

# COMRADES-IN-ARMS: THE INDEPENDENT ARTIST AND THE INTELLECTUAL CRITIC

AN INTERVIEW OF GUAN YUDA BY THE GAO BROTHERS<sup>1</sup>

In this interview, the Gao Brothers and Guan Yuda discuss recent trends in Chinese contemporary art, and the search for meaningful expression in a censored and commercialized artistic environment.

GUAN YUDA, born in 1963, is an art critic and curator. Currently an instructor at the Guizhou University College of Art, he was recently a visiting scholar at Peking University and co-organized the "China-Germany New Media Art Week" earlier this year. He currently lives in Guizhou.

Artists GAO ZHEN, born in 1956, and GAO QIANG, born in 1962, are natives of Shandong Province and are now based in Jinan. Known professionally as the Gao Brothers, they have attracted considerable critical notice both in China and overseas with their body art and performance-based works.

**Gao Brothers:** When did you enter the Chinese contemporary art scene?

**Guan Yuda:** In the early 1980s, when I was still in college. It was a time of unprecedented dynamism in Chinese academic thought. The times were heady with an atmosphere of free thinking that made you want to sing out loud. In art circles, the '80s were also the decade of the "85 Movement" and the Chinese *Sturm und Drang*.<sup>2</sup> I use the term *Sturm und Drang* because the 85 Movement had elements of enlightenment, youthfulness, romanticism and utopianism that were in many respects similar to nineteenth century German Romanticism. People of my generation were heavily influenced by the 85 Movement, and I began to play close attention to reality, life, society and my self.

Another reason was that I studied classical philology at university, dealing mainly with antiquities and cultural relics. Classical philology is an exceedingly rigorous and rational discipline. The scholarly training I received is still of great benefit in my art criticism and art documentation work, but perhaps in my heart of hearts I am more of an artist than a rigorous scholar. I always felt that my own emotions and imagination,

my personal feelings, could not find free expression in textual exegesis, textual research, catalogues, book editions and so forth. In those days I felt very disheartened, and would pace back and forth in my solitude, unable to find direction. As Wang Guowei<sup>3</sup> put it, "Subjective scholarship is appealing but lacks credibility, while objective scholarship is credible but unappealing." That's when I began to come into contact with contemporary art.

I was immediately drawn to Chinese contemporary art, because I felt that there was something exciting about it, and conducive to continuous growth: this something was its experimental nature and its exploration of new possibilities. Yes, it was also at that time that I came to know rock music. Although I have always been a classical music fan, these days I listen to a lot of popular music, not because I think it's better than classical music, but because I can feel a sort of "breath" and "growth" in it. Pop music is much like certain aspects of my life, plunging this way and that, exploring new possibilities and unknown worlds. To my mind, Chinese contemporary art, like rock music, is something that is still growing, immature, full of possibility, youthfulness, passion, vitality and challenges. It's relevant to my way of life and personality. I've always been curious about the unknown and about new possibilities, and Chinese contemporary art satisfies this curiosity. Walter Benjamin once said that the object of criticism must have an intrinsic connection to the temperament of the critic. I very much agree with this statement.

Since the 1980s, art critics and curators have contributed enormously to promoting the development of Chinese contemporary art. But the fact is that Chinese contemporary art still resembles a motley crew of good and bad itinerant entertainers: artists, critics, curators, collectors, media people...it's all one big mess, and people are pretty confused about what role they and others are supposed to play. More than ten years ago, artistic survival hung on the words of certain art critics who held ideological authority. But things have truly changed: today artists also have a say in planning exhibitions and are constantly voicing critical opinions about art events, performances and artists, while some critics and curators, such as Qiu Zhijie, Zhu Qingsheng and Wu Wenguang, are also creating art. You'd be hard put to restrict them to a single role. So today's Chinese contemporary art

scene has come to resemble the Warring States period<sup>4</sup>, with feudal lords vying for the throne.

Although some people would like to "unify the artistic community," and are making some efforts to bring about "internationalization" and "standardization," ultimately contemporary art would perish through systemization. Outside of China there are some very standardized art exhibitions, and many commercialized "Olympics" of art. It all seems very lively and high-sounding, but in fact these exhibitions are a sort of quantitative contest that display little in the way of new art. What we ought to be on guard against is that many exhibitions now being held in China are aping these foreign models in the belief that the "legalization" and "systematization" of art is a very good thing. When art and art scholarship revolve around awards, ostentation and extravagance, social connections, prescribed requirements and power, they become completely pointless.

As for myself, I prefer to drift from role to role and don't want to devote myself exclusively to any single capacity. I currently work mainly on art criticism and art documentation. Maybe one day I'll experience the joy of creating art myself. It's hard to say. In fact, it's said that your status or role are imposed on you from the outside, but life and the mind open up the possibility of unlimited freedom. If you really buy into this cliché, you're an idiot. Contemporary art is currently moving toward a new synthesis, which is also the direction in which contemporary culture is heading. But the ultimate goal of artistic creation and art criticism remains the pursuit of intellectual and creative freedom and pushing the envelope. It's like Lin Huchong in *The Laughing Swordsman*<sup>5</sup>, a lone martial arts artist who pursues perfection, doesn't give a damn about politics, does as he pleases, and turns his back on power when it is within his grasp. Of course, this is a lofty realm, and although I cannot reach it myself, I yearn for it. It is precisely because the goal is great that it's worth striving for.

**Gao Brothers:** You recently organized the China-Germany New Media Art Week. Why and how did you come up with this exhibition?

**Guan:** The China-Germany New Media Art Week was held in June and July of this year in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou. More than 40 Chinese and German artists, art critics and curators participated, and the event was widely reported in the media. The event benefited greatly from the sponsorship of the Peking University Modern Art Society and the Beijing branch of the Goethe Institute.

Since the 1980s, China has witnessed very rapid development in new media art, including video art, digital photography, conceptual photography, Web art and experimental sound performance. A few artists have been involved in new media art since the outset, such as Wang Gongxin, Wang Jianwei, Zhang Peili, and some artists who had originally been working with traditional media also began to experiment with new media art. Of course, this doesn't include those involved in non-professional digital video, graphic design, Web page design and so forth. In a word, one of the most striking aspects of Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s was the proliferation of a wide

range of different media and the spread of artistic experimentation and individual creativity that resulted.

It can be said that through experimenting with new media, Chinese contemporary artists in the 1990s gained more opportunities to carry out exchanges with artists working at the cutting edge in other parts of the world. With increased interaction and dialogue, Chinese artists also came to focus their attention on a number of new questions. The "public nature" of contemporary art and the free exchange of art within a "public sphere" became key questions in the transformation of Chinese contemporary art at the end of the twentieth century.

For social and political reasons, Chinese contemporary art has for a long time developed underground. This underground mentality has given rise to oppositional and revolutionary sentiments that have been the main impetus for the growth and development of Chinese contemporary art on the one hand, and have constituted an obstacle to its beating a positive and healthy path for itself on the other hand. That's why some art critics view Chinese contemporary art as a sort of "clique art" or "guild." Lacking communication with the public, legal space for exhibitions, a system of healthy democratic criticism or a normalized market, many artists produce works that resemble the secret language of a medieval guild. Only a small minority of art critics and artists who understand its profound mysteries can analyze and explain this language. It's an absurd situation that is detrimental to the development of Chinese contemporary art.

Beijing is China's cultural, political and economic capital. In a sense it is also an increasingly powerful symbol of China's strength, an international melting pot and the place where new media art is expanding, which is why it has become the base for most of China's most representative new media artists. I was in close contact with them while I was a visiting scholar at Peking University. I feel they're different from the artists working in the digital utopia of Western new media art in that Chinese artists are still an underground clique and their audience is made up of fellow artists. It's a very closed, narcissistic and elitist art scene. It's altogether different in spirit from the highly ambitious and enterprising cultural utopianism that characterized Western new media art in the 1960s, which quickly took over the public sphere, including broadcasts on commercial television. Chinese new media art has yet to enter the public sphere Jürgen Habermas talked about. Nor does it have an organic relationship with Chinese social life, although such a relationship is very important for contemporary art. So at that time I felt that new media art must be given greater public influence to allow more people outside the artistic clique to get to know and understand it. My view was supported by Zhu Qingsheng, Huang Yan, Zhang Zhaohui and my colleagues at the Peking University Modern Art Society.

At that time, Dr. Ulrich Nowak, head of the Goethe Institute in Beijing, told me that his institute was just then planning an exhibition of German new media art in China, and suggested that we jointly organize a Sino-German new media art event. We agreed that this would suit everyone, and organized the festival. The highlights were:

- 1) A screening of "China Chronicle," for which I invited a dozen of the most representative China video artists to

present around 20 video shorts at Peking University, Tsinghua University, the Loft,<sup>6</sup> Shanghai Normal University, and the China Academy of Art, to showcase the development of China's video art from the 1980s to today.

- 2) A conceptual photography exhibition entitled "Power of the Body," featuring the works of 15 Chinese artists. Works by Xiang Jinfeng, Qiu Zhijie, Huang Yan and Weng Fen were especially created for this exhibition. I picked the title "Power of the Body," because I agree with Zhang Zhaohui that in this age of ever greater technical instrumentalization and rationalization, we would do well to stress the importance of the body as a resource for Chinese contemporary art. When this exhibition was shown in the Loft, a heated debate was raging in the Chinese art world about "growing violence in Chinese contemporary art," and this issue became the focus of discussion at the exhibition. Qiu Zhijie and Song Dong expanded the influence of this event through their frank multimedia work, "Fashion News."
- 3) The "Third Sex" Web art exhibition was a very important part of this event. It examined from a scholarly perspective the growing interest in recent years in Web art in China, and explored possibilities for integrating art and technology. The exhibition was followed with interest by many people from the IT world. In fact, Huang Yan, the organizer of a photography exhibition in Changchun, was one of the first people in China to show an interest in Web art, and many of the artists who participated in this exhibition were recommended by him.
- 4) The Goethe Institute invited two renowned German media art scholars, who used CD-ROMs and videos to present German media and video art since 1963, including some very recent experimental film work. During the festival, they gave lectures at Peking University, the Loft, the China Academy of Art, Shanghai Normal University and Tsinghua University.

This festival showcasing works by Chinese and German artists reflected the current state of new media art in two different cultural contexts. Some visitors wondered whether even a single Chinese work could qualify as new media art by the standards of German new media art. I think the premise of this question is that there is a single artistic standard, and that in the case of new media art this standard is its artistic quality, creative standard and technological content. Regarding this question I'm reminded of a conversation I once had with the artists Wang Jianwei and Wang Gongxin. When someone took Wang Jianwei to task because his video work supposedly did not place enough emphasis on technology, he replied that this was in fact an artistic expression of his attitude toward technology. Similarly, many Chinese artists don't care whether their work qualifies as new media art. The way they see it, the focus on advanced technology, equipment and materials is a very one-sided view held only by a few media art buffs. They feel that media art ought to focus on basic human and social ques-

tions, and that the tools used for expressing and creating art matter less than what forms, media and language are best suited to express the artist's meaning. So we can't really say that the work of an artist who uses new media is better than that of an artist who doesn't employ such media. Although new media art is intricately connected to technology, when all is said and done art is not technology. What's more, there is no single standard for new media art on which everybody agrees, not to mention a single German or Chinese standard. When experimenting with art, we cannot start out with a single standard. That would be like picking a "three-goods"<sup>7</sup> student on the basis of a single aptitude.

As for the artists' works themselves: there is a clear difference between Chinese and German artists regarding their attitude to technology, their understanding of formal artistic language and the questions they address. In Germany, many artists began to experiment with media art as early as the 1960s, including Joseph Beuys in his later works, and artists influenced by Beuys such as Nam June Paik<sup>8</sup>, who have been very influential in media art. Comparatively speaking, German artists seem to have a more receptive attitude toward technology and are more inclined to explore artistic languages per se. Most Chinese artists, on the other hand, tend to employ new media to address an issue or question, and to some extent all of these issues and questions concern real life in China.

A case in point is the emotive and narrative quality of Wang Jianwei's "I and We," and his use of the image of China, which has earned him criticism from some quarters for "peddling the theme of China" to the West. One might also cite Zhou Xiaohu's multimedia piece "Storming the Barricades," Cao Kai's video "Gathering Mulberry Leaves,"<sup>9</sup> which evokes the inner conflicts of the Southern Chinese literati, and the political culture alluded to in Weng Fen's video "The Award Ceremony," all of which express Chinese artists' concerns and thoughts about their own culture. Of course, the question is not quite as simple as that, and a simple comparison reveals very little. But these examples do demonstrate that Chinese contemporary art has drawn on new media to considerably expand its field of experimentation and exploration, and has gained many more opportunities to engage with international art on equal terms in a process of give-and-take.

In recent years new media art in China has been barreling ahead with no sign of slowing down, and many young artists, art students, digital video enthusiasts and graphic designers have entered this new field. According to information in my possession, a great many young people are currently experimenting with new media in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Nanjing, Shenzhen, Fuzhou, Hangzhou, Chongqing, Guiyang, Wuhan, Changchun, Changzhou, Nanzhu, Nanning, Haikou and Jinan. Zheng Guogu once said to me in a phone conversation, "I'm afraid that Chinese avant-garde art has reached a stage where its influence is spreading unchecked." In some Beijing art circles, the first thing people say when they bump into each other is, "Hey, pal, what's your latest film?" Every artist in Beijing seems to be taking pictures and shooting videos. Of course this is a little ridiculous. But we shouldn't be too critical of this phenomenon: the film and

media craze currently sweeping Chinese contemporary art can also be seen as an expression of the democratization of art in Chinese society.

The generation born in the 1970s and 80s came of age in the 1990s. Unlike the generations that preceded them, they live in a comparatively affluent consumer society, a society that is advancing by leaps and bounds thanks to computers, digital technology and biotechnology. A great many of these young people grew up on television, cartoons, photography and movies. When they begin to create art, it makes perfect sense for them to choose the methods and techniques they're most familiar with. This media and film craze signals a new trend towards the democratization of Chinese contemporary art, expanding the space for popular participation in artistic creation and the development of intellectual life, and opening the possibility of a pluralistic environment conducive to creative and personal development. This is worthy of our attention.

However, we should also keep in mind that because new media art is highly dependent on science and technology, it may constitute an obstacle to genuine artistic progress by causing alienation through materialism. When an artist becomes a slave to what he has created, he loses sovereignty over his spirit and his life. In fact, since Marshall McLuhan, the history of new media art has been marked in turns by two opposing poles: a utopian belief in technology and doubts about the supremacy of technological rationality. It remains to be seen whether in their experiments, China's new media artists will succeed in going beyond the intellectual inertia of these two opposed views and draw strength from the wisdom of China's ancient civilization to make a genuinely new contribution to new media art. It's fair to say that Chinese contemporary art is making great effort toward this significant and challenging goal.

**Gao Brothers:** You've said that for some time you've been collecting materials on Chinese contemporary art, which you hope to publish in relevant journals. This is undoubtedly a significant project. How far along are you?

**Guan:** Chinese contemporary art, particularly since 1989, has already attracted the interest of people with breadth of vision in the international art world. Many Chinese artists have repeatedly shown their works at international exhibitions. Numerous international curators and art critics have been coming to China to select artists and give advice. Quite a few artists have struck it rich overnight and the "myth of the market" has gained a powerful hold on people. All of this has inevitably left a mark: it seems as though Chinese contemporary art is outshining its competitors around the world and has made Western art, which has reached something of a dead end, pale by comparison. The Chinese economy is growing equally fast, but drawing a parallel between the two would be erroneously simplistic.

Because Chinese ideological control has engendered an "underground complex," and Western cultural hegemony has created a colonial culture mentality, Chinese contemporary art still finds itself between a rock and a hard place. Someone once criticized contemporary Chinese art for focusing too much on

information and processing and not enough on learning and art. I could not agree more. An important reason for this state of affairs is a continuous "revolution" driven by the urge to outdo others and by opportunism of the most superficial and reckless sort, to which one should add a lack of fundamental scholarship and established standards of criticism. A clear case in point is the 85 Movement, which over the past two decades has produced a rich and extensive corpus of historical materials that constitute a visual testimony to China's social, intellectual and cultural transformation during this period. Although these materials are an important foundation for the establishment of proper standards of contemporary art scholarship and research, to date they have not been collected, organized or published in a comprehensive and scientific fashion.

When I began to work as a Chinese contemporary art critic and curator in the late 1980s, I became acutely aware that due to a dearth of documentation, many critiques and discussions of contemporary art were very inadequate in terms of scholarship, depth and originality. Some of the people critiquing an artist's work lacked the most rudimentary understanding of historical facts and background, deliberately misrepresented artists and their work, and spouted arrant nonsense about their own superficial scholarship. Most recently, for example, *Meishu* (Fine Arts) magazine started a debate about the "violent tendencies in Chinese contemporary art." The two sides engaged in a seemingly lively debate, but the fact is that all they came up with was so much spittle. There was nothing scholarly about it, and some critics lacked even the most elementary general knowledge of contemporary art, had no understanding of documentary materials on the development of contemporary art, and made groundless accusations based on impressions gleaned from art catalogues. This is a very harmful trend in scholarship.

That's why since the end of the 1980s I've devoted considerable energy to collecting and archiving documentary materials on Chinese contemporary art. Owing to the limitations of my personal abilities and financial resources, the work has been difficult. Fortunately, many artists, critics, collectors, curators and publishers have been very supportive; in particular, Zhu Qingsheng of Peking University, Wang Nanming in Shanghai and Wang Lin in Chongqing, Gu Chengfeng in Nanjing, Li Luming and Zou Jianping in Changsha, Su Lü in Nanning and the Gao Brothers in Jinan, have contributed excellent suggestions to my work in this area. But what progress I've achieved is in large measure due to having been invited by Dr. Zhu Qingsheng as a visiting scholar to Peking University in the year 2000. The excellent academic environment allowed me to pursue my work. Dr. Zhu played a leading role in this work by editing *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishu Wenxian* (Documents on Chinese Contemporary Art), establishing work norms and providing me with much practical guidance. To date, we have compiled more than 200 files on Chinese contemporary art in accordance with professional archival norms, and we are currently seeking cooperation with relevant publishing and academic institutions to publish the materials we have already collected and archived. Our goal is to make these materials available to scholars and interested readers in China and abroad.

**Gao Brothers:** What is your view of the violent tendencies of China's performance art in recent years?

**Guan:** First of all let's determine whether violent tendencies actually exist in China's performance art. Only after confirming this can we discuss the reasons.



**Gao Brothers — Father and Son**

Since the 1980s, performance art using the human body as an artistic medium has become an important trend in the experimental work of China's contemporary artists. As a result, many excellent and significant works have been created, such as the Dong Village Artists' "Adding a Meter to the Nameless Mountain," works by Chen Lingyang and He Yunchang, works by Lin Yilin of the Dawei Working Group, Ma Liuming's works on sexual identity and so on. But the performance art that has attracted the greatest interest and demand is that using self-mutilation, animals or corpses as an artistic medium. Such works often become the explosive subjects of human-interest stories in the media, because they push the boundaries of existing law with their graphic, violent and extremely carnal content. Examples include the first and second exhibitions of Qiu Zhijie's "Afterthought," Mi Xinting's "Infatuation with Injury," Ai Weiwei and Feng Bo's "Non-Consensual" exhibition, as well as Gu Zhenqing's "Man and Animal Exhibition" and Xu Yang's "China's First Performance Art Festival."

Among these are some works with genuine violent tendencies. But as far as I know, most of these exhibitions were just exchanges within art circles, and there were very few members of the general public who attended them. As soon as the

media made a big fuss about them, they became very explosive. So when we discuss this problem I propose that we make a clear distinction between our analysis and criticism of the art itself and the effect of the fuss the news media makes about it. When the media makes a big fuss about such art, it may simply be indulging in fabrication and fantasizing, while the works in question are not really as gory and sadistic as the media makes them out to be.

**Gao Brothers:** What do you think gives rise to violent tendencies?

**Guan:** This is a very good question. We're all shocked by the depiction of virtual violence, but we're numb to the ubiquity of violence in real life. This is clearly a problem of social psychology, and shows that the individual capacity for judgment has been lost in our modern society, in which people are subjected to information overload and control by the media.

To get back to our specific discussion of these works with so-called violent tendencies, I think that the key criterion for judging the success of these works of performance art is whether the artist is sincere and imaginative, and whether he can express these qualities in a unique artistic language. Regrettably, what I've seen in these works with so-called violent tendencies is a simple, uniform creative style that aims to overwhelm through ferocity. Everyone seems to have agreed to compete in one style, and art becomes a sort of athletic competition in which you mutilate yourself, he kills a dog, you eat a baby and he performs a skin graft. These works, which lack artistic realism and imagination, are superficially very violent but are not actual "violent art."

In this sense, I don't believe that modern Chinese performance art has genuinely violent works, but there is certainly a tendency in the media to make a big fuss about violence in art. In fact, in the "Man and Animal" exhibition that was considered so violent there were some works like the Gao Brothers' "Culture and Tattoo" (as well as your later "Embrace" performance)<sup>10</sup>, which were highly critical and imaginative. Unfortunately, they were entirely obscured behind the smoke screen raised by the debate over "violent tendencies" that was engineered by artists and the media.

Qiu Zhijie once joked, "In Chinese performance art it appears that only 'sex' and 'suffering' are effective." The sex angle requires having the right capital, but few artists have the physical advantages of Ma Liuming. But all you need for the suffering angle is to take a few savage photos and you're all set. So I'd say that the "violent tendencies" of modern Chinese performance art are a completely bogus issue. And when critics such as Huang Zhuan and Wang Nanming engage in a witch-hunt with ulterior motives and end up blaming Chinese violence on the hegemony of Western culture, they buy into this bogus issue hook, line and sinker. I have addressed this question in some of my essays, including "Chinese Violence and the Demonized West" and "On the Power of the Body."

By and large, the real crisis in China's contemporary performance art experiment is not the brouhaha about violent tendencies, but rather a creative style that focuses on a single

subject, turns viciousness into a competition, and lacks imaginative power, intelligence and sincerity. Of course, these problems also beset other experimental art forms, including new media art. Perhaps it's sadly unavoidable that all manner of unrelated arguments, power struggles and conflicts of interest will continue to be fought out in the name of contemporary art.

**Gao Brothers:** How do you understand "conceptual art"? What is your view of the advocates of "notionalism" (*dianzizhuyi*) and the related simplification of creative work?

**Guan:** So-called "conceptual art" seems to have become a trashcan in which any piece of dreck can be tossed, which is a big mistake. Taking the "concept" of artistic creation and simplistically interpreting it as an opportunistic, market- and fad-driven "notionalism" is an even bigger mistake.

Beginning in the 1970s, conceptual art in Europe and America became a new movement arising out of opposition to the commercialization, marketization and systemization of artistic creation. This movement can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp, a unique personality in the history of art who made life into art. His 1917 "Fountain"<sup>12</sup> conveyed the idea that art is nothing special, that it is not worthy of our adoration, and that we ought to have the same regard for all human activities, because only then can we escape from the cage we have constructed for ourselves.

One could say that conceptual art emphatically eliminates

the commercial and consumerist side of art, and that many artists have completely abandoned old styles of artistic creation in an effort to draw a wider audience. So the essence of conceptual art is its zeal for free experimentation and exploration. In concrete terms, a "good" work of conceptual art should successfully break through established artistic or cultural norms, and effectively transform fixed cultural values. So in conceptual art, the depth of the "concept" cannot be the deciding factor in the quality of the work, because what ultimately touches our senses is its unique and ineffable artistic language.

In Chinese contemporary art we see many works of so-called conceptual art that are merely simple graphic depictions of what the artists consider to be profound concepts, such as using industrial rubber gloves to represent cold detachment and rationality, human skeletons and black cloth to represent death, and herbal infusions to represent healing. This simple metaphorical method seems profound, but is actually ridiculous and ignorant.

The "notionalist" creative style is even more of a mockery of the free experimentation and exploration advocated by conceptual art. In works of notionalist art, "concept" becomes a calculus devoid of intelligence and imagination, a technique for toadying to the market and its consumers. When conceptual art is distorted into such a devious scheme, it deserves the criticism Duchamp made of Neo-Dadaism: "When I discovered ready-mades, I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-



Gao Brothers — Sense of Space: Prayer

Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty."

**Gao Brothers:** Faced with the widely uneven quality of so many avant-garde works, how many genuinely experimental works do you reckon there are?

**Guan:** One assessment of Chinese contemporary art is that it is a "bazaar culture" manufactured in response to Western cultural colonialism, a product of the West's rapacious mentality following the Cold War. Another viewpoint elevates Chinese contemporary art to a cultural strategy that has already achieved a status of equality in its dialogue and exchange with Western culture, and holds that the unique understanding and knowledge of Chinese contemporary artists has enabled them to complement and challenge dead-end Western culture. To be honest, I'm sitting on the fence regarding this question. I'm not as cynical as those who subscribe to the "bazaar culture" theory, but neither am I as proud and optimistic as the second group.

Over the past century, under an intense assault from Western culture Chinese art has embarked on a modernist transformation, which has proven to be an arduous and slow process. The social, political, cultural and economic reforms of the 1980s have allowed China to genuinely merge into the most profound transformation in world history. The 85 Movement was an Enlightenment movement of intellectual liberation, as well as a modernist movement in which Chinese artists were once again learning from Western art. With the breakup of the Eastern Bloc and the end of the Cold War, the 1990s witnessed tremendous changes in international politics, economics and military affairs. As Chinese society entered a period characterized by a commodity economy driven by consumer culture, coupled with rapid economic growth and the steadily increasing openness of society, Chinese contemporary art entered a new stage of development.

Because a large number of Chinese artists appeared and performed on the international art stage and many people came to regard Chinese contemporary art as a new force to be reckoned with, works by Chinese artists living abroad, such as Cai Guoqiang, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping, Chen Zhen, Hou Hanru and Fei Dawei, effectively extended the influence of Chinese art. This is an indisputable fact. But it is also true that the development of Chinese contemporary art is still hampered by the twin pressures of ideological constraints and commercialism. Its scope for development remains very limited. The recent discussion about legalizing contemporary art, the debate about violent tendencies, and the prevalence of "corporatist conservatism," which encourages artists to behave as if they were members of an exclusive guild, all indicate that contemporary Chinese art has a long and difficult path ahead.

In a sense, however, we can also say that cultural creativity thrives under pressure. For example, the Daweixiang Work Team in Guangzhou, Gu Dexin, Wu Wenguang, Wang Jianwei, Zhu Qingsheng, Qiu Zhijie, Zhang Peili, Huang Yan, Jin Feng, the Gao Brothers, Song Dong, Chen Lingyang, Hai Bo and

Weng Fen are all artists with a marvelous creative spirit. In the past two decades, Chinese contemporary art has yielded a rich and dazzling bounty. As to which of these works are genuinely experimental: the answer to this question requires rigorous scholarship, and individual opinions differ. I'm afraid that we'll have to leave it to the next generation to carefully sort it all out and reach its own conclusions.

**Gao Brothers:** What do you make of the current state of art criticism? In what ways is it related to the creation of art?

**Guan:** In my opinion, art criticism is much more mature than it was ten years ago, and has begun to evolve into multiple, coexistent styles. Critics from the 1980s, such as Li Xianting, Wang Lin and Huang Zhuan, have earned respect through their consistent sensitivity and attentiveness to a variety of key questions. The new generation of critics, such as Pi Li, Qiu Zhijie, Zhu Qi, Huang Du, Wang Nanmin and Zhang Zhaohui, are full of energy and write fine essays. Other critics, notably Wen Pulin, Zhang Songren, Zhu Qingsheng, Wu Hong and Gu Zhenqing, have done important work and have advanced contemporary Chinese art from different perspectives. You might say that art criticism and Chinese contemporary art have cemented a mutually beneficial relationship, one that has been brought about by newly affirmed and recognized roles taken on by artists, critics and curators following a period of considerable confusion.

**Gao Brothers:** You were a visiting scholar at Peking University, so you should have some understanding of the current thinking in academia. In your opinion, is there a connection between the problems Chinese contemporary art is facing and those academia is grappling with?

**Guan:** Chinese contemporary artists began to experiment against the backdrop of China's intellectual liberalization in the 1980s. I would say that every academic debate and controversy potentially affects Chinese contemporary art. Since the 1990s, Chinese contemporary artists have all paid close attention to questions of language and meaning, body and gender, identity and ethnicity, center and periphery, the environment, colonialism, the Internet, globalization, public interest and legalization, liberalism and utopianism and so forth. These issues have also drawn the attention of academia as culture has entered the so-called post-modernist stage, and academic disciplines have been increasingly diversified, deconstructed and re-integrated. Contemporary art is likewise moving toward a new synthesis and reconstruction. As the boundaries between academic disciplines become increasingly blurred, contemporary art—which is highly sensitive to cultural issues—often acts as a weather vane for academic trends.

For example, since the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals and academics have engaged in a debate over so-called New Left thinking and liberalism, to a certain extent echoing and responding to international academic trends. After the end of the Cold War, liberalism confronted the fact that its ambition to provide the world with a unified agenda required resolving

its own contradictions, and it also faced challenges from Marxism, the New Left and multiculturalism. The concepts of race, gender, nation vs. state, multinational capital, mass media and globalization became global hot topics.

With China rapidly globalizing along with the rest of the world, these issues have naturally also become a focus for Chinese academics and artists. But on closer inspection, we find that the Chinese academic world currently faces a huge shortfall of intellectual resources. Both liberals and New Left intellectuals who raise the issue of intellectual resources inevitably use Western thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Hayek and John Rawls to back their arguments. The similarity to the way that Chinese contemporary art draws resources from Western contemporary art is striking. Of course, the debate between liberalism and the New Left is not entirely a Western question, because it has a definite relevance to China's intellectual culture. But I'm afraid it will take quite some time before Chinese intellectuals and contemporary artists make a genuine contribution to these questions of fundamental importance to human civilization.

**Gao Brothers:** What is your view of what some have referred to as "intellectualism"? Is intellectualism a necessary quality of avant-garde artists?

**Guan:** Regarding intellectualism in art, I'm reminded of Edward Said's remark that engaging in criticism and defending critical positions is of paramount importance in the life of an intellectual. It is the public duty of intellectuals to be nomads and outsiders, ever willing to speak the truth to those in power. To be honest, Said's definition of the intellectual is extremely idealistic. According to this definition, in the art circles and universities of present-day China, intellectuals are the last dinosaurs: an extinct species. Chinese contemporary art is currently exposed to multiple pressures from materialism, opportunism and the corporatist or cliquish conservatism I mentioned earlier. At this time we should emphasize artistic independence and critical thinking, neither of which absolves contemporary art of its public responsibility. Even less should artistic independence and critical perspectives be used as a justification for the elitist cultural hegemony of artists. If by "intellectualism" some people mean this sort of independent spirit, I would say that this is indeed a quality that a genuine artist ought to have. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer artists actually have this quality and ability. In his collection of essays, *Power, Politics and People*, C. Wright Mills wrote that modern means of communication engulf us in stereotyped views and received wisdom, but new experiences have the potential of exposing and shattering these stereotypes. Only a small minority of people, Wright argued, still have the capacity to resist and confront stereotyped views: independent artists and intellectuals are among them. It would therefore appear that genuinely independent artists and intellectuals with a critical spirit are comrades-in-arms.

**Gao Brothers:** What do you see as the cultural relevance of Chinese avant-garde art? What is the greatest problem it is facing?

**Guan:** This is a huge question, and seems to seek a prescription for the future of Chinese contemporary art. Simply put, thanks to Chinese contemporary art, the zeal for free experimentation and exploration may well turn out to be the driving force needed to create China's contemporary culture and to broaden the spiritual and intellectual life of the Chinese people. There is a Zen Buddhist story of an old monk who pushed the head of a young monk underwater several times and asked him how it felt. The young monk said, "Now I know how important air is for breathing." Taking a cue from this parable, I think that Chinese contemporary art is to the spiritual life of modern Chinese people what air is to breathing. This is the cultural relevance of Chinese contemporary art. The greatest question Chinese art is facing right now is the one I mentioned earlier, namely how to move toward openness and legality, and how to practice and communicate art in a free public sphere. This is a complex problem, and not one that can be solved in short order. Chinese contemporary art is developing in tandem with the very real transformation of Chinese society. This is an exciting cultural reality, which has real potential for creative, spiritual and intellectual growth, and for that reason we have reason to place our hope in the future development of Chinese contemporary art.

Translated by Paul Frank with Stacy Mosher

Translators' notes:

1. This is a translation of an article originally posted on the Web site of Chengyan Art: <http://www.wordart.com/cn/no14/document20.htm>.
2. The name of a literary movement in Germany in the 1760s that eventually came to denote a period of youthful exuberance and/or maladjustment.
3. Wang Guowei (1877-1927) was a man of letters, philosopher, and archeologist who wrote about German philosophy, Chinese theater and Han Dynasty documents found in Dunhuang. He committed suicide in 1927.
4. The Warring States period (479-221 BC), often referred to as the "hundred schools of thought," saw the rise of a remarkable proliferation of competing schools of thought propagated by itinerant masters, including Mencius and Xunzi, as well as the establishment of many of the governmental structures and cultural patterns that were to characterize Chinese civilization for two millennia.
5. A well-known martial arts novel by Louis Cha.
6. An artists' bar in Beijing.
7. The three goods are ethics, academic performance and physical fitness.
8. Nam June Paik is Korean-American video artist who is acknowledged as the originator of the genre and is informally known as "the pope of video."
9. The term *caisangzi*, to gather mulberry leaves, refers to a type of ci poem derived from a Tang-dynasty (618-907) style of melody.
10. The Gao brothers have used hugging in numerous performances, including their work *Utopia of Embrace of 20 Minutes*, for which they invited 150 volunteers who were strangers to each other to hug for 15 minutes in various settings, including the banks of the Yellow River.
11. The Chinese term is *dianzishuyi*, which does not have a ready translation and does not seem to be frequently used. It is possible that Guan is referring to "minimalism," but this term has different translations in Chinese, namely *jijianzhuyi*, *jishaozhuyi* or *jianyuezhuyi*.
12. The "fountain" was in fact a urinal.