

made in china



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In 1989 the world watched China live on television screens as the Beijing protest movement was crushed in what has since become known to the Chinese as the June Fourth Incident, or the Tiananmen Square Massacre in the West. Deng Xiaoping, responsible for China's economic reforms during the 1980s with his *Gaige Kaifang* (Reforms and Openness) programs, was at that time de facto leader of China. He had been responsible for significant changes to China's domestic, social and economic systems during his leadership, introduced after the deaths of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Deng's strategy saw the beginnings of a modern industrialised nation with a socialist market economy, in what has become known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics". After the June Fourth Incident, Deng's power weakened as he (along with Premier Li Peng) was blamed for the massacre, with factions in the Communist Party accusing him of suppressing any signs of political freedom that would undermine his economic reforms. After his retirement, in 1992 he made his famous 'inspection' visit to cities in the south of China, basically to assert his economic agendas, where history and myth have him utter his now legendary catchphrase "to get rich is glorious", which became the catalyst for the subsequent extraordinary socio-economic development of the country that has such an affect on both the world economy and that of Australia.

The political and economic ideologies developed by Deng have since become known as Deng Xiaoping Theory, the convergence of a market economy model with a socialist political system—"one country, two systems"—with the opening of the country to the outside world. The cultural and economic backwardness of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were thus dismissed, but not necessarily forgotten (unlike the June Fourth Incident, which is still officially not discussed) in this struggle to be both rich and glorious.

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Where there's money, there's eventually art. When Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art opened in November last year it presented its owner's collection of painters, the '85 New Wave-The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art'. Curator Fei Dawei said of this exhibition,

Between 1985 and 1990, a group of over one thousand young Chinese artists living in an environment without galleries, museums, or any systematic support for art and with unprecedented enthusiasm and passion, led a fundamentally influential artistic movement. It marked the end of a monolithic artistic model, achieving unprecedented freedom and opened a path for Chinese art to march toward internationalisation and contemporaneity. After 1985, "contemporary art" irreversibly became the driving force behind Chinese art. This famous '85 New Wave Movement represents a watershed in contemporary Chinese art history which departed from the old time and pointed out a new direction. This movement also cultivated a group of artists that have an impact in the world, with their works influenced and changed the direction and structure of Chinese and world art.¹

Out with the old, in with the new, to be new is glorious. These were Deng Xiaoping's disciples, only they painted canvases rather than *Dazibao*, the 'big character' wall posters of the Beijing's 1978-79 Democracy Wall period (also suppressed). This '85 new wave was both preceded and followed by the "Apartment Art" movement (1970-1990s), a unique Chinese response to a lack of official galleries and sponsorship, in which underground, experimental and avant-garde art committed themselves to the creation of critical and radical contemporary artworks.² From the 1990s came artists who were soon to become internationally famous—Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei, Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxin, Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen.

In 2000, the *Shanghai Biennale* also 'opened its doors' to international art and artists, having been accessible before only to the old school painters. Since this period the Chinese art market has emulated the economy with an escalation in the number of exhibiting artists, studios, galleries, artist run spaces, museums, touring exhibitions, commercial enterprises and both local and international auctions of contemporary Chinese art. In October 2000 artist Ai Weiwei and independent art critic and curator Feng Boyi wrote what was effectively their manifesto for an exhibition that became a pivotal if not iconic event in the recent history of contemporary Chinese art. The exhibition was titled in English *Fuck Off*, in Chinese the more prosaic, "The way to not cooperate", or "An Uncooperative Approach". In reviewing *Fuck Off for Art Asia Pacific*, Charles Merewether wrote,

The fact that Ai and Feng selected mostly Beijing artists for a Shanghai event invokes the long-standing differences between the two cities, with the financial centre Shanghai serving as a nexus between communist China and the commodity-oriented West, and Beijing serving as the seat of the political establishment and the radical intellectual engagement of issues within China. Ultimately, "Fuck Off" has proven more significant than the Shanghai Biennale in crystallising the concerns and issues of artists working at that moment of transition.³

From this moment onwards, though not as a direct result of the exhibition per se, sensationalist and a milestone it might have been, contemporary Chinese art might be historically evaluated as it moved under the rubric of Deng Xiaoping Theory, into the twenty-first century, into a period of meteoric economic expansion and interest in all things Chinese, contemporary art included. Ai and Feng declared in the catalogue's preface,

In today's art, the 'alternative' is playing the role of revising and criticising the power discourse and mass convention. In an uncooperative and uncompromisable way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and vulgarisation. A cultural attitude that stands against the power and makes no compromise with vulgarisation is, together with independent individual experiences, feelings and creations, is what extends the pursuit and desire of art for spiritual freedom—an everlasting theme. Such a cultural attitude is obviously exclusive and alienated. It aims at dealing with such themes as cultural power, art institution, art trends, communications between the East and West, exoticism, postmodernism and postcolonialism etc.

Fuck Off emphasises the independent and critical stance that is basic to art existence, and its status of independence, freedom and plurality in the situation on contradictions and conflicts. It tries to provoke artist's responsibilities and self-discipline, search for the way in which art lives as 'wildlife', and raise questions about some issues on contemporary Chinese art.

Allegory, direct questioning, resistance, alienation, dissolution, endurance, boredom, bias, absurdity, cynicism and self-entertainment are aspects of culture as well as features of existence. Such issues are represented here by the artists with unprecedented frankness and intelligence, which leaves behind fresh and stimulating information and traces of existence.

In this exhibition, participants and their works are not objects of choice, identification and judgement. They have no quest for any kind of excuse. Group identification and inner differences are both so fully respected and encouraged that it may be doubted if there is the necessity for the presence of audience.

An on-site ambiguity and uncertainty forces one to seek meaning and satisfaction only in the form of proliferation and postpone[ment]. Perhaps there is nothing that exists 'on-site' but what will last forever is the very uncooperativeness with any system of power discourse.⁴

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Having walked across Istanbul last October it was quickly possible to perceive that Chinese über-curator Hou Hanru's *Biennale, Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War*, presented art that was quite removed from the Australian model. Its multi-city-sites staged a frenetically charged critical reflection on modernity and its consequences, a discordant clutter of loss of illusions, many of the artists from non-art-central countries, much like Charles Merewether's 2006 *Biennale of Sydney Zones of Contact*. There was not one Australian artist in Istanbul's four major *Biennale* sites.⁵

One might query what has been the driving force of contemporary Australian art practice over this current decade, given our historical proclivity to external cultural influences. If the 1980s saw a blind obedience to "French Theory" and its factional absolutism roll into another usurping fadism of "New Media" in the 1990s and later, there seems not to have been any overall doctrine of influence or philosophy—apart from the persisting exhortations of the "New Media" clique (or is it now just "Media"?)—except for the unambiguous quest for the nurturing realm of the commercial sector and its desired product, the pinnacle of which has seen aspirants 'curated' by the Australia Council for presentation in the Australian Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale*. Apart from a politically charged sub-group of practice shooting its bolt at a conservative government (subsequently disenfranchised by a change in that government) the overall platform seems to have been enveloped by a safety in product. Apart from Bill Henson of course.⁶ It certainly could not boast a manifesto as riotous and revolutionary as that of Ai's and Feng's *Fuck Off*, nor anything like the exhibition and its artists.

In her catalogue essay to the 2008 *Biennale of Sydney-Revolutions: Forms that Turn*, Artistic Director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev presented her *Biennale* as one that, "explores the relationship and distance between 'revolutionary art' and 'art for the revolution', the space between form on the one hand, and the role of art in society in the other",⁷ complemented by the website, "*Revolutions: Forms That Turn* articulates the agency embedded in forms that express our desire for change. Such literal and formal devices are charted for their broader aesthetic, psychological, radical and political perspectives..."⁸

Those perspectives were unarguably fixated upon her home turf, making *Revolutions...* a "nostalgic 'Euronale'", eschewing the cynosure of regions somewhat closer to its host city of Sydney.⁹ As the kick-start member of *Art Compass*, being Asia-Pacific's five leading contemporary art events—*Gwangju, Shanghai, Singapore Biennales* and the *Yokohama Triennale*, the *Biennale of Sydney* ultimately presented itself (if not Australia) yet again as a European outpost at the "end of the world" (as Okwui Enwezor, having just arrived in Sydney for his *Biennale* keynote speech, conjectured as to where he thought he might be) amongst its Asian neighbours. There were only two participating Chinese artists in *Revolutions...* in a country with an extraordinary twentieth-century history and enough artists to fill a biennale or two.

One can count as least four upheavals worthy of any 'revolutionary' recognition, from the collapse of centuries of dynastic rule in 1912 to the post-Tiananmen Deng instigated economic surge of one-China two-systems, with Communist (1949) and Cultural Revolutions (1966-69) thrown in for good measure. It might be argued from a Chinese perspective, that if standing in Europe, the "middle kingdom" might also be at the end of the world.

Where there's money there's art and where there's art there's money to be made. The last decade has seen a phenomenal surge in the Chinese art market and much like China's past, it has been eagerly colonised by Western investment (corporate and private collections, establishment of galleries and museums) and Western language (curatorial dictates, critical and historical evaluation). The lure of the dollar is omnipresent and the status of being collected by Charles Saatchi and Uli Sigg for the Chinese artist is no less a desire than an average family working resolutely towards the purchase of their BMW. In 2005 the government announced that by 2012, the year of the Shanghai World Expo, China would have built one thousand new museums. Western commercial galleries abound in Shanghai and Beijing. Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, founded by Belgian industrialist Baron Guy Ullens, opened to much fanfare in November 2007. Last year saw the sale of

Yue Minjun's painting *Execution* (1995) becoming the most expensive work ever by a Chinese contemporary artist when it sold for £2.9million at Sotheby's in London. Other Chinese artists have reached comparative stellar heights at both local and international auction houses. Major collections and curated exhibitions like *China Power Station* were staged internationally via London's Serpentine Gallery in collaboration with the influential Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art. The Chinese art market has paralleled its economic surge. But as we know, things have changed somewhat. The Shanghai Stock Exchange has lost more than seventy-five percent of its value since November 2007 as the global economy has sustained a dramatic decline. Amidst this latter mayhem, the world focus converged on China, not only the earthquakes in Sichuan and the Tibet riots but of course the Summer Beijing ("our") Olympics.

The Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony provided one of the most extraordinary visual presentations for a sporting if not cultural event, conceived and directed by the internationally famous film director Zhang Yimou, whose 2006 film, *Curse of the Golden Flower* was the most expensive Chinese film ever made (only half the cost of the opening ceremony). Despite the current economic gloom pervading both the world and Chinese economies and art markets, Shanghai this year staged the *SH08 Contemporary Art Fair* running parallel with the 7th *Shanghai Biennale*, while in an industrial estate in the north of the city the star of the 2006 *Shanghai Biennale*, Qiu Anxiong presented a powerful indictment against Chinese working conditions, rights of workers and Western abuse of both with the exhibition *We Are the World*. Against this terrain of the Olympics, earthquakes, Tibet, art fairs and the *Biennale*, building of museums, auction and art market hysteria, there has been another undertaking, on an Olympian scale—perhaps the epitome of things Chinese and Chinese art—Zendai Museum of Modern Art's *Intrude: Art & Life 366* project, a year long public art intervention project with one event for the 366 days of the year—according to its Executive Curator Biljana Ciric, "maybe only in China can a project of such immensity and complexity actually happen." (The following *Intrude* texts, apart from the interview with Ciric are reproduced from Zendai MoMA's *Intrude* magazines produced throughout the year.)

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In this first decade of the twenty-first century, contemporary Australian art could be seen to be gridlocked on the boardwalk of an economy at its wealthiest since its 1901 Federation, with favourable market conditions and low unemployment, whether by design or coincidence all under a conservative government.¹⁰ The national Richter Scale for cultural and/or political dissent has been practically non-resonant, apart from some minor blips over the wars on terror and in Iraq, "boat people" and union relativism. The lingering odour of last century's cultural parochialism of Pauline Hanson and her One Australia Party had seemingly wafted to its rightful dissipation; that is until this year's tyranny of illiberalism manifested itself over the 'Henson Affair' (a return to the 1960s, if not earlier), being a logical amplification of a "chicken little" factional screeching about the evils of the internet and mobile phones, with its attendant upskirting, downblousing presumption that every male it would seem is a potential pedophile, all a triumphantly 'corrected' and constipated philosophy. Australia still might be social critic and academic Donald Horne's "the lucky country" with its resource based economy, though today the adjective in the subtext to his famous quote "run by second-rate people who share its luck" might easily be replaced with "ugly" or "revolting". Australian art—quo vadis?

So by way of comparison, MADE IN CHINA.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.ucca.org.cn/portal/exhibition/view.798?id=2&menuId=27>

² See Gao Minglu, 'What is Apartment Art?': <http://en.artintern.net/index.php/review/main/html/4/378>

³ Charles Merewether, 'Ai Weiwei: The Freedom of Irreverence', <http://www.aapmag.com/53features1.html>

⁴ Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, *Fuck Off*, Eastlink Gallery and Ai Weiwei, Shanghai, 2000

⁵ Sydney based artist Eugenia Raskopolous participated in the satellite project *Nightcomers* of 116 artists over 25 sites

⁶ See Rex Butler this issue, page 277. See also Richard Grayson, 'Dirty Pictures', *Broadsheet* Vol 37 No 3, 2008: 182–85

⁷ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'Revolutions—Forms That Turn: The Impulse to Revolt', *2008 Biennale of Sydney Revolutions—Forms That Turn*, Thames & Hudson: 30

⁸ <http://www.bos2008.com/page/theme.html>

⁹ John Clark, 'The 1968 "Euronale" of Sydney and Other Matters', *Broadsheet* Vol 37 No 3, 2008: 177

¹⁰ Since this middle of this year the Australian Stock Exchange has experienced its greatest fall since 1987