



# Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art

*Edited by*

MARY BITTNER WISEMAN & LIU YUEDI

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Subversive Strategies in  
Contemporary Chinese Art

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# Philosophy of History and Culture

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*Edited by*

Mary Bittner Wiseman  
Liu Yuedi



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*To Harvey Goldstein and Gui Qingkai*

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We must create a new roadmap for our entire tradition of thought. The first step is to take stock of our resources: we concede that Occidentalism is now a new tradition, but more importantly that revolutionary war and socialist life have become an even newer tradition. Now add to that the lingering traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and the dazzling new political and economic conditions of the day: From these four sources we must conceive a philosophy of life, a philosophy of politics, and a natural philosophy.

Qiu Zhijie, *Breaking Forecast: 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation Artists* (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 2009) p. 212.

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## VOLUME FOREWORD

Mary Wiseman's and Liu Yuedi's timely collection is a philosophical and cultural goldmine. It makes a significant contribution to the study of contemporary Chinese culture, its cross-cultural influences, and to the philosophical understanding of its meaning. Authored by both Chinese and Anglo-American philosophers and art historians, it is the first collection of its kind on the art of the Chinese avant-garde. It is a notable achievement. As such, this volume is a welcome addition to Brill's Series on the Philosophy of History and Culture.

Michael Krausz, Series Editor, *Philosophy of History and Culture*  
Bryn Mawr College, USA



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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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ABRAHAM KAPLAN (1918–1993), born the son of a rabbi in Odessa, Ukraine, was professor of philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles for almost 20 years and in 1978 moved to the University of Haifa in Israel. Best known for being the first philosopher to examine the behavioral sciences systematically in his book *The Conduct of Inquiry* (1964); his last book was *In Pursuit of Wisdom: the Scope of Philosophy* (1977). He traveled to India and Japan to study their culture and beliefs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mary Bittner Wiseman

A little more than three decades have gone by since Deng Xiaoping opened China's doors to the capital and culture of the west. In its wake have come changes not unlike those that occurred elsewhere in the world in the 1960s: the anti-establishment social turmoil in the United States and the moves that won independence for two thirds of the European colonies in Africa. The west bore witness to another revolution, a revolution in art, when modernism's insistence on art's divorce from the world and the lives of those who walk its stage was challenged. Postmodernism rejected modernism's conceit, which was not unlike Mao's, that it was the final act in the ordered march of art history and needed no longer to take directions from the past. The Chinese versions of the social and political changes of the 1960s are distinctive in that it was the People's Republic of China (PRC), not those disaffected with it, that initiated them, keeping apace with what the electronic and information revolutions have wrought, that is, globalization. The revolution in art, however, was decidedly not initiated by the PRC but by artists no longer moored in the Soviet style realism of the immediate past, no longer convinced that Maoism was the fulfillment of history.

With the classical tradition not ready at hand because it had been denounced, and many of its works destroyed, during the Cultural Revolution, artists in the new China began to ask themselves what art is and what objects or events are art. They began also to ask what it is to be Chinese in a China no longer revolutionary and in a world whose economy and art are become increasingly global. They used their art to work through these questions and became an avant-garde in the process, one that threatens to undermine our ideas about art and Chineseness. The American art critic Barbara Pollack got it right when she wrote in *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China* (Timezone 8, 2010) that:

It became clear from my trips to China that a lot of people were banking on the belief that this will be the place where the art movements of

the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be launched. I came to believe that some sort of future of the art world will undoubtedly take place in China, though it may look quite different from our current image of an art world or of anything Chinese. (20-21)

The job of art criticism and its older cousin, the philosophy of art, is to midwife the paradigm shift that is taking place in China in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Two virtues of this volume are that it is the first collection of articles by philosophers on the art of the Chinese avant-garde, and it is a collection by both Chinese and American philosophers and art historians. Of the fifteen authors, eleven are philosophers and four art historians, and eight are American and seven Chinese. Several conversations are going on at the same time, one between philosophy and art history and criticism and another between the Chinese and American thinkers. And between and behind their separate voices is always the new art, in whose service these articles are written. The United States' introduction to the Chinese art scene came in 1998 when *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* was exhibited in San Francisco and New York. It was followed by exhibitions such as *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (2004 – 2006); *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (2005 – 2006); and, in the United Kingdom, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (2007), in which there was no art made before 2000. The art had wider circulation abroad than it did in China and was recognized on the world stage before it was given a proper reception in its own land. Indeed, the first collector of contemporary Chinese art was a Swedish businessman, later Sweden's ambassador to China, Uli Sigg, who, in 1998, established the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards.

The subjects that come up in these conversations between denizens of the Chinese and western art worlds are those set both by tensions between the global and the local and by those between China's classical and revolutionary traditions, on the one hand, and modernism and postmodernism, on the other. The first is a matter of geography (here and there), the second, of history (now and then). Accordingly, the volume has two parts: Here and Now, and History and Geography.

### *Traditions and Modernisms*

China, in the face of the changes rung by its embrace of capitalism, is remapping its relation to the rest of the world and to both its recent

and imperial past whose customs, culture, habits, and ideas comprised the Four Olds whose destruction was one of the goals of the Cultural Revolution as Mao strove to free the People's Republic of China of the past. Although each era constructs the past in its own image and then either develops, criticizes, or transcends it, this has to be done in the face of material things that persist and the effects of time on the land and the plants and animals it supports. Of these one can hardly be free.

The material past is there in the *gunpowder* discovered around 850 CE (Tang Dynasty) and used by Cai Guo-Qiang for his paintings and explosion events. It is there too in the *incense* used in China in ancestor worship and Buddhist rituals at least since the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) and whose ashes Zhang Huan collects from a temple in Shanghai to use in his work. The recent past is present in the *bronze fragments* of Buddha statues smashed in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution and gathered up by Zhang to be turned into large statues of body parts, a foot, an arm, a head, and in the Ground Zero *dust* from the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 spread over the floor of a gallery in Cardiff, Wales by Xu Bing. In the dust was written a line from an early Zen poem: "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust collect itself?"

Current Chinese artists do not want to put the *material* past behind them, because matter, like gesture, has a stubborn truth. Gunpowder and incense carry with them the memory of their presence in ancient China: the pieces of bronze had been statues of Buddha, the ash is the residue of Buddhist temple offerings, and the dust, residue of the destruction of the Twin Towers. These materials carry their stories with them. Does the material significance of these artists' work show it to belong to postmodernism? Yes and no. Yes, insofar as their work refers outside itself as modernist work does not, and no, insofar as the art that came before it was Socialist Realism—which did refer to the people and their lives—not modernism. The Chinese artists' relation to their art historical past is more complex than that of western artists.

### *Interlude*

We will turn in a moment to the effects of globalization on the current art scene in China and questions it raises about wherein Chinese-ness lies. But look now at the title of this book, *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, and the image on the cover, *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains, No. 32*.

When I wrote the title article four years ago, the beliefs being subverted by the new art from China were somewhat different than they are now, so fast is the art scene changing. Then they were that the new social spaces were hospitable, the discourses of socialism and capitalism compatible, and western art theory adequate to the new Chinese art. The art showed its viewers the fragility of the beliefs as it conveyed some sense of *what it is like* to live through the changes taking place in China: the social worlds were unstable and the languages of an authoritarian government and free-wheeling capitalism hard to reconcile. By 2011, the scene has changed and the subversions are more likely to be of the idea that moral and ontological theories that prevailed in imperial China no longer speak to the present or that the revolutionary imperative to serve the people can no longer be heard. The sheer energy and imaginative power of the work being made by Chinese artists are subverting many of the ideas about art in terms of which critics, western and Chinese alike, tend to see the experimental art being made by Chinese artists now.

This brings us to the cover image, *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains*, No. 32 (2010, ash on linen, 160 cm x 250 cm) from an exhibition of thirty-seven tiger paintings at Pace Beijing in the summer of 2010. Mountains and rivers, stone and water, bone and blood, stillness and motion, silence and sound, the pairs have a place in the Chinese world view comparable to that of mind and body, culture and nature, same and other, and the like in western metaphysics. The south China tiger is the evolutionary antecedent of the eight species, three now extinct, of the world's tigers. In 1900 there were one hundred thousand tigers in the wild, now there are between five and six thousand. The Chinese tiger is the most rare; no more than thirty or forty are left. Zhang has saved thirty-seven of them on his canvases, saved them from the extinction that threatens because tiger parts are essential ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine. Like the lion in the west, the tiger in China is the king of animals: the three horizontal stripes that cross the vertical in the Chinese character for 'king' mimic the stripes on the tiger's back. Were the tiger free of predators he could return to the mountains of which he would, then, be king. In the painting we chose, bare branches of the winter trees mime the tiger's stripes and the tiger seems to be walking out of the canvas, on his way to mountains.

The painting alludes to the history and current plight of the tiger, to nature and its place in the Chinese worldview, and, thanks to the

incense ashes from which it is made, to Buddhist ritual. Chinese religion and philosophy are here. The thirty-seven paintings are Zhang's identification of himself, and us, with the tiger and a plea for its survival that is at the same time a plea for ours, a plea that we stop our predation of the natural world and instead live in harmony with it. Fully to do this is to revise the western view of nature as something to be controlled and of capital, the only nonliving thing that can reproduce itself, as that of which there can never be enough.

This is art addressing the world as directly as political tracts and advertisements do. The immediate address is a legacy of Mao, who insisted that art was to, for, and about the people. The difference is that the people whom this art addresses are, like Zhang Huan's tiger, free of the necessity to believe, do, read, and think only what the leaders of the People's Republic allow.

### *Global and Local*

Global no longer means western, if ever it did. The issue for the Chinese artists raised by the phenomenon of globalization is this: how Chinese is their art since much of it is genuinely international in being compatible with works in other cultures and readily engaged by viewers who belong to those cultures. The artists who were abroad for the last several decades, some left after the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, made work that was inevitably affected by their expatriation. As it became known and appreciated in the west, their art opened western eyes to the possibility of an art that did not follow the narrative line—however tangled the line might have become in its rejections and revisions of what went before—of western modernism. The 1998 appearance of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* came at a time when the art world in the west was ready for an art that invited its viewer to think and feel and dream, as the art being made in the west no longer did.

This volume comes at a time when the art philosophical and historical worlds are following the well-known expatriate artists Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, and Zhang Huan (two of whom have returned to China) and many, many others in reclaiming Chinese theories of art so that they, the theorists, can engage the new art and lay out its presuppositions and implications for an art-interested public. The book begins with my response to the work by Chinese artists shown in the west at the beginning of the new century and ends with my co-editor's



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