



fuck off

an uncooperative approach

I can still more or less recall the evening, at dusk on 4 November, 2000. I came to a street in a taxi along the Suzhou Creek in the Shanghai suburbs—a river dike on one side and old factories and warehouses on the other. Immediately I recognised some ‘arty’ looking people strolling and smoking on the side of the road before I had even found the number on the door. I stopped the taxi alongside them and asked where was the entrance of Eastlink Gallery. Inside, at the most prominent position, hung a work by Ai Weiwei, *Gold Distribution*, an enormous black and white photo of a tightly packed group of people in a queue, a reproduction of a famous photo taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1949 (the year the Chinese Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China). I didn’t pay much attention at the time to the name of the exhibition *Fuck Off*, or “uncooperative approach” in its Chinese translation. I came mainly because of its reputation as the external exhibition for the *Shanghai Biennale*. Knowledge of this kind of exhibition seldom depended on formal invitations, rather, the information was passed on by insiders and word of mouth.

In this massive and sturdy former warehouse, the exhibition space on the ground floor was dirty and crude, reeking of filth. Upstairs, on the contrary, was clean, bright and spacious. The upper floor was the gallery space; the bottom floor was rented out for the short term. As is the case for this kind of exhibition, I saw several acquaintances, some eccentrically dressed characters and many foreigners. Artist Ding Yi handed me a catalogue, along with an ‘underground’ rumor—many young artists were being presented here, a number of whose works contained literally ‘raw material’—skin and flesh. Several weeks later I visited Li Liang, the gallery owner of Eastlink Gallery. By then the exhibition was already down, some abstract paintings by Shanghainese painters were leaning against the wall in the empty gallery. In the office, in his usual nonchalant manner, Li Liang mentioned that the Cultural Inspection Bureau had come after the opening. They claimed that some of the works were inappropriate and demanded that the exhibition close. All the remaining catalogues were confiscated as they were being sold without government publication authorisation.

There were forty-six artists showing in *Fuck Off*, including the works of Zhang Shengquan who had recently committed suicide. The Cultural Inspection Bureau considered several works were inappropriate. Photographs by Xu Tan were considered pornography and taken away. Another photography work, by Yang Fudong *The First Intellectual* (2000) also suffered the same fate. In this image, a young man standing in the middle of a road, in a torn suit and loosened tie, his head covered in blood, is holding a brick in his hand as if to make a counter-strike; the background being the new avenues of Pudong District of Shanghai, and the newly finished tallest building in Asia, the Jinmao Tower. In this year of 2000, Yang Fudong had not yet become famous. The performance piece *Eating People* by Zhu Yu, often referred to as “Eating Baby”, the most controversial work of the exhibition, in fact was not displayed. On the opening night, a rumor revealed that the baby-eating photos were in a black suitcase in the corner of the exhibition space. This artist had in the past used parts of corpses in his artworks. For this exhibition he travelled with the black suitcase from Beijing to Shanghai by train. The curatorial team worried that its contents were nevertheless still too sensitive, and therefore did not display them. When the Cultural Inspection Bureau came, Zhu Yu had already returned to Beijing with the suitcase. However, the photos and their accompanying texts nonetheless were included in the catalogue. Also in the catalogue were images of young female artist Peng Yu’s *Oil of Human Being* (2000) which too provoked considerable controversy, the title needing no explanation.

Eastlink Gallery and some artists’ studios did not stay for more than a couple of years in these warehouses before they were renovated. Destruction, relocation and renovation were common for all these types of venues in Shanghai and China over the last twenty years. They moved to the nearby (and now famous) 50 Moganshan Road and other unoccupied warehouses. The galleries and studios in this complex inevitably became self-inflated with the burgeoning art market. Today, they have been successfully transformed and incorporated into the hip yet excessively commercialised M50 Creative Park. Presumably, within this setup it is doubtful that there is any remaining interest to engage “how not to cooperate”. There is a copy of a very worn *Fuck Off* catalogue in Eastlink Gallery; the young receptionist could not give me a clear explanation of what had happened.

The 2000 *Shanghai Biennale*, by breaking away from its past (domestic) conservative approach and engaging global contemporary art, had indeed provided a brand new artistic environment in China. Before this, the ‘radical’ art movement in China had encountered persistent obstacles. The *Shanghai Biennale* was the first government organised contemporary art exhibition in a national art museum that included installation and film works. This became a turning point, as the Shanghai municipal government was determined to demonstrate their open-mindedness and desire for progress to that of the West. Consequently, as the progressive art movement in China steered towards a course promoted by the Western contemporary art world, its imported influence was positively received. Though Jiang Zemin’s Administration’s utilitarian mindset was not ready to accommodate any radical art forms, it nonetheless was also aware of the profits that could be attained by supporting and presenting this style of contemporary culture given the potential for attention and investment by the West. Indeed, several international Chinese curators such as Hou Hanru, who co-curated the 2000 *Shanghai Biennale*, successfully imported new concepts, creating new excitement in the national art scene.

Was *Fuck Off* then good or bad news for the art scene in China? One of the two curators, Feng Boyi revealed afterwards that Ai Weiwei, the other curator, with his sensitivity and timely perception, was able to discern even the subtlest developing mood. The setting, ambiance and openness in Shanghai at that time were unparalleled, especially with the newly modified warehouse spaces along the Suzhou Creek. Ai Weiwei was invited by Li Liang, who had recently moved into this new area, to construct an exhibition that could be contextualised by the *Shanghai Biennale*. Perceptibly, he had already conceived such an event and its title before collaborating with Feng Boyi. Therefore, what *Fuck Off* tried to achieve was more a gesture, a statement, an expression of attitude, rather than quality of content. The exhibition confronted and criticised the reality of its artistic environment—the emergence of Chinese official contemporary art and a cynical conformity to Western influence that had always existed and was destined inevitably to be the predominant theme of the *Shanghai Biennale*.

During an interview, Ai Weiwei fervently declared, “We do not cooperate with anyone, anything. This is a challenge to all the powers, authorities and the system. It is small yet not to be ignored, like a nail in the eye, a thorn in the flesh, a little grain of sand in the shoe—it reflects a valuable cultural spirit.”¹ Feng Boyi further clarified, “Do not cooperate with the contemporary mainstream trend in China, do not cooperate with the established structure of today’s art world, do not cooperate with the Western standard.”²

For a long time after the opening night, there was much public discussion and media response, which directly lead to the forming of a legislative “notice” in April 2001 which included “forbidding performance or display of bloody, violent, and obscene subjects, as well as presentation of human reproductive organs or other pornographic acts that are harmful to the society.”³ The 2002 *Shanghai Biennale* Committee also posted the “lawyer authorisation declaration” in major newspapers, as an attempt to suppress any “external exhibition”.

Dating back to as early as the May 4th Movement in 1919, Chinese intellectuals have undertaken radical action in response to social and cultural problems. The ‘radical’ art movement that began in the late 1970s, after travelling along a bumpy road for two decades, finally gave its ‘last blow’ before it eventually submitted to a new regime of the contemporary art world. I considered *Fuck Off* to be this ‘last blow’. Even though the fundamental concepts of radical art are based on rationalism, it was also romantic in a political sense, with a belief in abstract liberation as well as reckless fanaticism enlivened in a tangible form.

The radical art movement may have been continually changing its form, yet it did not do so just for the sake of form. An ideology to oppose the orthodox was its main focus; they were the pioneers leading to a “road of liberation”. The distinctive features of these kinds of exhibitions in the 1990s were a refusal to be involved in a conventional exhibiting system; risking being cut short or closed down for their radical approaches; proclaiming their status as the avant-garde with radical actions and gestures; and having difficulties with spaces and funding. The idea, the scope of *Fuck Off* and the breadth of its effects were substantial enough to be qualified as the concluding show of this radical movement. It may not have realised then its own destiny. *Fuck Off* appeared to have concluded a dynamic that had thrived for two decades, where artists conceived and created their own exhibitions. The time was however, already moving into the era of the curator.

The Chinese translation of the exhibition is both sensible and literal, “the way to not cooperate”, as opposed to the English interpretation, which on the contrary, in an expressionist way, serves the meaning on a metaphysical level. Though the approaches vary, the two translations nonetheless agree in essence. However, the English profanity reveals much about an artistic trend of the late 1990s. Many of the exhibition’s young and emerging artists were actively involved in the underground art scene then, and many artists sought maximum sensual excitement from and stimulation in their works. Additionally, *Fuck Off* unexpectedly terminated the efflorescence of that particular group of art ‘radicals’. Other exhibitions which extensively employed human and animal cadavers were *Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies & Delusion*, Beijing, 1999, *Indulge in Hurt*, Beijing, 2000 and *Human and Animal*, Nanjing, 2000. This movement lasted for about a year or two until criticism and reflection created by the controversial “Eating Baby” artworks and its successors brought a sudden end to this shock art contest.

TRANSLATED BY HSUAN-YING CHEN

Notes

¹ Dialogue on the “Fuck Off” Exhibition’, an interview with Long Yong. The original article was published in *Art World* magazine in 2001, see http://arts.tom.com/look1/ysxw/cul_ybxw_zlzz_buhezuo1_2.htm

² Ibid.

³ Notice by the Cultural Department to strictly prohibit performance or display of bloody, violent, and obscene subjects on behalf of “art”, Government issue No 14, 3 April, 2001