

[Song Dong @ Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](http://www.squarecylinder.com/2011/04/song-dong-yerba-buena-center-for-the-arts/)

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The project is by now legendary: Beijing artist Song Dong, long known for acts of art that are quiet but socially resonant interventions in Chinese order, power, and tradition, helped his aging mother, Zhao Xiangyuan, to resolve her grief over the loss of her husband by organizing and exhibiting the thousands of everyday household items she began recycling during the 1950s and then continued hoarding for the rest of her life. The resulting installation, *Waste Not*, curated by art historian Wu Hung, was originally shown in 2005 at Beijing-Tokyo Art

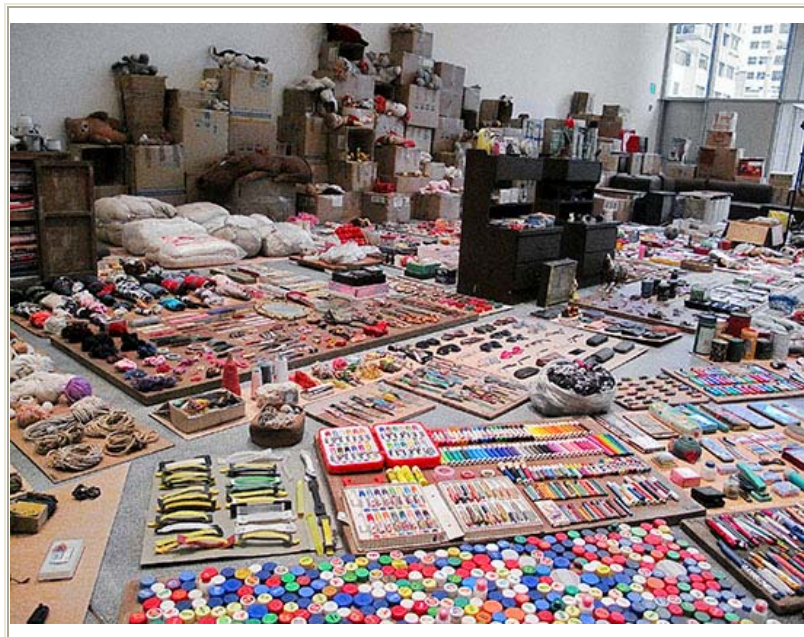
Projects in the still-raw [798 arts district](#) of Beijing. Since then, it has traveled to such venues as the Guangju Biennale, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, now, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Along the way, the installation's form has remained more-or-less the same: a skeletal outline of the artist's diminutive boyhood house, composed from its actual remaining timbers, windows, and roof poles, as well as a floor-scape of meticulously organized rows, stacks, and sections of what seems like a lifetime of the contents that once filled the house: clumps of colorful string, empty plastic bottles, extra bottle caps, squeezed-out toothpaste tubes, recovered buttons, used Styrofoam food containers, rows and rows of worn and worn out shoes, washed-in and washed-up wash basins, and every piece of exhausted clothing that may once have fit a child.

Begun during the disastrous Great Leap Forward as a patriotic duty to save and recycle, Zhao Xiangyuan's hoarding soon took on its own obsessive imperatives, a little like storing grain for the winter, or stashing money in a mattress. But the value of grain and money are easier to understand than the hundreds of lost buttons or the piles of pens long since drained of ink. When the value of something – its physical usefulness, its transferability into other things, its talismanic resonance – is no longer apparent except as mountains of waste for which there is no conceivable purpose in life, one thinks of some kind of holocaust, of all who are no longer wearing and using those things. Of the artist who is no longer a child. Of the mother who is no longer alive. Of all the meals eaten, walks taken, letters written, sweaters donned, teeth brushed, and babies washed in tubs of bathwater that were tossed into the alley. Now only memory traces for survivors of a single family, the actions that once animated the objects covering the gallery floor like tsunami debris have settled into a flattened plane of entropy and stillness. Everything on the floor is well ordered but dead – like the clothing, rings, and eyeglasses gathered from the doomed in a death camp. The only duty left is to archive, and the only remaining utility is to remember.



Song Dong self portrait

Few works of significant art exist at exactly the threshold where personal obsession and collective order give way to each other. Look closely, and the waxy wooden handle of a too-worn hairbrush testifies to a million utilitarian strokes across a proletarian head



over a tin water basin in the early morning of a drab workday. Look up at the sea of hoarded objects, and it seems as though a million musty instruments of personal and ideological hygiene have been marshaled into a utopian parade ground of collective

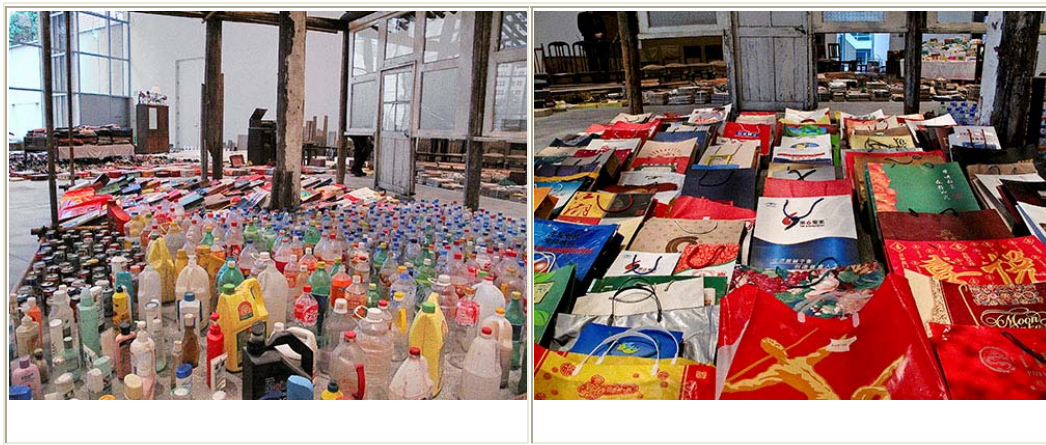
“harmony”. Harmony, enforced by the state on a socialist scale, is always chilling. At the call of a loudspeaker, a well-ordered neighborhood can disintegrate into a warren of roving revolutionary mobs; at the wave of a flag, a domestic dreamscape can erupt into a social nightmare. The half-life of that nightmare goes stale. Family keepsakes from a tender time become fossils of a calcified revolution. In *Waste Not*, the threshold at which the microcosmic focus of the artist’s mother slips into the surrealistic vastness of the political space surrounding her – which she seems always to have feared – is breathtaking. Sometimes order gives art its stage and art gives order – and obsession – its meaning.



Like the residue of countless affectionate gazes, a patina of grief coats every object. To keep something safe, no matter how useless or absurd the thing being safe-kept, is to enfold it in the rituals of burial – to store, to stack, to cover, to set side-by-side. Zhao Xiangyuan’s safe-keeping, a daily task for decades, is a heartbreaking emulation of mourning and loss, the caressing of objects that once touched her family before the idea of the family was seized by the state. Hers was not a healthy caressing, of course, because nothing was ever let go of. The material items of a family’s living were stockpiled in the

house they eventually overtook, until the house became a tomb. It was the son – Song Dong – who saved his mother by suggesting they “collaborate” by organizing the hoardings, thereby converting her stillborn grief over the loss of traditional family life into the labors of grieving. By participating with her son in some sort of art that must have seemed stranger even than hoarding, she was able to liberate the compressed contents of her mania into a moreorless open memorial: the slight frame of her house that allowed her grief to breathe. She could see, finally, all that had been hidden, and she could see it well ordered, beautiful in its own way. From that perspective, and on that scale, the hoarding was suddenly industrious, like the work one does for one’s neighborhood or work unit – for one’s family.

At the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, *Waste Not* is part of a larger exhibition, curated by Betty-Sue Hertz, the director of visual arts, entitled *Mom and Dad, Don't Worry About Us, We Are All Well*. Installed smartly throughout the ground floor spaces, Song Dong's videos and photographs provide an expanded familial context in which to see and understand *Waste Not*. Moreover, their titles imply the intimacy, even the privacy, of this public artist's work: *Touching My Father* (1997), *Father and Son in Ancestral Temple* (1998), *Listening to My Family Talking about How I was Born* (2001) and *Chinese Medicine Healing Story* (2011). As Hertz suggests, these works collectively express "the power of the family as a social unit." They also function as a rejoinder to the Mao-era principle that the biological family, by comparison with work units, local committees, soldier squads, and neighborhood cadres, was the weakest link in the Cunfucio-utopian chain.



Song Dong was born in 1966, just as the Red Guards – Mao's righteous teenagers – began savaging teachers, murdering principals, beating and humiliating class enemies, and informing on their own parents. The Cultural Revolution shattered Chinese families, sending mothers and daughters, fathers and sons to remote work camps, or walling them off – as it did Zhao Xiangyuan – in wards of fear, silence, and obsession. In the era of Mao, China had one father and three hundred million crazy mothers.

In 2005, my wife and I attended the opening of "Waste Not" in Beijing. We had just returned from a city called Fengjie along the Yangste River where we watched [Liu Xiaodong](#) paint brown-skinned laborers playing cards on a mattress as the waterline rose behind the Three Gorges Dam. The men were drowning but they didn't know it. To come upon Song Dong's ode to his mother's obsession – and to his nation's collective psychosis – was like arriving at the river's edge and seeing what, finally, had washed up on the shoreline of the Chinese mind. Because of fifty years of dialectical progress, China was now the most mentally ill nation on earth.



“She’s crazy,” Song told me when I visited his Beijing [hutong](#) later that fall. Zhao Xiangyuan was still alive then. We met her at the opening, and she seemed alert but generally satisfied with the public airing of her neatly folded laundry. She stood quietly near the installation’s perimeter, overseeing her things and observing the many strangers moving respectfully through what used to be the contents of her life. Zhao Xiangyuan died in 2009 while trying to retrieve a wounded bird from a tree in a park near her Beijing apartment. Her death added a memorial dimension to the Yerba Buena installation of *Waste Not* that feels lived out rather than paralyzed – more dignified than crazy. For mother and son, for an audience, and perhaps for a nation, art can be redemptive.

–JEFF KELLEY

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Song Dong: *Mom and Dad, Don’t Worry About Us, We Are All Well* @ [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#) through June 12, 2011.

About the Author

A critic since 1977, Jeff Kelley has written for such publications as *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. From 1993 to 2005 he taught Art Theory and Criticism at the University of California, Berkeley, and edited/authored two books on Allan Kaprow published by the University of California Press. Kelley curated the popular and critically acclaimed *Half-Life of a Dream: Chinese Contemporary Art* from the Logan Collection for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2008), and currently functions as an advisor on Chinese art to the Logan Collection.