

It Takes Two: Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen

by [Lilly Wei](#) 12/01/11

Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, a Beijing-based husband and wife team, are, as individual practitioners, among China's leading contemporary artists. They have collaborated for the last 10 years on a single ongoing project. "The Way of the Chopsticks III," the project's third iteration, is currently on view at Chambers Fine Art in New York, after premiering at the gallery's Beijing branch in June. To mark the tenth anniversary of "Chopsticks," Chambers opened its doors on 11/11/11 at precisely 11:11:11 am. The number 11, as Song points out, resembles a pair of chopsticks.

The exhibition has three components: chopsticks in bright red (his) and yellow (hers); square and round abstract paintings-hers with the addition of cut-up clothing that addresses the common theme of time; and an elaborate catalogue that documents the entire project to date, made up of two books cleverly, if complicatedly, bound into a single volume.

As a concept, chopsticks skirt cliché but their ubiquity, ordinariness and practicality are critical to the overall meaning of the collaboration. Even more important is the fact that while each chopstick is discrete, there must be two of them to function properly. This pairing is highly symbolic for Song and Yin, one that describes their personal as well as creative relationship. For these reasons, they chose chopsticks as their central motif, although in their second venture, the "chopsticks," which had become less sticklike, referred to Beijing's landmark central axis, and in the latest iteration of their project, the "chopsticks" refer to urban structures in Beijing and suggest construction cranes. All the works in the three collaborations are pairs, with each artist contributing half.



View of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen's exhibition "The Way of Chopsticks III," 2011. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art.; Chopsticks: Section 1. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

LILLY WEI Can you discuss the background of your collaboration?

SONG DONG The first show was in 2001-2002 and, of course, the topic was chopsticks-it still is. Chris [Christophe Mao, founder and director of Chambers Fine Art] was very important to this project. He wanted to do a solo show with me, but I had just met him and said no. Then he asked Yin Xiuzhen to do a solo show and she also said no. So he said, "let's do a show that's a collaboration." Impressed by his enthusiasm, we said we didn't have a reason to collaborate but we would if we got an idea. One night, while eating dinner, we looked at our chopsticks and saw how the two became one. I could make one, Yin Xiuzhen could make one, both in secret from the other then put them together so they become one work and yet we've kept our independence. So we told Chris we had an idea. The year of the first show was also the 10th anniversary of our marriage.

YIN XIUZHEN We decided on the shape and size-there's a basic module-then went to our own studios to make our work and only saw each other's work when it was time to install.

SONG The first time we did this, I wanted to make a powerful object, so my chopstick was based on the Monkey King's magic stick that protected him as he traveled westward to look for the true Buddha (from the classic Chinese novel *The Monkey King* or *Journey to the West*). It's made of copper, the points are plated with gold and there is a small video installed at the tip with a popular cartoon about the Monkey King. But when we placed them next to each other, I realized that Yin Xiuzhen had made the more powerful piece.

YIN I thought a knitted bag that could hold the chopstick was very powerful because it could assume any shape and include everything.

WEI Since then, the projects have increased greatly in size.

SONG For the first collaboration, the chopsticks were 15 feet long, for the second, they were 25 feet, and the newest one is about 40 feet. It's because we had more space. Chambers's Beijing gallery was the measure for it.

WEI How long will the project continue?

SONG It's a lifetime project. We may include our daughter in it later when she's older. We never have a set date, but when we have an idea, we do it.

YIN We found a way to collaborate that we call the "Way of the Chopsticks" and continuity is part of it. We each have to be concerned with the other when we collaborate so there is some guessing going on but it's also independent. The essence of it is trust, as well as equality and independence.

WEI And the interaction between your work?

SONG When I make my own work, my concept is simple-life is art and art is life. That doesn't change. We're just putting our individual works side by side. The difference is that from two

works, we are creating one.

YIN When I make my own work, I have more freedom, but when we work together, there are certain rules that need to be followed, like size, shape and theme. It's a challenge to find ways to continue. Through these collaborations, I've learned to work with other people. I've learned how to make compromises.

SONG I also learned to compromise through our "Chopsticks" collaborations. For instance, in *Waste Not* (2009), I learned to collaborate with my mother. I didn't like my mother's style of life, but when my father suddenly passed away, I had to rethink things. My style is minimalist, but she doesn't like empty rooms. After my father died, the objects she had became even more important because they were full of memories. I took all of the contents of her house, everything, and made them into *Waste Not*-which filled the atrium of MoMA.

WEI Do you ever disagree about the direction of an exhibition?

YIN For the first collaboration, we made the chopsticks separately but we made the other works in the show together. That was difficult. For the second show, we worked separately on everything and it was much better.

SONG There was a bed we wanted to put in the second show. It used to be my bed in my childhood home, and when Yin Xiuzhen visited, she slept in that bed. But we couldn't decide what to do with it so we cut it in half.

WEI What have you learned from your collaborations?

SONG We've been together for 20 years and we are accustomed to each other, but because of the "Chopsticks" project, we have come to an even closer understanding. Everything is about family for me. My happiest day was the day I got married. And the second happiest was when my daughter was born. And the saddest days were when I lost my parents.

YIN We have a lot in common so it makes sense to work together. We have learned from each other. Song Dong works delicately, with great detail. My work is rougher, more spontaneous. But now, after all these years, he works more spontaneously and I've learned to be more refined, slower.