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Special China Issue

Rong Rong Shoots 7 Young Artists

In the Studio with Wang Qingsong

Chinese Museums: What's New?

PLUS

Matthew Collings on the Failure of Today's Radicalism

WHO ARE CHINA'S NEXT STARS?

A FINALE OF BROKEN SPELLS

EMERGING CHINESE ARTISTS IN THE AGE OF INVENTION.

BY DAVID SPALDING

★ **THERE HAS BEEN** a lot of talk in Beijing and elsewhere lately about discovering and defining the "next generation" of Chinese artists. Born at the dawn of the 1980s and after, China's latest crop of cultural creators grew up in a country far different from that of their parents and professors. Many have benefited from advances in arts education, the increased visibility of Chinese art abroad, growing access to information, and China's economic boom, with the attendant development of the country's arts infrastructure. All these factors have doubtlessly helped to shape contemporary art practice, although in ways less obvious than you might imagine.

In a mad rush by the art establishment to categorize and capitalize, the new generation has also been the subject of several recent exhibitions in China, and more will surely follow. So far I have found these shows disappointing—perhaps because of the haste with which the organizers have attempted to package such an unwieldy diversity of practices. Yet after visiting studios and homes (which for many function as studios) and meeting with more artists than could be included below, I was elated to rediscover the off-kilter drive—the strange way of seeing and the desire for making—that motivates art practice before commercial success sets in.

ZHANG HUAN **ARTIST**

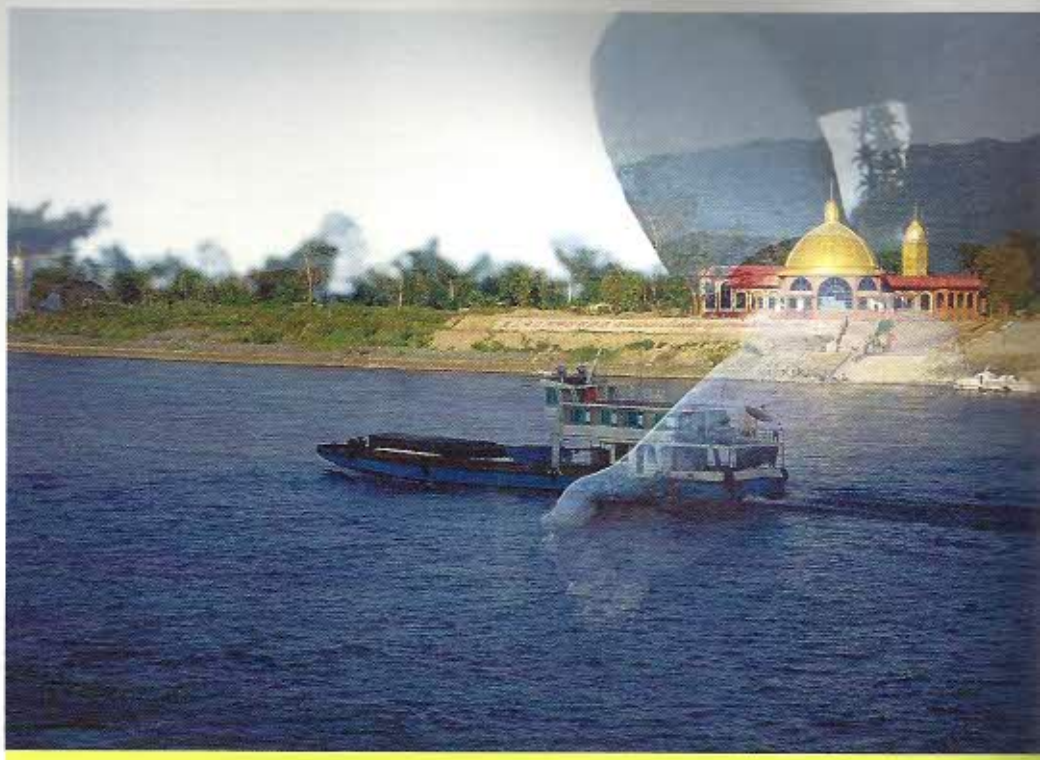
The artists who were born after 1979 began their artistic careers around 2000, when Internet technology was developing and China was becoming more open to the world. They have more freedom in creation and display more diversity in expression. Whether members of this generation will achieve international success depends on their individual efforts and fortunes. The Chinese government attaches great importance to the development of the culture industry. Museums, cultural criticism, and curator teams—all these will be improved gradually. The most important thing is to make good work.

Chinese Enough?

"She's not really Chinese," a friend involved in the Beijing art scene says offhandedly when I mention **Wei Weng**. It's a declaration that, while not altogether surprising, gives me pause. Nationality is a slippery thing in the 21st century; it's also far less of a concern among young Chinese artists today than it was a decade ago, even if it continues to be a preoccupation among some curators and critics.

Wei is a Chinese-passport holder, born in 1981 to Chinese parents in Nanning. But her father's work with the World Food Program took the family away from China when she was eight, and she grew up in Pakistan

RIGHT: Artist Ye Nan at work.



RIGHT:
Wei Weng, still from the digital slide show Buddha Foot Boat Casino, *Golden Triangle, Thailand*, from the series "Cultural Synesthesia", 2010.

OPPOSITE:
Su Wenxiang, *The Oneness of the Five Colors Blind the Eyes*, 2009. Polaroid 600 photo paper, 8¾ x 10¾ x 10 in. each.

and Malawi, attending high school in Geneva and college in the U.S. Wei has lived in Beijing since 2006, working steadily, if somewhat reclusively. Has her time abroad eroded her Chinese identity, leaving her stateless, a permanent outsider?

Genre Bending

"Those are the creases left by Black Email's data belt," Wei offers when I ask about *Curator Corset*, 2010, an abstract digital print hanging on the wall of the apartment that doubles as her studio, located in an upscale neighborhood not far from Beijing's Chaoyang Park. To speak with the artist about her practice often requires using a strange vocabulary of her own design. Black Email is a character in her novel *Beijing Sci-fi*, comprising 13 parables about China's political history (and Beijing's art scene) that begin with the arrival of "child soldiers" and "child workers" at a place called Glass City. (This essay's title is borrowed from her text.) Wei produces objects and artifacts that point back to the novel in ways that are alternately illustrative and obtuse. Black Email is a curator—loosely based on one who was, until recently, working in Beijing—whose data belt constantly provides updates on the global art world. "She needs this information to operate," Wei explains, "but it's also constricting." Wei created *Curator Corset* by cinching fabric around the waist of a dressmaker's form that, she says, was "about the same size as Black Email," then marking where the gathered cloth wrinkled, flattening it out, and scanning and editing the results.

Wei's practice is emblematic of an emerging cross-disciplinary approach to artmaking among China's younger artists—one that shirks the mastery of a particular medium and the development of a signature style, two hallmarks of many successful older Chinese artists. Her recent output includes interrelated texts, photographs, paintings, and installations, as well as the staging of interactive situations. In 2009, when Wei was nominated for the first annual Three Shadows Photography

SHENGTIAN ZHENG **ARTIST AND CURATOR**

China always has creative potential owing to its large population and rich cultural tradition. I have no doubt there will be new talents coming. Shanghai artists Ji Weiyu and Song Tao are around 30 years old, and they have been working as a team named Birdhead that is worth watching. However, there is a lack of infrastructure to nourish these young talents and help them to grow. China needs to upgrade its system for supporting individual creativity. This would include funding agencies for artists, independent criticism, and the public collection of contemporary art. A market-dominated art scene will only spoil or kill good artists.

Award for emerging artists, she presented her Web site, antimapping.com, which she describes as "an interdisciplinary resistance toward narrative practice." More recently she has returned to painting, methodically applying black ink to paper to create mosaiclike portraits of "terrariums with legs," which also figure in the book. Whether or not all the pieces in her artistic puzzle add up, Wei's work is indicative of the genre-bending approaches that are gaining traction among artists of her generation.

Expanding Materials and Media

While some young artists are happily bulldozing the walls between artistic genres, others are pushing their chosen media into new territory. Photography is but one example. From the late 1990s on, some of the most visible Chinese artists working with photography have produced carefully staged images, their models elaborately costumed and posed, the backgrounds either meticulously constructed, similar to theatrical stage sets, or reduced to the empty, artificial space of the monochromatic studio backdrop. Like frames in a comic strip or stills from propaganda films, the resulting photographs are meant to tell a story, and the narrative is usually explicit.

Recently, however, several young Chinese artists have been exploring the material and mechanical properties of photography, video, and other lens-based media, rather than exploiting its capacity for storytelling. Among the artists mining this vein is **Su Wenxiang**, who was born in 1979 in Xuancheng, Anhui Province, and studied graphic design and art at Bengbu College, in Anhui, before relocating to Beijing in the spring of 2008. Su uses apparatuses that generate or transmit images—including cameras, printers, televisions, and computers—in ways that subvert their mimetic abilities but reveal something of their inner logic. At times his

ALEXANDRA MUNROE
SENIOR CURATOR OF ASIAN ART, SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

"Contemporary Chinese art" as a singular cultural descriptive is becoming irrelevant if not unjustifiable. First, it is confined to conceptual art and politically tinged realist oil painting, disregarding ink painting, which remains the dominant art form in terms of innovative practice and domestic market share. Second, there are at least three generations of artists whose work makes up the post-1979 phenomenon known as contemporary Chinese art. Critics have interpreted these first waves of contemporary artists strictly in terms of cultural difference.

For the younger generation of conceptual artists, the subject of China—or at least the impulse to infuse their work with Chinese meaning and references—risks being contrived and outdated. We are seeing art that is critically engaged with the international art world, that actually pokes fun at the whole curatorial project of constructing a national art identity. A subculture of young artists working in collectives, new media, experimental music, and performance is gaining ground through tools like iPads. The best thing for the Chinese art world would be to let these marginal explorers of the global electronic age just keep on playing.

CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS
CURATOR, INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY, NEW YORK

There is no shortage of enormously talented and imaginative young artists issuing each year from China's art academies. But the domestic art world they encounter today is a curious place that can only be described in *Alice in Wonderland* terms. National-level museums openly rent out their gallery spaces to the highest bidders, while private "museums of contemporary art" backed by financial and real-estate concerns serve as shells for money-laundering activities. The favorable attention of art journalists is readily available at a price, "independent curators" turn out to be private dealers in disguise, and what passes for critical discussion is orchestrated by art-fair organizers, gallery owners, and collectors.

Do I exaggerate? No doubt. Yet a topsy-turvy situation obviously does exist in the Chinese contemporary-art world, and only when it begins to be righted will a new generation of Chinese artists truly gain its footing.

work also suggests the hidden forces around us, those invisible machines that shape the contours of public memory and personal freedom.

To create *The Oneness of the Five Colors Blinds the Eyes*, 2009, Su loaded and reloaded 10 packs of film into a Polaroid camera, exposing the negatives in the process. Presented together, the photographs produced at first appear identically white, but they slowly reveal subtle variations in tone caused by chemical and photomechanical variations. The viewer's desire for an image is countered by a series of meditative monochromes, while the film's cool or warm hues denote the Polaroid's inability to remain neutral.

Shortly after moving to Beijing, Su came home to find that his television had suddenly begun receiving more than double the usual channels. This was the seed for *Limited TV Channel*, 2008, in which he charts the set's ability to capture broadcast transmissions in Shanghai and Beijing both by using its auto-search function and by cycling through the stations with the remote control. The work itself—three color-coded charts listing the available channel numbers and corresponding broadcast networks, paired with two videos recording the artist's and the set's search for stations—speaks to the TV's seemingly uncanny ability to select what it presents to the viewer but also hints at how one's proximity to China's power center, Beijing, opens or closes the apertures through which information flows.

Questions Rather Than Answers

Li Ming, who was born in Yuanjiang, Hunan Province, in 1986 and completed his degree in 2008 at the China Academy of Art's New Media Department (led by artist Zhang Peili), in Hangzhou, creates single-channel videos that record staged performances or actions: dreamlike cinematic scenes that pulse with violence and a surreal eroticism. Li is prolific—my request for material was answered with 12 DVDs, all made during the past three years. His best pieces walk the uncomfortable and relatively uncharted border between male bonding and its homoerotic corollary, blurring the distinction between bromance and romance. In *XX*, 2009, two men sit outdoors on a rock, struggling to exchange their T-shirts while keeping their torsos touching at all times, a task much more difficult than it sounds. Within this odd wrestling match the artist locates moments that, in his words, "change the normal friendship of two men into an unnatural relationship." *Back Garden*, 2008, depicts security guards in a residential complex who pass the time spraying each other with water guns and floating together, nearly naked, in a shallow pond. The camera lingers on their bodies but remains neutral. Like other artists of his generation, Li is not afraid to take on subjects that some find controversial, but he does so in a way that never feels didactic, instead leaving the viewer to draw conclusions. Unlike certain of their predecessors, many young Chinese artists have found that raising questions can be more useful than proffering answers.

RIGHT:
Li Ming, *Back Garden*, 2008. Single-channel video, 14 min. 15 sec.

OPPOSITE:
Installation view, "Ye Nan: Phosphorous Red," Chambers Fine Art, March 6–April 11, 2010.

The New (Nonideological) Red

The color red plays a starring role in **Ye Nan**'s recent works, but it's not the vibrant, revolutionary hue that came to be so strongly associated with Chinese contemporary art during the 1990s. "They belong to the past now," the artist says of the overtly political styles of the preceding generation. Ye, who was born in 1984 in Hangzou and studied under the artist Qiu Zhijie at the China Academy of Art, prefers the incendiary red of phosphorous, the brick-colored substance used to coat matches, which he incorporates into his striking (and flammable) prints and installations. Ye is concerned with the future. And with his roving intellect, disarming confidence, and freewheeling artistic approach, which allows him to hopscotch between various media, he might also be said to embody it.

During our studio visit, Ye talked about his interest in a strikingly wide range of topics, from science fiction (Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke are among his favorite authors) to 19th-century capitalism and the difference between "use value" and "exchange value." At the same time, his research-driven practice yields works of striking beauty. His prints—shown recently in solo exhibitions at the Beijing and New York branches of Chambers Fine Arts—offer an evocative cosmology in black, gray, and matchstick red. In *Ideal Nation*, 2010, moths and butterflies flutter toward distant stars, as if drawn toward a glow that, light years away, may already be extinguished. In *Who Conquered There*, 2010, a giant mosquito alights on the moon, where a flagpole has been planted. Viral outbreaks and space colonization are hinted at, but unlike the works of some older artists, Ye's narratives deliberately leave the political message open-ended.

PAN GONGKAI
ARTIST AND PRESIDENT, CHINA ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, BEIJING

First of all, the new generation enjoys better conditions than earlier ones: better education, more information, and a bigger stage. And the environment for young artists' professional development—the art market, the gallery and museum system, art critics, and so on—is generally improved. At the same time, they confront much more competition because of the expansion of higher education and new art and design programs. The success of a generation never exists. The reality is that in each generation only very few individuals achieve success. The new generation will compete on a new platform. To match the achievement of the last generation, it needs to acknowledge West and East, ancient and contemporary.

BARBARA POLLACK
JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR, *THE WILD, WILD EAST: AN AMERICAN ART CRITIC'S ADVENTURES IN CHINA*

It is almost impossible to separate our appreciation of the first wave of Chinese artists to receive attention in the West from their thrilling life stories, most of which began with harrowing childhoods during the Cultural Revolution. The younger generation in China does not share this rags-to-riches mythology and will have to emerge on the world stage more on the merits of its work, which at the moment is difficult to discern. There is an awful lot of kitschy painting by what locals call the "spoiled brat" generation, referring to the 20-somethings who have ironically benefited from the one-child policy by being only children of China's new class of millionaires. Still, some of the more interesting work comes from women artists, such as Chen Ke or Song Kun, a happy break from the all-boys club of the past. The most hopeful sign is the rise in professionalism in museums and galleries, which may lead to a demand for higher quality in the artworks and the discovery of new talents.

Like many artists of his generation, Ye, rather than dismissing his elders in general, is selective about whom among them he admires. He tells me he hopes to fit into a genealogy that includes Qiu Zhijie and the Paris-based pioneer Huang Yong Ping. Their constantly evolving practices, although different, share a preoccupation with big issues—ideas drawn from Eastern and Western philosophy, concerns about colonialism and industrialization, to name a few—and an ability to work successfully in a variety of media. It's early days, but with his ravenous mind and expanding technical repertoire, Ye just might get his wish.

Less Is More

In the years leading up to October 2008, as money poured into China's white-hot art market, many established sculptors and installation practitioners took advantage of the relatively cheap labor here, employing an army of assistants and fabricators to fill the country's large exhibition spaces with oversized, made-to-order works that sometimes seemed produced on a whim. **Yang Xinguang**, who was born in Hunan in 196[illegible] and studied with Sui Jianguo at the Central Academy of Fine Arts sculpture department, in Beijing, creates works that offer a much-needed antidote to this bigger-is-better syndrome. His handmade sculptures, which have been linked by critics to both the Arte Povera and the Mono-ha movements, are characterized by a profound sensitivity to natural materials—stone and wood are the most prevalent—from which he coaxes poetry. I rarely see Yang at openings; he tells me he'd rather stay home carving. In his 2008 *Hooks* a row of sculpted, sharpened peach-tree branches suspended from above are miraculously transformed into the implements of a fairy tale's butcher shop. In the 2009 *Thin*, large branches lean against the wall, whittled and sanded until they resemble the bones of a dinosaur. *Clean Lines*, 2007, comprises two cobblestone arrangements, one a circular pile, the other a neatly aligned square. With elegant

simplicity, the piece suggests nothing less than the human drive to order nature, the cycles of building and demolition in Beijing and other growing cities, and the elemental play of chaos and control.

Yang's gallery, Boers-Li, in Beijing, presented his work in Art Basel's Statements section this year. Pi Li and Waling Boers, too, sense that contemporary Chinese art is undergoing a sea change and are betting on Yang's work to pique the interest of collectors. Forget about those flashy, gigantic pieces with their equally huge price tags. Yang is the poster child for contemporary Chinese art after the financial crash. His unassuming sculptures reveal a mastery beyond his years.

Like young talents working in other parts of the world, emerging Chinese artists often move fluidly among media, choosing whatever tools are best suited for a particular project. As the boundaries between media become more porous, these artists continue to expand our understanding of genres; painting, for example, sometimes resembles installation or even performance. Ambiguity and multiplicity are preferable to reductive didacticism. Overt politics often take a back seat to formal experimentation and the development of more personal, idiosyncratic visual languages.

This new generation represents a shift, rather than a rupture, in the evolution of artistic practices within the context of urban China. To suggest that the oeuvres of these artists differ entirely from that of previous generations would be a mistake. For every assertion I've made contrasting younger artists with their elders, one can find exceptions, influences, and inheritances. Indeed, outlining tendencies among emerging artists in China is only part of the critical work that needs to be done. None of those mentioned should be slotted into the generational and national pigeonhole indicated by the phrase "young Chinese artist." Instead, they must be considered in relation to their peers working throughout the world. **MP**

WU HUNG
CURATOR AND PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

If we are talking about post–Cultural Revolution Chinese artists, they should include those who grew up after 1976, the end of the revolution. We can divide them into two generations: those who were born in the 1970s, now aged 30 to 40, and those born in the 1980s, now aged 20 to 30. The first group has produced some notable names, including Yang Fudong (born 1971), Kan Xuan (1972), Li Songsong (1973), Xu Zhen (1977), and Cao Fei (1978). They are almost 20 years younger than stars of the earlier generation like Xu Bing (1955), Huang Yong Ping (1954), and Cai Guo-Qiang (1957) and should be given more years for further development. I believe that some of this cohort—not necessarily the names listed above—will eventually achieve international stardom, but they will do so in different ways from the earlier generation. Their works are more personal and less metaphysical and betray stronger influences from global visual culture and postmodern theories. Like the Sixth Generation Chinese filmmakers, they are no longer attracted to grand narratives and visual spectacles but are more sensitive to the subtleties of individual psychology and ironies in everyday life. Although they will continue to bear the label of Chinese artists in the global space, this identity will be blurred. This trend will be continued by artists born in the 1980s. However, because they are still so young and have an insufficient track record, it is premature to assess their talent and predict their future.

OPPOSITE:
Yang Xinguang, *A Piece of Wood*, 2007. Pinewood, 11½ x 1½ x TK ft.

BELOW:
Jia Aili, *Mickey's Redemption*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 78¾ x 111 in.