new ideas from the West, had begun to write their own story, and this was the real beginning of Chinese contemporary art.”

Acceptance of Rauschenberg

The desire to escape from political chaos and empower reform to the country fueled both Party and individual efforts at westernized modernization in the realm of economics, education, and even culture. After the “cultural revolution” of the 1960s and 70s, Fei Dawei adds of the eighties: “Suppression of such a powerful culture could only be met with an equal and opposite force.”

Rauschenberg was not only keen to engage the country by actively initiating the exchange, but can be considered in some ways a ‘safe’ cultural choice for the Chinese authorities, who understood both the need for openness together with the diplomatic value for such an exchange with the once-described international paladin of modernism. The fact that this champion drew his inspiration from such untraditional sources as

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magazine ads and garbage dumps, and was famous for his non-elitist views, perhaps made him seem in some ways even ideologically compatible to the Party’s core.

More importantly, Rauschenberg’s works from his first trip to Jiangxian in 1982 lacked a detrimental political nature. While cultural barriers and bureaucracy made the process difficult on both sides at times, there were no lasting negative or embarrassing political aftereffects that would have prevented him being allowed to exhibit his cumulative ROCI exhibition in Beijing.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note Richard Vine’s conclusion that the Chinese avant-garde’s quick leap over modernism has deprived abstraction of the pioneering status it holds in West art history. For experimental painters in the PRC, coming onto the scene some eight decades after the emergence of such work abroad, abstraction was just one more handy option among many. It might be met, at first, by bewilderment from the general public and vague (although unconfirmed) suspicion from the censors, but it did not require a gut-wrenching formal breakthrough by individual artists. Consequently, he concluded that there are virtually no abstract painters are counted among the major artistic provocateurs in China today.  

Many Chinese critics would say that what Vine misses in his observation in the way that free-floating spaces in Abstract Expressionism, for example, actually have a long history in Chinese painting and calligraphy. The economy of means and empty spaces in minimalism are like-wise very familiar to Oriental art. Ellen Johnston Laing

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would refute this in the way Chinese language, as a pre-established form, prevents personal nonrepresentational formulations as defined in western abstract art.\textsuperscript{10}

Nonetheless, while it is understandable that Rauschenberg’s postmodernist work may have met with more questions than elicited recognition in 1985, it is certain that this deep tradition in form and craft gave a kind of pre-existing schema and acceptance to his works.

A Country Seeking International Recognition

Rauschenberg’s visits to China articulated the Politburo’s wish to re-establish international recognition and cultural legitimacy, a desire that has not been abated since his trips in the early eighties. In 2005, there was an estimated 10,000 trained artists in China by the national standards set by the Beijing Central Academy; yet despite the inauguration of the Chinese Pavilion at the prestigious Venice Biennale that same year, Chinese artists' participation at such events represented just two to four percent of the overall contribution of international artists. At a 2006 symposium at Stanford University, leading art collector Uli Sigg, who has funded an award for Chinese contemporary art since 1998, stated that “the top segment of global mainstream art is made up of 150 artists, which so far includes no artist living in China but a small group of Chinese artists living abroad at its periphery.”\textsuperscript{11}

There is reason for this discrepancy. By the early nineties, the Chinese contemporary art world was divided into two communities: those living in abroad in exile...


and those who remained in mainland China. Occasional crossovers between the expatriate and mainland artists generally came from being included in the same exhibitions abroad; otherwise, the two art worlds inside and outside China operated independently until 2000. During this time, the cusp before China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the Party’s attitude toward experimental art practices started to ease and domestic exhibitions began to appear more frequently.

With the 2001 invitation by the government to exhibit in the country given the formerly controversial Cai Guo-Qiang, it became evident that the Party was interested in reclaiming at least to some extent China’s expatriate artists, many of whom had built international reputations during their years abroad. Artists were lured back to China with promises of exhibitions and involvement in new art, architecture, and curatorial projects. Relaxed travel restrictions and the apparent official acceptance of experimental art encouraged others to return. Those who had lived outside China for nearly two decades began to visit with greater frequency; some returned periodically to have their works fabricated in factories across China while others established studios in the mainland. Renowned artists like Ai Weiwei, Liu Dan, Chen Danqing, Xing Danwen, Wang Gongxin, Lin Tianmiao, and Wang Zhiyuan returned to China permanently. However, as seen from Uli Sigg’s comments, there still remains a perception of status accorded to expatriate artists, but not conferred those who remained.

Further efforts have been made to re-establish international prestige by the government. It was contended in 2008, that the Chinese Ministry of Culture was making

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an extra effort to promote the arts both at home and abroad, and intended to build 132 state-run museums by 2015, not to mention the many more private ventures. Chinese news reports predicted that both institutional systems together make up as many as 1,200 museums projected to open by 2010.

The flip side of this popularity is the lack of infrastructure for cultural activities in China: there is no legal framework for establishing a not-for-profit organization in mainland China, and there is no tax benefit for making donations to cultural institutions given to both to corporate or individuals. Therefore, art museums—both government-sponsored and private—must continually invent ways to fundraise, often resorting to methods that might be considered illegal or unethical in the United States. One such method is the act of selling artworks from the shows to hotels or organizing an art fair.

Another method is in the museums often seeking support from the artists themselves. Zhang Huan, a leading Chinese artist who had a show at the Shanghai Art Museum in 2007, confirmed that he was asked to pay almost $200,000 to cover the costs of his extensive exhibition, including the catalogue. This issue is compounded by the fact that few of these museums have curators solely devoted to researching and initiating original shows of contemporary art. In the end, any artist who takes the initiative to organize his or her own retrospective can offer the exhibition proposal to a museum, and as long as the artist can provide funding, the show will go on. Most of the artist-funded exhibitions run only one or two weeks, and it is not unusual for a museum to hold as many as eighty such exhibitions a year.

One key problem cited by many sources is the absence of training programs for museum professionals in China, a place where the term “curator” did not exist until a decade before. Without degree programs in arts management or curatorial studies\textsuperscript{14}, most of the museum directors were originally artists themselves. With the lack of training evident at all levels of museum management, there exists an absence of professional art handlers and restorers, all of which results in poorly installed exhibitions and damaged artworks, especially at state-run museums.

An additional challenge for state-run museums is the burden of China’s excessive bureaucracy, which would hinder their exhibition programs. For example, the museums must often accept shows that the government wants exhibited, such as those of work by regional artists belonging to official political unions or professional organizations, like the Hunan Province Artists’ Association or the Farmers’ Painting and Calligraphy Association.

Private museums have much greater leeway in programming, but they often suffer from the same lack of infrastructure as the state-run institutions. Most of these museums, founded by real-estate developers and are situated in the center of vast luxury-apartment complexes. Here, the developer receives the advantages of having a museum simply by building the edifice, often recruiting a well-known international architect, without having to plan for ongoing operating expenses or future programming.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} According to the above article, there is only one program in curatorial studies, run by the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, which graduated its first class in 2008.

\textsuperscript{15} Pollack, “Making 1,200 Museums Bloom,” 14.
Art versus Government

One of the primary purposes of ROCI was expand the artistic landscape for the public in closed, authoritarian countries. In these places, where art can only serve as a function the government, any art that is made in contradiction to that purpose is a political act itself. Given China’s history of varying degrees of censorship and bureaucratic control, the question today is how to speculate on the meaning of the apparent contradiction in a society that nurtures entrepreneurial artists to the status of quasi rock stars, while maintaining the necessary lip service to the founding socialist ideology espoused by its leaders.

The contradiction can be resolved, at least in part, by the paradox of avant-gardism. When Chinese artists embrace contemporary forms like video, digital art and extreme performance art, they often adopt rebellious personas that seem to mock the consumerist values sweeping their country. While portrayed as being poised to do so, they never go so far as to overtly criticize the government.

In the end, the issue posed by Eleanor Heartney arises: are these artists really rebels, or are they simply savvy marketers promoting the idea of a China open to new ideas and philosophies? Does this promise a glimpse into a future that we may all soon be sharing which so fascinates their devotees abroad?16

To this, the Ministry of Culture has become increasingly outwardly supportive of contemporary art, especially in recent years: a slogan the Chinese media have attributed to previous Minister of Culture Sun Jianzheng says, “Culture is so important; culture is

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like the calling card of a country; culture is the spirit of a nation.” In the past, every work shown in a public space—whether a museum or commercial gallery—had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture. Now, only exhibitions of art from international artists receive such scrutiny, according to Guangdong Museum director Wang Huangsheng.¹⁷

This reasoning, according to Cai Wu, the present Minister of Culture, is based on a recognized need for fostering cultural development:

It should be noted that the guaranteeing the people’s basic cultural rights and interests is a major breakthrough in our understanding of cultural development. Culture used to be treated as a means or tool for publicity and mass education. This is not wrong in itself, but one-sided. Culture is a way to inform and educate the people…[It] is an important component of the basic rights and interests of the people…an innate right of the people. As the ruling party that works for the public interest, and as the government that serves the people, it’s our duty and obligation to satisfy the people’s needs, and guarantee and safeguard their basic rights and interest. So, guaranteeing the basic rights and interests of the people must be given top priority in cultural construction.¹⁸

It is natural to conclude then, in representing the interests of the people, that it would mean the creation of creatively free environment absent of governmental censorship. Cai Wu agrees with this in the preceding lines:

We should follow the laws governing culture and art, and organize artistic production in line with artistic characteristics. We should reduce and as far as possible eliminate administrative meddling in art, and ensure that writers and artists have space for independent creation, personal hobbies, and freedom in their thinking and imagination, and in adopting diverse contents and forms.¹⁹

Furthermore, he reflects:

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¹⁸ Wu Cai, China’s Cultural Development in 30 Years of Reform and Opening-Up (Beijing: Beijing Press, 2009), 102.

¹⁹ Ibid., 108.
Cultural construction must serve the overall situation, center on economic construction, and provide an ideological guarantee, spiritual motivation, and intellectual support for socialist construction with Chinese characteristics. At the same time, we must take into consideration the basic conditions of our country, which is in the primary stage of socialism, and the economic and social reality, make scientific plans for and rational investment into cultural construction, actively carry out cultural projects, and better coordinate cultural construction and economic and social development.\(^{20}\)

With these promises of a censor-free authority, it is curious to see his freely detailed description of a tightly-knit supervisory system:

Over the past 30 years China has put equal emphasis on the stimulation and regulation of its culture market...In addition, a supervision system for the culture market has been established that operates by way of law enforcement, public supervision, self-discipline of the industry, and technical monitoring. By 2007, China had set up 3,706 law-enforcement organizations for the culture market at state, provincial, municipal, and county levels, which cover all provinces and cities/prefectures and 84 percent of the country’s counties.\(^{21}\)

One might say that the unhappy history behind the Tiananmen Square Massacre/Incident spurred the creation of this governmental supervisory system, which is why not everyone looks to Cai’s remarks with certitude. Former student leader Wuer Kaixi, in an interview with *Guernica* magazine for the twentieth anniversary of the event, was most pessimistic that the Chinese government would ever account for its decisions behind the events. As he saw it, with the world becoming more dependent on China, Tiananmen is becoming more of an inconvenience not only to China, but to the world.

After 1989, the Chinese Communist Party decided to make a deal with the Chinese people—to have political cooperation from Chinese people, in exchange for economic freedom. And it’s a lousy deal because those political freedoms and economic freedoms belong to the Chinese people to begin with. Nevertheless, the

\(^{20}\) Wu Cai, *China’s Cultural Development in 30 Years of Reform and Opening-Up* (Beijing: Beijing Press, 2009), 99-100.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 86.
deal worked. Chinese people took the deal and the Communist Party withdrew from Chinese people’s daily lives. So there is no longer an ideological state, and that is the only way they can keep Chinese people settled for a little freedom, even if it is only economic freedom. The Chinese people started to enjoy the newly-given freedom after 1992, which needed to develop and boom. Before that, the PLA, the People’s Liberation Army, the PCP, Communist Party, all had a certain deal of credibility in China. Not now. Today it’s just a coexistence.

With economic freedom, Chinese people are more capable of pursuing political freedom. They may not be clearly aware of this, you know, so the worry they have of losing the benefit they have gained with economic freedom may also be slowing them down...That’s why you can sometimes see people saying that if there is no democracy, we will be better off. At the same time, the same group wants more fair and more equal opportunities and they want to have a better legal system to protect them. They want to have a more transparent information flow, they want to be able to take part in the decision making process... All these, without [their] knowing [it], are longings for democracy.²²

In October 13, 2009, China was to be an honored guest at the world’s largest and most influential book trade event, the Frankfort Bookfair. What was hoped to be a public celebration of cultural achievement turned into a battlefield of sorts, which stemmed from Party refusal to allow the travel and subsequent presence of certain invited Chinese artists and writers to the event. Fair organizers thusly had to decide exactly which China was to be honored: the authorizing government or the dissident writers?

Followers of the conflict saw, through Party reactions, a country still uncomfortable with its own discordant voices, while eager to become more competitive with the West in the realm of ideas.²³ Cynics can further say that political reform outside the economic arena can be considered cosmetic.


²³ A sign of the political weight attached to the event was the presence of Xi Jinping, China’s vice president and heir apparent to President Hu Jintao.
On the part of the German organizers, they can be viewed as having naively misjudged the complications of honoring China in a year laden with controversy, including the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 20th anniversary of the crushed Tiananmen Square democracy movement and the 60th anniversary of Chinese Communist Party rule. 24

This lesson learned by the Germans is one that Chinese citizens have always kept to heart; another recent example of Party deference can be seen from the withdrawal of celebrated Chinese film director Jia Zhangke from the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival, in an effort to avoid appearing beside Rebiya Kadeer, the exiled Uighur leader whom the Chinese government has accused of instigating the July 2009 riots in Xinjiang, China. 25 For him, even the image of the pair together would have had far reaching effects beyond the artistic realm.

Art versus Commodity

One of the specific points of pride for Rauschenberg was the ability to see his ROCI project as wholly his own, absent of any governmental or corporate sponsorship. Per legend, much of the finances came from his selling off the majority of his art collection, including his own work. Fortunately, these works were successfully valued in the millions even before his death. 26 For the artist, this marker of success was bittersweet: Rauschenberg once quipped “I can’t afford me either,” as recalled by Milton Esterow,


26 This range expected to increase exponentially now that the body of work is finite.
editor and publisher of *ARTnews*. This is a quandary that could be said for artists in general: the irony is that in transforming the image of commodity, both the work and artist are transformed in the eyes of a global cultural economy.

Others make have stronger opinions about the relationship between the market value versus the aesthetic one. At the 2003 Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale, Hou Hanru, one of the curators of the notorious 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, reviewed growing concerns that many mainland artists now live like pop stars and work in “studios big enough to play football in” to produce art that is at best “subversion for the pleasure of the bourgeoisie.”

It is certainly a profitable business. In 2006, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, the world’s biggest auction houses, sold $190 million worth of Asian contemporary art, most of it Chinese, in a series of record-breaking auctions in New York, London and Hong Kong. In 2004 the two houses combined sold $22 million in Asian contemporary art. The climax came at a Beijing auction in November 2006 when a painting by 43-year-old Liu Xiaodong, was sold to a Chinese entrepreneur for $2.7 million. Not only is it the highest price ever paid for a piece by a Chinese artist who began working after 1979, it put Liu in the company of the few living artists, including Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, whose work has sold for $2 million or more at auction. Altogether, these artists are merged into an international system of art and commerce, to which they contribute heightened

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excitement and anxiety, generated not so much by the art itself but by the unprecedented transformation of an enormous country and its 1.3 billion people.

While auction house sales are crucial to the Chinese contemporary art market, they are only one step of a system. They act as middlemen along the art-market continuum, a process that follows so: Artists make the work, which they often sell in the first instance through galleries. The work is acquired by private collectors, sometimes changing hands multiple times in the secondary auction market. The best works frequently end up in museum collections, where they are preserved for posterity.

It was the unique environment in the 1990s that China created a refraction of this continuum. Through most of the decade, there was no local gallery system in place in China; as a result, artists became savvy at marketing and selling their work themselves, in addition to being represented by galleries around the world. More recently, with the growth of the auction market for Chinese contemporary art, artists directly put their works for sale, an act Western artists rarely do for themselves.

In the West, museums may be seen as the end point of the art market; in the case of Chinese contemporary art, they also act as a starting point. As early as 1993, major survey exhibitions of avant-garde Chinese art were shown in museums in Hong Kong, Berlin, and Sydney, and later New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. These museum touring exhibitions gave enormous exposure to Chinese artists and laid the groundwork in the West for a later appreciation of Chinese contemporary art in its historical context.  

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29 Chiu, 7 Chinese Contemporary Art Things You Should Know, 11.
Therefore, with auction prices soaring and reputations cemented by international museums, hundreds of new studios, galleries and private art museums have been opening from 2000 on, in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Chinese auction houses that once specialized in traditional ink paintings now feature contemporary experimental artworks on the block. A 2005 article reported that Western galleries, especially in Europe, have been rushing to sign up unknown painters; artists a year out of college are selling photographic works for as much as $10,000 each; well-known painters have yearlong waiting lists; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Pompidou Center in Paris have considered opening branches in China.  

The auction frenzy has also sparked debate here about whether sales are artificially inflating prices and encouraging speculators, rather than real collectors, to enter the art market. Auction houses “sell art like people sell cabbage,” said Weng Ling, the director of the Shanghai Gallery of Art. “They are not educating the public or helping artists develop. Many of them know nothing about art.”

A sharp criticism on the part of the artists is how the focus on prices has led to a decline in creativity. For a particular group, they often copy or knock off variations of their best-known work rather than exploring new territory; some even employ teams of workers in assembly-line fashion to manufacture their artistic creations.

Market pioneers such as Tsong-Zung (Johnson) Chang of Hanart, Hong Kong, draw a further distinction between commercial and non-commercial Chinese

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contemporary art, with the former as being dominated by more highly priced traditional oil painting and calligraphy, the latter by work in new media.

But Lorenz Helbling, director of the ShanghART Gallery, says Chinese artists continue to produce an impressive array of works, and that talk about the market being overrun by commercialism is exaggerated. “Things are much better than they were ten years ago. Back then many artists were commissioned to simply paint dozens of paintings for a gallery owner, who went out and sold those works. Now these artists are thinking more deeply about their work because they’re finally getting the recognition they deserve.”

One might liken the current situation to another kind of cultural revolution, offering an insight into Chinese experience, expectations, and world views just as European art did at the turn of the 20th century.

For Richard Vine, there is something of the contemporary Chinese artists’ collective psyche reflected in the medium itself. Knowing the more utilitarian aspects of painting, in terms of its portability and ease of storage, as well as its need to match with various room furniture, leaves a number of China’s new artists in mildly embarrassing straits. He sees that their refusal of pictorial depth and illusionist detail may well stem from a more profound psychological refusal to be “sucked in” by the plebian. Indeed, much has been written about how these painters certain make the most of financial opportunity when it comes, hiring assistants, opening restaurants, gifting friends and family members, buying houses and cars, and freely traveling abroad. Yet a certain wariness persists, to Vine—a fear that although the nature of the dream has changed since

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the high Communist era, China is once again being sold a pernicious ideal, only now with a brand name attached.\textsuperscript{33}

This concept can be seen on a global scale. A pre-global recession, 2007 \textit{New York Magazine} article debated the merits of the commoditization of art itself. There, Jerry Saltz recounts an outrageous system where students can charge $25,000 for paintings, concluding that the M.F.A. has become the new M.B.A.

Saltz attributes the phenomenon as partly the fault of megacollectors who look to entering art history by spending astronomical amounts. Consequently, once the international market sees one artist’s work selling well, it leads others buys more by that artist, driving up prices, regardless of personal taste. These high prices then become part of its temporary content, often disrupting and distorting art’s organic subjectivity, or Kafka’s phrase, “glimmer of possibility.” Artists like Damien Hirst, who once brazenly declared that collectors would “buy what you fucking give them,” wearily later told \textit{The Guardian}, “You just make things and you sell them, you make things and sell them.”\textsuperscript{34}

What would the Party say in regards to this commercial re-branding of art?

Minister of Culture Cai Wu wrote:

\begin{quote}
Cultural production must follow economic and market laws. We have to handle well the relationship between social impacts and economic benefits. In the socialist market economy, we should abide by the basic rules of market operation, let the market promote cultural and artistic production. And do our best to seek an integration of the laws of culture and the market, so that cultural production and the market will promote each other for common prosperity.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} Vine, \textit{New China Art}, 38.


\textsuperscript{35} Wu Cai, China’s Cultural Development in 30 Years of Reform and Opening-Up (Beijing: Beijing Press, 2009), 109.
Given this confluence, one question that can be posed is exactly what kind of role may the humanist play in reflecting on this socialist-approved commercial art? Edward Said suggests, “It is precisely the role of the contemporary academy to bridge this gap since society itself is too directly inflected by politics to serve so general and so finally intellectual and moral a role.”36 Sheldon Lu agrees, that in a historical period when transnational capital, the media, the market, and the state are poised to penetrate and occupy the entirety of public space, the role of the Chinese intellectual is singularly important. To devise practices of resistance to the tide of commodification and consumerism, and to find ways of mediating the local and the global, the critical and the public, and the political and the contemplative, are of paramount importance in envisioning the position of the intellectual in contemporary China.37

In this light ROCI appears even more poignant and prescient. Rauschenberg had the foresight to urge ROCI audiences to recognize a shared humanity using images of concrete, simple day-to-day universal life rather than didactic speeches or commercial branding. The focus in displaying these works in countries like China, who had yet to live through breakthroughs in freedom and capitalism, was meant to surpass and bridge gaps in how they understood themselves and how they saw others. Most importantly, Rauschenberg was actually present to exchange questions and comments alike, from both art students and public, serving as a living representative of an alien world previously accessible by way of static magazine pictures.


Considering the length of ROCI’s run and the fact that the exhibition did not travel to other regions but remained at the capital, it would be interesting to contemplate what other effects it might have played in formation of the artistic and commercial industry in China today had the exhibition been structured differently.

Art as a Reflection of an Emerging Chinese Identity

Just a few short years after ROCI’s introduction in China, contemporary Chinese art was finally introduced to the West through the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989, in almost the same moment as the happenings of Tiananmen Square. Naturally, the show became an overnight success. A few years later, launched in 1993, the touring exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* presented Europe with the first overview of Chinese contemporary art ever, exhibiting a tremendous variety of works by some ninety artists living in China and abroad. Similar to the way the Chinese inhaled multifaceted information from the outside, suddenly the western world discovered Chinese art in the form of installation art, conceptual art, political painting, and more: an art which made use of western idioms, but reinvented to suit its own necessities and traditions.  

Prior to these exhibitions, the realm of the ‘modern’ was thought to wholly belong to the West. As Karen Smith notes, one of the consequences of this point of view was the voyeuristic appreciation of “eastern” dissident art through western eyes. With the notion that freedom of expression was the exclusive, historical achievement of European and later American society since the Enlightenment, came the inverse reasoning that all art

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from “repressed” countries, be it Russia or China, had to be “dissident” in order to be “authentic,” without perhaps the necessary understanding of dissident movements outside the West. Consequently, certain so-called “dissident art” in China was and still specifically churned out to cater to the American and European art market; at the same time, the West, inversely, had little comprehension of the subversive importance of “nonsense characters” (examples by artists like Xu Bing and other artists, are said to have a liberating effect on Chinese art.)

The other issue was Orientalism, according to Smith. This goes twofold: one is the western expectation that Chinese contemporary art must conform to a continuation, if only in some formal way, of Chinese historical art; otherwise, what is Chinese?

In this vein, critics in the West have expressed disappointment in Chinese video and installation art, which represents the other face of the same posit. Ironically, the traditional focus by the Chinese authorities on calligraphy and brush painting as the official state art was consistent with the western argument for a value-free art, in promoting a neutered formalism as free expression.

Colonialist and Orientalist views on Chinese culture become almost interchangeable therein; the unfortunate result is as specific timing, inspirations, criteria, and contexts are lost, many artists become primarily associated with their countries rather than the originality their works. Smith responds that this is the case for the more opportunistic varieties of globalism. Critic and curator Wu Hung agrees, reasoning that
this speaks to the need for artists from different parts of the world to be brought into a genuine artistic and intellectual exchange, one his own exhibitions tries to resolve.39

Apart from the outsider perspective of the value of globalism, Roland Robertson presents further perspective on the part of the artist: “increasing interaction between different cultures, which constitutes the very dynamics of globalization, does not necessarily generate cultural homogenization or a cultural hegemony from the West alone, but also heterogenization or heightened sensitivity to one’s local culture.” If Robertson is correct, then both international and local elements of Chinese modern art informs of specific Chinese local cultures rather than a distinctive Chinese whole.40

Whether its significance lies locally or wholly, Chinese contemporary art, like its economic development, has proven to be an immense success story. Whereas the initial avant-garde began with only a handful of artists, nowadays there are some 70,000 applicants yearly to the China National Academy in Hangzhou alone, a growth that certainly parallels China’s economic one.41

The question lies in what is in store of this post-ideological art. These days, young contemporary artists in China are focusing increasingly on themes like alienation, loneliness, and dislocations caused by this national economic revolution. They ‘speak’ for the current 200 million so-called ‘post-1980’ youth in China — a generation of mostly single children, thanks to the one-child policy, born on the cusp of an unparalleled

39 Wu, Making History, 259.


economic boom. These young people are said to have never experienced material hardship, with annual income per capital soaring to about 19,000 Yuan ($2,760) in 2007, up from 380 Yuan ($55) in 1978.

Internet-savvy, worldly, fashion-conscious, they are also largely apolitical. An official survey released in 2009 found seventy-five percent of college students hoped to join the Communist Party, but fifty-six percent of those said they would do so to “boost their chances of finding a good job.”42 This reasoning is certainly a far cry from the political fire that acted on Mao’s exhortation to “awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment.”

Without politics as an anchor, one wonders about the future of China’s artistic arc. Perhaps the answer lies in another facet of its historical ideology, through its own concept of humanism. As Wing-tsit Chan opens in his book, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy: “If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophical thought, that word would be humanism ....” How is this Chinese version of a description in terms of genus without species then different from the humanism in ancient Greece of the tension of Man vs. Nature, and the humanism in modern Europe since the Renaissance involving the tension of Man vs. God? Aware of the importance of due qualification, Chan continues, “not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power,

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but one that professes the unity of man, [Nature] and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history.\textsuperscript{43}

The seeking of one’s place in this larger scheme once spurred Rauschenberg upon midlife, as well it inspired and continues to inspire a country of artists to describe their own journey amid a collective awakening. Whatever forms, in terms of a created, manufactured art, this vein of humanism would take on, the results should be fascinating.

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