

IMBALANCED GROWTH

DEVELOPING BEIJING'S
CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE

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Kyle Chayka is a senior at Tufts University majoring in Art History and International Relations. He spent the 2008 fall semester studying Chinese intensively in Beijing. His work experience at two major international museums has contributed to his knowledge of the world of contemporary art. During June of 2009, he conducted research in Beijing, acting as his own guide and translator. His articles have appeared in GlobalPost, an international news agency, and in the *Sampan Asian American* newspaper in Boston.

Walking around Beijing's 798 District quickly takes on the cast of a surreal dream. The neighborhood of abandoned factories perches on the side of a highway behind a graffiti-covered brick wall, broken with a gate bearing its name in huge, neon-red letters. Chance encounters with Communist soldiers are common here, and it's no surprise to turn a corner only to confront a mutated figure locked in a cage, snarling out at passers-by through the bars. When the shock wears off, realization dawns that these visions are sculptures and that the 798 District, far from a classified government-testing site, is actually Beijing's largest neighborhood of art galleries, studios and event spaces.

On any given weekend, the sidewalks of 798 inevitably fill with strolling pedestrians hiding underneath sun umbrellas, picking their way across the expanses of galleries. It is not uncommon to see groups of tourists led by clipboard-carrying guides, directing attention to one or another of the brick buildings and pointing out notable outdoor sculptures. Contrary to what one might expect for a neighborhood home to the Chinese contemporary art community, 798 is not a well-kept secret. 798 is popular.

Over the past two decades, China's contemporary art community has undergone a dramatic change. From unknown to fashionable, selling prices have risen for Chinese artists. Chinese curators and art history scholars have come into

the international spotlight as never before, and Beijing has become an art world destination and a hotbed of popularity and talent.

In the nineties, none of this growth would have seemed possible, much less likely. From a collection of artists' studios, 798 has now become Beijing's third most popular tourist attraction, after the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.¹ Contemporary painters Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun and Zhang Xiaogang recently became the first living Chinese artists to sell works for over \$1 million; these artists' works have also attained multi-million dollar prices at Sotheby's and Christie's contemporary art auctions in 2007.² Art world tastemakers, like advertising magnate and collector Charles Saatchi, have also supported the rising generation of Chinese art stars: Saatchi in early 2009 mounted an exhibition of his personal collection of contemporary Chinese artists.³ In October 2009, Chinese artist Cao Fei was nominated for the international Hugo Boss contemporary artist prize for her new media work.⁴ Together, these details paint a rosy picture for the future of Chinese contemporary art.

Yet the hidden costs of internationalization of China's contemporary art community are often not examined. The rapid influx of money and fame has driven many Chinese artists to pursue only what is already commercially successful, neglecting independent development in what

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many see as a turn towards the market and away from artistic innovation. In the evolution from a local phenomenon to an established global community, Beijing's contemporary art scene has developed unevenly. Masked by money and renown, problems like lack of critical presence, shortage of gallery infrastructure and the loss of local identity in the face of international influence are now coming into the foreground.

Mid-summer Beijing covers the brick walls of the 798 District in a dusty haze. In the shade of the factory buildings, tourists take a break from their viewing and sip overpriced iced coffees. 798's streets are lined with storefronts in varying stages of completion, some being renovated, some under construction, and others already abandoned to the wind and leaves. An archetypical "sawtooth" factory building, in 'Originality Square' in the center of 798, houses international art spaces Faurschou and Pace, well-regarded galleries from Denmark and New York City, respectively. The real estate investment indicates confidence on the part of both galleries in the continued significance of Beijing's art scene. Both galleries work with international as well as Chinese artists. Opened only in August of 2008, Pace's inaugural exhibition in particular poised the gallery at the juncture of Chinese contemporary art and the greater art world. Named "Encounters," the show placed the most prominent of China's contemporary artists in the larger context of the global contemporary elite with artists such as Americans Jeff Koons and Alex Katz as well as Japanese wunderkind Takashi Murakami.

Other significant galleries in 798 have developed out of Beijing's own artistic community. The Long March Space, a gallery and project area, was founded as an outcome of the Long March Project, an ongoing curatorial effort and long-term performance piece initiated by Chinese artist-curator Lu Jie in 1999. The Long March Space and the Long March Project now share office and gallery space. The Long March Project's initial effort, "A Walking Visual Display," was a response to the historical narrative of the Long March undertaken by the then-rebel Communist army to escape destruction at the hands of the Nationalists in 1934. In twelve exhibitions at sites along the original Long March, Lu Jie and over 250 Chinese artists used contemporary art to examine Chinese history on its own terms from both a local and international perspective, inquiring into the politics of identity, space and memory.⁵

According to Zoe Butt, the Long March Project's Director of International Programming since June 2007, the Project's aim "has definitely expanded" since the beginning of "A Walking Visual Display." "I think that the Long March Project since 2003 [when the Long March Space opened in 798] has been a journey very much wanting to argue what is China to the international, and how do you bridge the gap between local and international."⁶ Poised to exhibit and act at an international level, the Long March Space and the Long March Project stay rooted in their Chinese origins and are actively engaged in defining Chinese artistic identity to the international art world. However, the path between local and international has proven difficult to navigate.

"From my perspective," Butt said, "meaningful relationships" between the Chinese contemporary art world and other international artistic communities "are few." For Butt,

the problem lies not in the lack of international exhibition opportunities for Chinese artists, but their lack of sustained cultural exchange and engagement with art communities outside of China. “There are of course many Chinese artists willing to more critically engage with an international platform,” she acknowledged, “but it’s a slow process. I think that the Chinese artists definitely are open to invitation when it comes to international interest, but it’s about being able to do projects where they can dictate what they want to do, and the suggestion of collaboration or contributing to another kind of idea is not wholly easy to get them convinced.”

Song Zhuang is a village two hours outside of central Beijing. When the long distance express reaches the village’s single station, it meets a main street with a few blocks of restaurants, stores and art galleries. What makes this village unique is the presence of so many galleries and museums, aftereffects of Song Zhuang’s colonization by Chinese artists over the past decade. The village population is over 30 percent artists; a statistic illustrated by the sight of enormous canvases stretched on the sidewalk and bikers with art supplies tucked under their arms. Beginning in the late nineties, Song Zhuang became a haven for Chinese artists, attracting residents from all over China. The village has gained a reputation for fostering artistic talent; some of China’s most famous artists still keep their studios there, including Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun.

Among the village’s artists is Lu Lin, who works out of a hangar-like studio there. The artist’s figure is dwarfed by the towering canvases around the open room: dramatic, mixed media works that mingle traditional Chinese painting formats with total abstraction and sweeps of bright color. It is clear from his studio that Lu does well with his art. “When people ask me what Chinese contemporary art is like,” the artist says, though, narrowing his eyes, “I say that China has no contemporary art.” “Why is that?” he asks, “It’s because Chinese contemporary art doesn’t represent China’s entire history and culture. It just conforms to Western expectations of what Chinese contemporary art should be like.”

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Lu is frustrated that so many contemporary Chinese artists follow an established, market-friendly style, a movement often called “cynical realism.” Cynical realism incorporates realist imagery, often including Communist propaganda, symbols and figures from China’s recent past, but perverts them with strange distortions, of colors and abstract painting techniques.

The drive towards commercial development and the lure of commercial success, according to Lu, have pushed Chinese artists to follow only what sells and not to develop independently. Though Lu still sells his works, business has largely turned from commercial galleries to selling privately from his studio. “The 798 galleries won’t show my work,” he says, “They think it’s too conservative, not ‘contemporary’ enough. I don’t think my work is ‘contemporary’ at all.” “Contemporary” is a heatedly debated term in the Chinese art world. The adjective itself, to artists like Lu Lin, represents the overly commercialized and westernized art that they [artists] feel makes up most of Chinese contemporary art produced in Beijing.

Fellow painter and Song Zhuang resident Gao Yang agrees with Lu’s critique of recent Chinese contemporary art. He feels that too many young Chinese artists are willing to copy already popular motifs in order to gain money or fame. “They all paint the same things,” he says in exasperation, “Tiananmen Square, Chairman Mao, the Cultural Revolution... there is no development, no independent thinking”... “What we need,” he adds, “is for young Chinese artists and young Western students to work together, to create something new. Right now that isn’t happening.”

The Chinese contemporary art community’s exposure to the international art world has brought with it attention, money and opportunity, but along with greater possibilities often come greater risks. Zhao Yi, a mixed-media artist also living in Song Zhuang, has had art exhibited in New York through international visitors to her studio. Yet the follow up response to these shows has been lackluster, as have been the exhibition and sale opportunities she has found within China. Her critique of Beijing’s contemporary art community does not have to do so much with the quality of work being made, but rather the quality of work being selected for exhibition. “Galleries are just playing to the market,” she says, “They only show artists whose work they know will sell easily. More challenging work gets ignored not because it’s bad, but because it won’t sell.” Zhao’s own work is atypical of the many artists living in Song Zhuang. Using fabricated boxes fronted with glass as containers, the artist creates sculptural compositions of fiber, thread, beads and spray-paint that draw from traditional Chinese watercolor painting as well as abstract expressionism and installation art.

Adding to the artist’s discontent with the Beijing art community is the fact that at 50, her work is often overshadowed by the work of younger, trendier artists. “The problem I have,” Zhao says, “is that Beijing’s gallery system doesn’t support mid-career artists. The only thing that matters is how fast the artist’s work will sell and how popular they might become.”



As is often the case in the international contemporary art world, youth is in fashion and is prized over talent at times. Every gallery is eager to discover that next great star, the next Zhang Xiaogang, just as record labels in the United States search for the next Bob Dylan. The vogue for youth comes at the expense of artists like Zhao Yi, who, failing to catch on in the art world at first blush, must try and work their way back into lower level gallery exhibitions. Zhao Yi now invests most of her own money back into producing new pieces that are much less likely to sell than they would have been two years ago.

This inequality reflects another imbalance of Beijing's contemporary art economy. The lack of support for mid-career artists stems not only from the greater commercial appeal of youth but also from the lack of gallery infrastructure. Because Beijing's contemporary art community has established itself only recently, there has been little opportunity to develop a comprehensive gallery system. With the little investment money available and the paucity of local demand for Chinese contemporary art, it is difficult for galleries focusing on more expensive mid-career artists to succeed, unless the gallery is part of an international brand.

Representing mid-career artists requires a gallery to have a unique combination of skills and resources. Their work is priced higher than that of young emerging artists, forcing galleries to work with higher sales figures but with a margin of fewer sales. Similarly, established artists may expect their galleries to foot the bill for the production of new works, requiring further investment on the part of gallery owners without immediate return. These factors make representing mid-career artists more difficult and more dangerous than investing less to look for the next big thing, particularly for galleries working on little capital and few sales.

Despite the fact that Beijing's contemporary art community has gained tremendously and grown enormously from exposure to international attention, this expansion cannot be taken purely at face value. The speed of growth has opened an opportunity for entrenched imbalances, including the emphasis of market popularity over talent due in part to economic pressure on galleries. There is a disconnection, as Zoe Butt referenced above, between the "local" Chinese contemporary art community and the international art world, with its myriad of locales and identities. Furthermore, some artists feel disenfranchised by this focus on the market and the politics of being a "Chinese" contemporary artist while participating in the international art world. As Gao Yang suggests above, what is needed is a deeper interconnection between Western international influences and the local contemporary art community in Beijing. Through this cooperation and keeping at heart the goals of nurturing artists and the artistic community, producing challenging contemporary art, and improving the possibilities open to Chinese artists, Beijing's contemporary art community will gain transparency, stability and credibility.

Notes

¹ We Make Money, Not Art. "The 798 Art District, Take Two," posted August 18, 2008. <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/08/-the-new-golden-brick.php>

² ArtZine China. Christie's Auction Sale Results. http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid384_en.html

³ Art Observed. "With a sweeping survey of Chinese contemporary art, Charles Saatchi opens much anticipated new gallery in Duke of York headquarters building, Chelsea, London," posted October 8, 2008. <http://artobserved.com/with-a-sweeping-survey-of-chinese-contemporary-art-charles-saatchi-opens-much-anticipated-new-gallery-in-duke-of-york-headquarters-building-chelsea-london/>

⁴ Vogel, Carol. "Finalists Announced for 2010 Hugo Boss Prize," October 8, 2009, *New York Times*, Art section.

⁵ The Long March Space. Long March Project section. <http://www.longmarchspace.com/english/e-project.htm>

⁶ All proceeding interviews conducted and translated personally in Beijing during May-June 2009.