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The Art of Contemporary China (World of Art)

Jiang Jiehong

A redefinition of contemporary Chinese art of the last forty years
in the context of unprecedented cultural, political and urban
transformation

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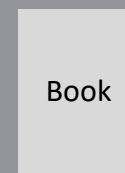
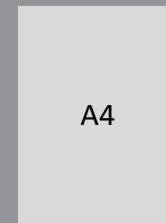
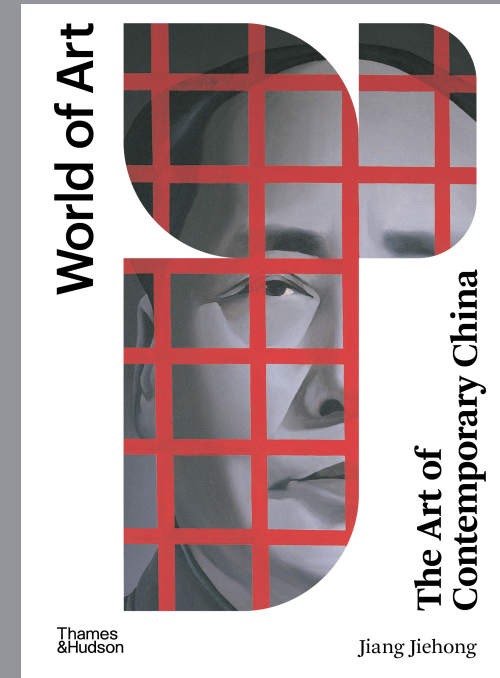
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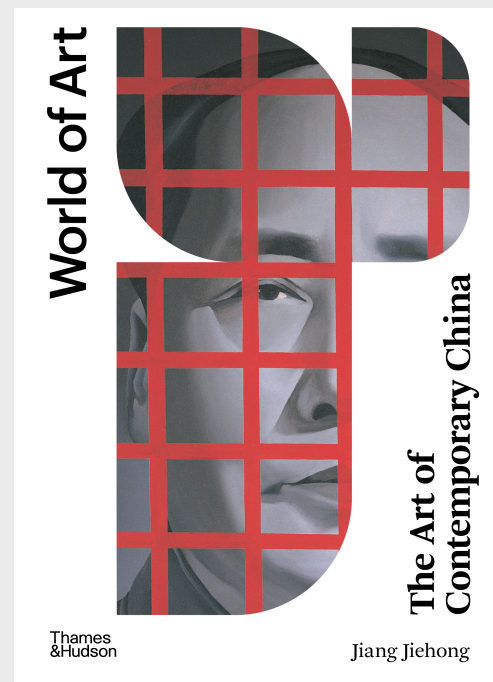
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Key Sales Points

- A concise but far-reaching survey of contemporary Chinese art that incorporates a critical examination of art and visual culture in contemporary China.
- Published to coincide with the increasing visibility and power of contemporary Chinese art in the international arena.
- Based on original research through first-hand materials and in-depth interviews with more than 30 artists in the last ten years.
- Featuring c.150 colour images of artwork by more than 50 important, internationally renowned Chinese artist.





of culture or a particular period of history. Sometimes Mao is avant-garde, but sometimes rather conservative.⁶ From the end of the 1980s, however, the artist began to re-portray Mao in a completely different way. Most of his early paintings are based on journalists' photographs of Mao published in the pictorials officially sanctioned by the state. All the images that were accessible to the public were positive, and historically and politically significant, celebrating Mao leading the country and his people on the way to the success of the People's Republic.

8 In Yu's series of *Mao and His People*, the leader is positioned in the centre with the gesture appropriated from the well-known photograph of the talks in Yan'an (see p. 000). Instead of the original patched trousers, however, his suit is patterned with flowers, and these are also dotted around the painting, which is turned into a fabric-like composition. Similarly, floating flowers

9 are applied to the 1991 work, *Talking with Hunan Peasants*, based on a 1950s photograph depicting Mao sitting graciously with a family of cheerfully admiring peasants – the men notably sitting, while the women stand – in his home town, Shaoshan, in Hunan Province. The floral patterns were the artist's own invention, inspired by the paper flowers used as so-called

8 OPPOSITE Yu Youhan, *Mao and His People*, 1995
9 BELOW Yu Youhan, *Talking with Hunan Peasants*, 1991





河南省公安厅警政干部学校师生合影纪念 一九九七年五月三十日河南省洛阳市



18 TOP Zhuang Hui, *The One and Thirty*, 1995–96

19 ABOVE Zhuang Hui, *Group Portraits: Luoyang Cadre Police Academy Students and Staff, Henan Province, May 13, 1997, 1997*

In 1997, Zhuang Hui negotiated with the authorities to organize group assemblies in the ‘Chinese way’ (typically, this would involve an invitation to a banquet, and the consumption of considerable amounts of Chinese liquor, to form a special ‘brotherhood’ with the authorities). Some large groups, including over six hundred people, were permitted to be convened and photographed, in one place at one time, through a technique involving a 180-degree rotational lens camera. In the photographs, the artist himself always appeared either at



51 Xiao Yu, *Thinking Too Much That...* No. 5, 2015 (video stills)



52 Zhao Zhao, *Lighter*, 2016

work, bamboo is not only subject, and not only material; it is also a readymade channel to imagine 'a shape of power'.⁴⁴

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Zhao Zhao chose jade from the 4,000-metre-high (over 13,000 ft) Kuntun Mountains to carve a real-size version of a cheap, mass-produced, everyday item – a lighter. This luxurious material, together with the long and painstaking work of exquisite craftsmanship, was therefore expended on a daily consumer product that can be manufactured in the blink of an eye or discarded at any minute. The work merely preserves the exterior appearance of the plastic lighter, and therefore is naturally devoid of the original item's functionality. It creates a strange relationship between material and object: one is to be fondled lovingly in the context of elegant traditional culture, while the other can be consumed in the daily life of our present time; the translucent and supreme quality of the stone has here assumed a cheap and low-grade shape.

to reciting poetry, or listening to music. Although music and poems may stimulate our visual imagination, they cannot provide the concrete boundaries for imagination, nor the visual references, that are the domain of hand scrolls. This kind of reading implies a process rich with visual expectation and visual memory. A hand scroll is to be perused, from left to right, in the same order as the visual narrative is produced. The reader thereby gains an experience of the artist's creative process, and is able to travel back and forth into an imaginative space. How do this particular medium and its aesthetic experiences inspire the artist's practice within a contemporary context? And how may the artist make use of this visual form to lead the viewer on a new journey across time and space?

In Hao Liang's view, the core of the transformation from the historical to the contemporary is to have a full understanding of the evolution of Chinese art as a whole. To him, tradition is not something to be concluded or distilled; it is everyday life, it is the way in which he understands the world. He does not have anxiety about tradition, and he believes in its vitality over time.⁶² In his large horizontal scroll *The Tale of Clouds*, he focuses on depicting spatial transformations between different times and scenes. Through his own imagination and understanding of tradition, Hao Liang continues to give shape to all manner of interrogations, deliberations, and compromises between the body and the world, as well as between past and future.

The proposition of literati art is poetic, and ink-wash (*shuimo*) is its language. The Taipei-based artist Wu Chi-Tsung still speaks the language of ink-wash, but he does not necessarily use ink-wash as his physical material. His acclaimed series, *Wire*, first appeared in 2003. The first version of the installation imitates the structure of a slide projector,

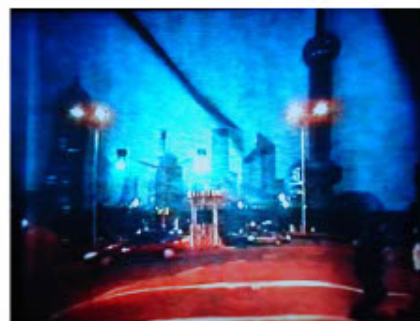
62 BELOW Hao Liang, *The Tale of Clouds*, 2013 (detail)

63 OPPOSITE ABOVE Wu Chi-Tsung, *Wire I*, 2003

64 OPPOSITE BELOW Wu Chi-Tsung, *Wire II*, 2003



with an additional imaging magnifier at the front, constantly moving back and forth to project the shadow of a piece of wire netting within a certain range of changing focal length. When the projector alters its focus onto different parts of the object, the shadow of the image evolves. In contrast, *Wire II* has a fixed lens, which projects a rotating spool of wire netting. Through the different mechanisms, the images become alternately blurred and focused, disappearing and reappearing, while the cold industrial material, in the form of wire netting, transforms into visions of humanistic scenery. As the artist has discussed, 'If *Wire I* is seen as the misty and heavenly atmosphere in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1129) landscape painting, then perhaps *Wire II* resembles the magnificent mountains and rivers in the Northern Song (960–1127) style.'⁶⁴ In later work in the series, sometimes a restructured projector, with a wire netting placed inside, revolves to project the shadow, or rather



80 OPPOSITE Song Dong, *Broken Mirror*, 1999 (video stills)

81 TOP Song Dong, *Crumpling Shanghai*, 2000 (video stills)

82 ABOVE Song Dong, *Eating the City*, 2003 (Installation view)

erected the refrigerator, full of Sinkian Beer (the local beer in Xinjiang), to operate for the next 24 hours. When night fell, the refrigerator was illuminated, shining like a beacon as soon as the doors were opened, embracing and navigating all desires.

The urban extension in China seems to be encouraging, in the sense of prosperity and progress being made, but at the same time, it is aggressive. It follows a political agenda. In the Taklamakan Project, the artist could easily have chosen to use one or more powerful industrial spotlights, whose full beam would have appeared more abstract and utopian, but a refrigerator was the choice. This is a symbol of the 'daily bread' manufactured by our commercial society. The refrigerator was transformed from being one of those home appliances, a storage unit functioned by electricity, to being a piece of weaponry, commanded by power; indeed, it became an ensign of the expansive force of urban life with its cultural and political agenda.

Wang Yuyang also uses everyday urban materials to extend his re-imagination of the natural world. In 2007, he made an *Artificial Moon*, which consisted of 10,000 energy-saving bulbs arrayed in a four-metre-diameter (13 ft) sphere. It became, as curator and academic Zhang Ga describes, 'an artefact of formidable brilliance, reacting and penetrating, that entertains no meditative serenity, no nostalgia of lost innocence, confers no apologies of nature foregone, and elicits no allegorical signification.'⁷ Rather than reflecting light, it is made as



113 OPPOSITE Zhao Zhao, *Project Taklamakan*, 2016 (detail of performance)

114 ABOVE Zhao Zhao, *Project Taklamakan*, 2016 (detail of performance)

115 OVERLEAF Zhao Zhao, *Project Taklamakan*, 2016 (detail of performance)

peeling the outer rubber, layer by layer, away from every single spring steel in the core. When the black rubber sheets and steel rods were separated out to form geometric shapes – or, in the artist's words, 'aestheticized, and ritualized'⁹ – the original function of the police batons was invalidated.

Ai Weiwei's *Study of Perspective* has been produced as an ongoing photographic series for many years. Throughout the series, viewers see the artist's left hand, with the middle finger raised at cultural landmarks and monuments, such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, as well as the world's most powerful political centres, including the White House in Washington, DC, the Reichstag in Berlin, the Red Square in Moscow and the Tiananmen Tower in Beijing. As Ai Weiwei discusses:

I grew up in a society where self-criticism was highly valued. Chairman Mao taught us that we should simultaneously conduct criticism and self-criticism, and therefore, I hold my critical view to look upon things around me at all times. Perhaps it is a very simple attitude, but it is my attitude as always, towards for example a cultural organization or a government; an individual or a power system. It could be absurd, insignificant, but it is presented as my personal standpoint.¹⁰

Neither the consistent middle finger of the artist, nor the changing background of the significant subjects from around the world, should be seen as the focal point of the image. Instead, it is the relationship between them; the tension created by the offensive gesture of an individual, a rebellious act, against political and cultural institutions.

In the late 1960s, China's public properties and cultural relics were attacked by the rebels, with numerous treasures destroyed. Records indicate that, by the end of the Cultural Revolution in Beijing alone, 4,922 of the 6,843 officially designated 'places of cultural or historical interest' had been demolished, by far the greatest number of them in August and September 1966.¹¹ During the high tide of iconoclasm, hardly any religious buildings – or their statues, frescoes and books – survived these disastrous months. Crying 'smash, burn, fry and scorch', Red Guards pillaged and destroyed countless Buddhist temples with their hundreds of years of history.

This spirit of criticism and rebellion can be revived to challenge cultural orthodoxy in any direction. In one of his most famous pieces, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, Ai Weiwei drops a 2,000-year-old ceremonial urn, letting it smash into pieces on the floor. The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) is widely acknowledged as being a defining period in the



125 TOP Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective: The White House*, 1995

126 ABOVE Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995



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30, 106
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life-long project. Most obviously, some political and cultural landmarks have become the choice to develop 'off-site' work: for instance, Tiananmen, not only as a popular icon in paintings (for instance, in the works of Wang Jinsong and Yue Minjun), photographs (Ai Weiwei, Shao Yinong and Jiang Zhi) and installations (Shen Shaomin and Yang Zhenzhong), but also as a symbolic site for performance. One night in January 1996, Song Dong laid down his body prone in the middle of Tiananmen Square, under severely cold conditions, minus 7 degrees Celsius (19°F). For forty minutes, he kept breathing onto the freezing concrete ground in order to gradually form a layer of ice. In comparison with the vast area of the square, the artist's tremendous effort made minimal impact, either spatially or temporally. It would disappear soon, leaving no physical trace. As Wu Hung has noted, the artist's desperate effort to inject life into that political space was intended to commemorate the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and the failed pro-democratic movement. Since then, the artist has continued to conduct performances in the square and to record these site-specific works in photographs and videos.³⁴ The Great Wall of China, too, lends its unique cultural significance to artistic discussions. In 1997, Zhan Wang executed his work *Fixing the Golden Tooth for the Great Wall* in Badaling, one of the most visited sections of the wall, northwest of the city of Beijing. Over the centuries, parts of the wall have become weathered, and some have fallen into ruin. In this work, the artist fixes the missing parapets in a section with hundreds of 'golden bricks'. These are hand-welded, with wafer-thin stainless-steel sheets replicating the exact dimensions of the original bricks. The work would lose much of its impact without the cultural and political significance of the Great Wall. In fact, this is not a 'restoration', but an 'innovation', in which the brick meets the gold, the old meets the new, the authentic meets the imitative, and the cultural meets the pecuniary. Cai Guo-Qiang's 1993 work, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, was realized across the barren ridges of the Gobi Desert, starting at the westernmost end of the Ming dynasty wall at Jiayuguan in Gansu Province. In this ambitious pyrotechnic display, the Great Wall, as one of China's most enduring cultural icons, is central to the piece,

134 OPPOSITE TOP Song Dong, *Breathing*, 1996 (detail of performance)

135 OPPOSITE CENTRE Zhan Wang, *Fixing the Golden Tooth for the Great Wall*, 2001 (detail of performance)

136 OPPOSITE BELOW Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, 1993