



Culture
Communication
Contemporary
China

Cover Story

Interviews

Fragments

History

New Horizons : Art Presence in China

GENERAL EDITOR: Guo Huimin





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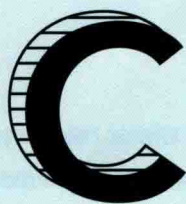
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Preface

New Horizons: Art Presence in China

C Book is a publication in the English language, in the form of serial books, whose purpose is to provide international readers with glimpses into contemporary China as it is. The letter "C" represents a number of crucial concepts, such as China, culture, critical, community, communication, creative, contemporary, change, challenge, cooperation, competition, etc. Those concepts constitute issues that will be examined in this book and the perspectives from which those issues will be examined. Essentially, this book is about cultural communication and about contemporary China.

It is our belief that important changes are taking place in the present-day China and it is imperative that we share our knowledge about those changes with our international readers. The authors who contribute to C Book are observers with keen insights into the Chinese society and with intimate knowledge in international relations. They examine China from within, but always with a strong international awareness and a keen sense of effective cross-cultural communication. The book seeks to be disinterested, de-politicalized and non-ideological. This detached interest solely in communicating the Chinese culture as it is will make it easier for this publication to resonate with its international readers.

Undoubtedly, China presents a kaleidoscopic variety of exciting changes

and only a panoramic view of China can do justice to this vibrant diversity. However, C Book expects to confine itself to more moderate objectives in order to achieve depths in its coverages. Two issues will be published annually, each issue focusing on one particular theme or topic and recounting stories about people, organizations or events as they unfold right at this moment. The book will introduce and explore the present-day social and cultural developments of China, featuring such topics as urban development, cultural inheritance, lifestyle, art and literature, music and film, media and sports, fashion and design, cuisine and crafts, architecture and decoration, etc. Leading figures in the country's cultural circles, along with their unique thoughts, achievements, and contributions, will be the among the authors of our original stories.

This first issue of C Book sets to explore the mode of art presence in contemporary China. Prior to the 1990's, art museums in China were almost exclusively public, and run by the state. However, since the mid-1990's, amidst the country's booming economy and increasing demand for diverse artistic expressions, private or non-state-run museums have begun to be established, whose number has now totaled approximately 400. This crucial transformation in the art world profoundly reflects the pattern of China's economic development over the past few decades. Before the Reform and Opening Up in the early 1980's, China strictly implemented the planned economy. Yet, since the 1980's, with the ushering in of the market economy, China has unleashed a dynamic and unprecedented economic growth. What really injects vitality into China's market economy is the sustained proliferation of private enterprises which now co-exist with state-owned enterprises to form a unique paradigm of mixed economy.

This coexistence between the public sector and the private sector is an unmistakable sign of China's social progress. However, the relationship between art and the official ideology has always been very subtle in China. Therefore, in trying to understand the development of contemporary art in China, we have to take into account several key issues. What are the implications of this burgeoning of the private museums? How are the private

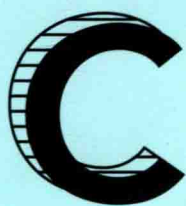
museums impacting contemporary art landscape in China? Can they operate in benign interaction with government-managed art institutions?

The cover story in this issue is entitled "To be Public or to be Private: A Pioneering NGO Solution to Contemporary Art in China". It explores the birth and development of Today Art Museum (TAM), China's first private art museum, registered as an NGO. The opportunities and challenges that it faces in China's unique social and political environment can typify those faced by other private museums. Apart from the cover story, the book has included a series of interviews that were conducted with practicing artists, curators, government officials and directors of state-run museums. Those interviews provide first-hand information about how private and public museums, with their different modes of artistic presence, can coexist and complement each other. In addition, we can learn how practicing artists respond to the way private museums are managed.

In her 1946 book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, the American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict made this classic observation: "One of the handicaps of the twentieth century is that we still have the vaguest and most biased notions, not only of what makes Japan a nation of Japanese, but of what makes the United States a nation of Americans, France a nation of Frenchmen, and Russia a nation of Russians. Lacking this knowledge, each country misunderstands the other." Even as we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the handicap diagnosed by Ruth Benedict remains as deeply-entrenched as ever. But the age of globalization calls for dialogues and consensus building to break up the barriers of cultural misunderstanding. C Book, whose mission is to tell true stories about China, expects to contribute to the consensus building between China and the international community through its commitment to people-to-people communication.

C Book is launched by the English Writing Centre, an organization of cultural exchanges affiliated to the School of Foreign Studies, University of International Relations. ©

by Guo Huimin



Cover Story

by Qian Kunqiang

To be Public or to be Private?

— A Pioneering NGO Solution
to Contemporary Art in China

Until the 1990's, art museums in China were almost exclusively public, that is, they were run by the state. However, since mid-1990's, amidst the country's booming economy and increasing demand for diverse forms of art, especially contemporary art, private museums began to be established, blazing new trails in promoting the development of contemporary Chinese art. Operating primarily as non-government organizations (NGOs), they constitute a healthy alternative to the state-run public museums, less fettered by ideological confines and better geared to the tastes of the public. Today Art Museum, the first and one of the most successful NGO art museums in China, is already making its influence felt not only domestically but also internationally with many of its pioneering concepts and practices of making contemporary art accessible to a rapidly growing audience. ©

Part-1:

Introduction

Evening, half past six, Beijing. With the limelight showering all over her, Dadawa stands solemn and motionless in the center of the vast hall enveloped in dim light and utter quietude, holding a thick wooden stick in her hands and facing a lavishly adorned Buddhist copper bell in deep meditation. With the first beating of the bell, the entire space becomes alive with



▲ The Second Documents Exhibition of TAM

sounds, including the sound samples that the artist collected in Tibet and other ethnicities across China. In the darkened background, 70 volunteers, both as performers and as audiences, all dressed in black, clap their hands against the surface of water in a pool and the excited ripples thus produced are projected, via video, onto the surrounding blank walls in confusing undulations of light waves. In her deep, magnetizing low voice, Dadawa chants a refrain which, when joined by the volunteers, turns into an improvisational monosyllabic chorus of primordial simplicity. Throughout the evening, the chimes of the bell, the ripples shining like light waves, the sound of dripping water, the chanting of human voices, and the barely audible breathing and heartbeat of the audience, all combine to create "an architecture of sounds" in an utterly unconventional transboundary exhibition *"Sense of Hearing: Dadawa's Participative Sound Field."*

"Absolutely stunning!" one critic wrote the next morning. "The sounds are soulful and hauntingly purifying, coming from the

remote origins of life." Another one wrote, "...an experiment of sounds, the co-existence of installation and sound effects, and the juxtaposition of the tangible and the intangible, dedicated to exploring the infinite possibilities of the art of sounds. Through this unique event, Dadawa becomes China's first transboundary artist of music, design, auditory and visual languages."

Dadawa, whose Chinese name is Zhu Zheqing, is a major Chinese musical artist of international stature, an independent producer and a representative of New Music, whose album *Sister Drum* sold 3 million copies worldwide in 56 countries. The name Dadawa itself (in Tibetan language meaning the "moon," but it also contains the French word "Dada" associated with the European modernist art movement Dadaism) is a symbol of avant-garde modernity and of the fusion between Oriental and Western artistic impulses. Recent years have seen Dadawa transforming from a singer of nature to the preserver of folk music, ethnic auditory records and even crafts on the

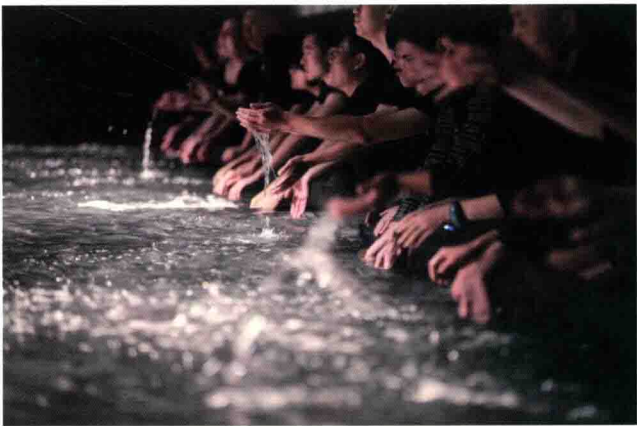
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▲ At Dadawa's "Sense of Hearing" transboundary sound-field exhibition, volunteers line up against the wall, whose chanting produces sound waves converted into light waves projected onto the wall.

► Volunteers clap their hands against water to produce the sounds of nature that stimulate the sense of hearing.



verge of extinction. With the fruition of her painstaking efforts over the years, she wanted to put on an open, free, boundless, experimental, dynamic and somewhat occult exhibition of the art of sounds. Dadawa believed that Today Art Museum, located in the stylish Pingod Community in Beijing's central business district, is the optimum locality for her transboundary epic event. The appeal of an avant-garde artist and an equally avant-garde museum of contemporary art were sufficient to draw throngs of audience since the first day of the exhibition—September 15, 2014.

And there is definitely no mistake about that. From the very outset, Today Art Museum was conceived to become an art institution on a par with its leading western counterparts. In choosing its site, Today Art Museum followed the footprints of art museums and galleries in Ruhr Industrial Base in Germany and in SOHO and Bushwick in New York, where total industrial landscapes were turned into studios and galleries and museums of contemporary art. Converted from the huge boiler house of the

former Beijing Beer Brewery through an urban renovation project, Today Art Museum aims to preserve the "real-time history" and to create a new pattern of "ecological relationships" among art, environment, and human community. Like its German and American counterparts, Today Art Museum hopes to inject vitality into man's bankrupt industrial activity through contemporary art. In this sense, art is an incarnation of rebirth.

However, whereas private art museums have been operating in a mature fashion in the West, they are a fairly recent development in China. With the country's economic development spanning for just three decades, the development of contemporary art has an even more brief history, of only two decades, and private art museums ready to accommodate experimental and avant-garde contemporary art are extremely limited in number. Among this limited number of private art institutions, Today Art Museum is the first of its kind, not only operating most successfully among its Chinese peers but also rapidly catching up with its

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To be Public or to be Private?



western counterparts. In view of the particular historical, political, and social circumstances of the modern-day China, this is indeed an incredible achievement in itself.

Registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China as the country's first NGO art museum in 2002, Today Art Museum has come a long way in becoming what it is. It has nurtured a large number of talented contemporary Chinese artists whose growth has been made possible in a non-governmental, de-politicized and non-ideological context and who have succeeded in earning a name for themselves both domestically and internationally. Operating

in accordance with cutting-edge international standards, the Museum has become a meeting ground for domestic and international artists to communicate and interact, and to grow through clashes of ideas. As an NGO, toward which the Chinese government maintains a guarded optimism, the Museum must have faced special challenges. As we explore in the following pages how China's Art NGO 001 has survived and thrived, many intriguing stories will unfold. ©

▲ "Translating China", Solo Exhibition of Jannis Kounellis

Part-2:

An NGO with a Passion

There is always a *raison d'être* behind all that exists.

The *raison d'être* for Today Art Museum is insinuated to a careful observer as he seeks entrance to the Museum. From the northern square, a visitor can catch sight of the main entrance but he is hard put to in gaining access to it because, instead of the usual flight of steps, he has to cover a long and gentle Z-shaped slope. Walking along the zig-zag trail gives one an unusual experience of making a difficult ascent, with a strong sense of a ritual, meditating with every step toward the entrance. It is a quest that psychologically prepares one for the ensuing artistic pilgrimage.

Art is sacred, special, and indispensable to life. This is not only the message that Today Art Museum wants its audience to incorporate as part of the viewing experience but also the very doctrine that underlay the creation of the museum itself in 2002. In the Museum's history, three persons have produced their defining impact on its course of development, with their passion for art and their relentless

efforts to make Today Art Museum China's No. 1 private art museum, comparable to its best international counterparts.

Zhang Baoquan, a real-estates tycoon who founded the museum, started his legendary career as a village carpenter in the late 1970's, earning less than half a dollar a day with his unrivaled expertise. Then he joined the army where he had sufficient time to bring his juvenile literary talents into full play by writing many stories. In 1984, during the war with Vietnam, he served as a war correspondent. In 1987, the last year he was in the army, he produced his maiden film, assuming versatile roles as script writer, director, producer, lyrics writer and composer.

The next year, retiring from the army, he worked temporarily at a local TV station. Those experiences qualified him for studying film directing at Beijing Film Academy. By the time he graduated, on learning that to produce a film would cost a staggering amount of 50,000 RMB, he decided to enter business to earn that sum of money just sufficient for producing a film. So

he created his real-estates firm called Antaeus Group. That happened in 1992. But once in the business world, there was no turning back. After more than two decades, the Group has grown into a major conglomeration featuring real estates, holiday and hotel industry, digital cinema chains and contemporary Chinese art.

Although a failed literary master and a failed film director, Zhang has always kept his literary and artistic impulses alive in him. All the real-estates projects developed by Antaeus Group boast a distinctive artistic atmosphere. With his astute business intuition, he believed that as Beijing residents' average GDP reached 12,000 US dollars per capita, there would be huge demands for contemporary art. In creating Today Art Museum, he became a leading art patron in China, donating the entire museum complex consisting of 40,000 square meters and thus putting the museum on a firm financial footing (exempting the otherwise annual rent worth around 60 million RMB). By granting the museum the status of an autonomous entity rather than an affiliation to Antaeus Group,