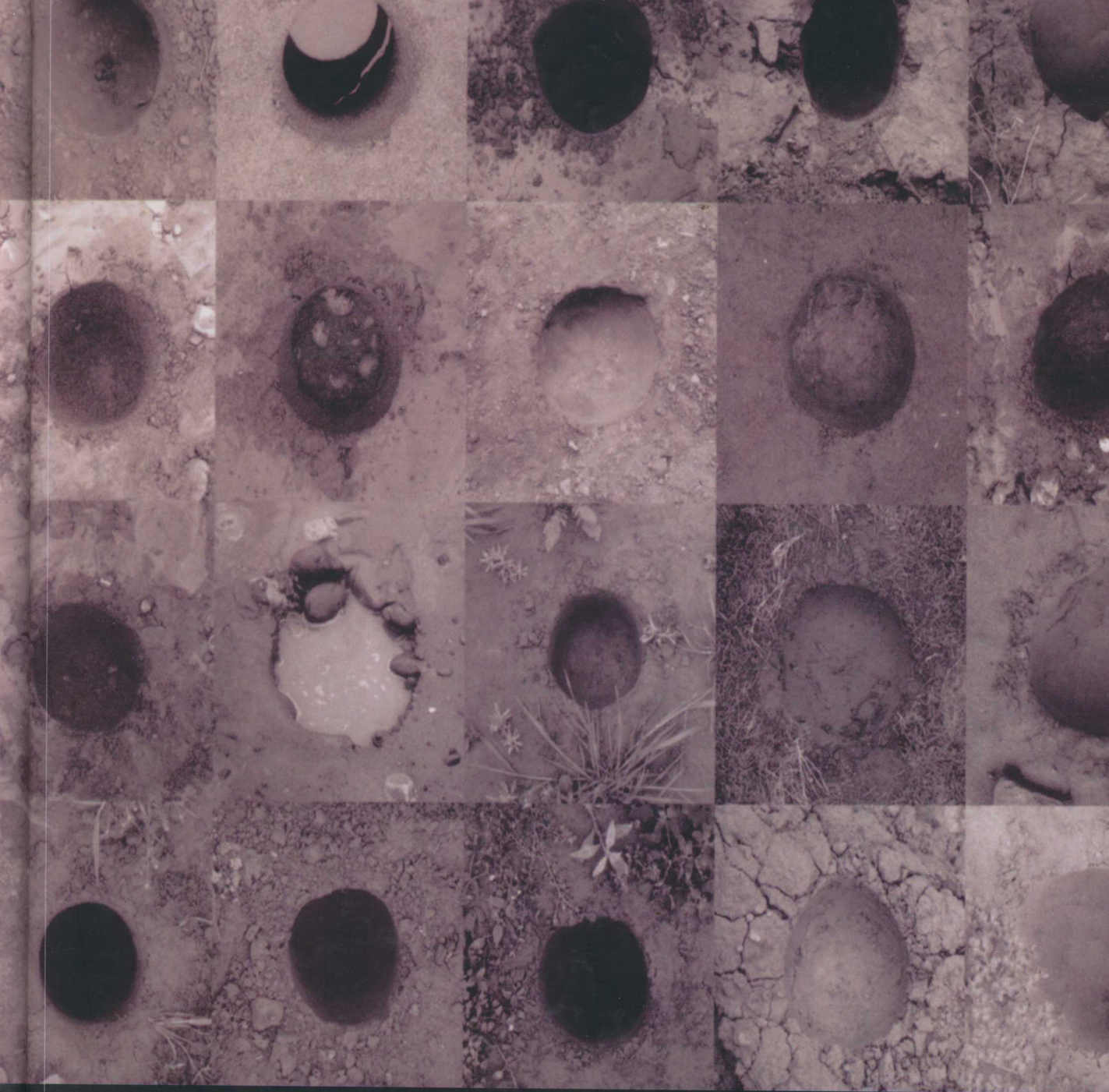

Wu Hung on

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ARTISTS

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Published by Timezone 8 Limited.
E-mail: info@timezone8.com
www.timezone8.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wu, Hung.
Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists / Wu Hung.
p. c.m.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-988-18034-3-6
1. Art, Chinese—Modern. 2. Art criticism—History—20th Century. 3. Avant-garde–(Aesthetics)—History—20th Century. 4. Art, Modern—20th Century.

First edition 2009

Layout editor: Michelle Woo

Cover Credits: Zhuang Hui, *Longitude 109.88 E and Latitude 31.09 N* (detail), 1995, black and white photographs.

Back Cover Credits: Song Dong and Zhao Xiangyuan, *Waste Not*, installation, 2008, House of World Cultures, Berlin.

Printed and bound in China.

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READING MU XIN: AN EXILE WITHOUT A PAST

(2001)

Among contemporary Chinese artists Mu Xin is special on two accounts. First, he is arguably the most learned in both Chinese and Western literature and philosophy, and he fuses this knowledge with his writing and painting with equal mastery (figs. 1-4). In this regard he can be compared with Gao Xingjian, the most recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who is also a dedicated painter. But in my view Mu Xin surpasses Gao in terms of both the stylistic subtlety of his painting and the thematic richness of his writing.

Second, Mu Xin is the most elusive writer and painter I know. I call him elusive not simply because he has remained virtually unknown in China, where he spent his first fifty-five years, or because he has continued to lead the life of a recluse during his past nineteen years in America. Nor is he elusive (though this is not entirely irrelevant) merely because he has assumed a long line of pseudonyms (Mu Xin being the most recent one) and few people even know his real name, Sun Pu.[1] Rather, he has perfected an aesthetics of invisibility that crystallizes his existence

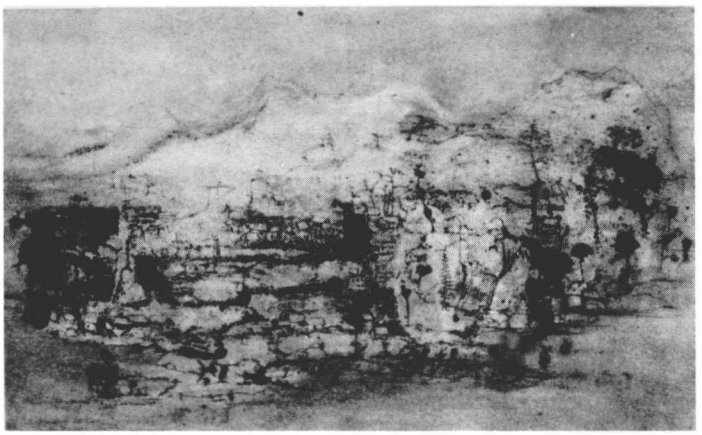

FIG. 1: MU XIN, *Reminiscences of Wang Chuan*, 1977-1979, INK AND GOUACHE ON PAPER, COLLECTION OF THE ROSENKRANZ FOUNDATION, NEW YORK.

FIG. 2: MU XIN, *Moonlight at Pudong*, INK AND GOUACHE ON PAPER, THE ROSENKRANZ FOUNDATION, NEW YORK, 1977-1979.

FIG. 3: MU XIN, *Lofty Residence of Wei and Jin*, INK AND GOUACHE ON PAPER, THE ROSENKRANZ FOUNDATION, NEW YORK, 1977-1979.

as a writer and painter. In this aesthetics, his personal experiences are meaningless unless they are transformed into artistic experiences, and his artistic experiences cannot excel unless they transcend any conventional historical or biographical framework. His books and drawings are everything about himself that he wants to show to the outside world, but these works conceal, not reveal, his historical specificity.

After he left China in 1982, Mu Xin began to publish his writings for the first time. His essays and short stories suddenly flooded Taiwan's literary journals and newspapers, and his readers felt that they were encountering a literary genius out of nowhere. Thus when the Taipei magazine Unitas (*Lianhe wenxue*) interviewed him in 1984, the interviewer started the conversation with a question that was on everyone's mind: "Who are you? Who is Mu Xin?" The question failed to provoke an autobiographical account, however, as Mu Xin responded quietly by quoting Flaubert, "Reveal art; conceal the artist." Answering another question about his favorite writers, he said that instead of having a "personal love" for individual authors he had only a "universal love" for literature.[2]

This attitude is consistent with his own literary work, in which he denies affiliations to recognizable schools and styles, but freely associates himself with numerous literary figures in both the East and the West. He rarely, if at all, writes about his imprisonment in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and his exile afterwards—not because he is disinterested in the past, but because the kind of past he is interested in always bypasses those recent, painful, and personal moments. So instead of describing his suffering in an abandoned underground air-raid shelter flooded with dirty water, his favorite topics include his fictional journeys to ancient metropolises and exotic lands, as well as his imaginary conversations with, among others, Petronius of ancient Rome, Yu Liang and Xiang Xiu of medieval China, and Tolstoy of nineteenth-century Russia. He recounts these conversations with the conviction of a prophet or spirit-medium. His vision of him-

self is therefore necessarily ahistorical but highly individualistic—a man unrestricted to any particular time and place, but rather who only belongs to an abstract humankind of an eternal present.

In this way, Mu Xin also denies a historical analysis of himself: What is the point of analysis that casts him in a position he is determined to escape? Here I am not suggesting that he and his work should not be studied historically; what I am suggesting is that such treatment only reflects the historian's point of view, not Mu Xin's. Of course he can be identified as a quintessential "exile writer-artist," whose every essay or painting attests to his self-contained marginality. Of course he carries on the ancient Chinese tradition of "remnant subjects" of fallen dynasties (*yimin*), whose brushes were the only tools with which to make their uprooted lives meaningful. There is no doubt that we can learn much about Mu Xin by associating him with these large historical patterns and categories, but at the same time we run the risk of alienating the artist and his art, because such contextualization and historicization inevitably destroys his carefully constructed fictionality about himself, and cancels the kind of delicate ambiguity that animates his work. Contrary to a historian's penchant for reconstructing the bygone past, Mu Xin's writing and painting always purposefully decontextualize him and transcend reality.

A discussion of Mu Xin (or any writer or artist like him) must therefore pose a methodological problem: Should this discussion demystify his ahistorical self-image and subject him to historical probing, or should it instead retain this self-image and focus on the construction of its interiority? I once tried the first strategy, but eventually gave it up.[3] This essay follows the second direction, of exploring Mu Xin's literary and artistic persona. In other words, my goal is not to distinguish fact from fiction in his life or to uncover the "real" Mu Xin. Rather, I take whatever he says and writes about himself to be real, because these are all components of a self that he has invented for himself and for his readers; my task is to trace the thread that connects these fragmentary components into an imaginary whole.

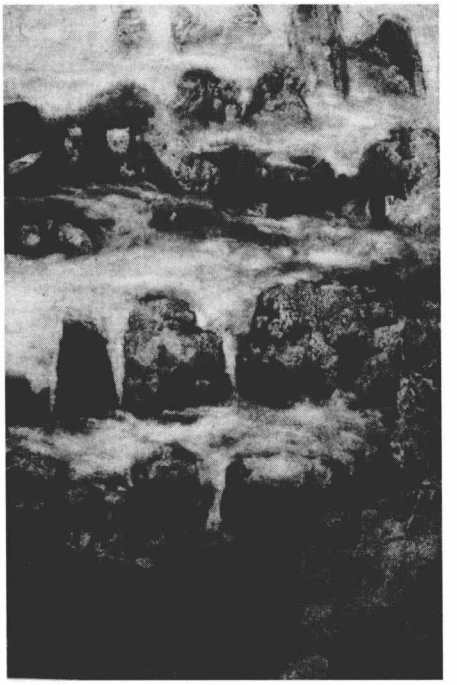

FIG. 4: MU XIN, *Wisps of Auspicious Clouds*, INK AND GOUACHE ON PAPER, THE ROSENKRANZ FOUNDATION, NEW YORK, 1977-1979.

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A central theme in Mu Xin's occasional reminiscences on his past is the repeated loss of a great literary corpus. Whether taking the shape of a private library or a multi-volume manuscript, such a corpus stands for his self-identity as an author, and hence its destruction poses the danger of losing this identity at a particular moment in his life. Also, according to Mu Xin, he has never tried to re-claim or reconstruct a lost corpus in its original form, but has only ventured to create a new one to take its place. The significance of these cyclical losses and re-creations is not difficult to grasp—they constitute a narrative of a series of deaths and rebirths that Mu Xin has experienced in his capacity as a writer.

This constructed narrative starts from a definable point: a long lost library that Mu Xin fre-

quented when he was a boy. The sacred site of his initiation into the art of literature, this library occupies the central stage in one of his rare memoirs, entitled "The Reading Spot under a Pagoda" (*Taxia dushuchu*).[4] The "pagoda" referred to was a historical relic in Mu Xin's home village of Wuzhen, located not far from the scenic city Hangzhou in south-east China. A local legend relates that under this pagoda, Prince Zhaoming of the Liang dynasty compiled his massive anthology *Selections of Refined Writings* (*Wen xuan*) in the early sixth century, presumably in the Buddhist monastery that the pagoda formed a part of. One and a half millennia later the pagoda had fallen into ruin and no trace of the monastery could be found. In the 1930s and 1940s, the most illustrious literary figure in Wuzhen was Shen Yanbing, better known by his pseudonym, Mao Dun. A celebrated modern Chinese novelist and playwright, Mao Dun was a distant relative of Mu Xin on his mother's side. During the Sino-Japanese War, Wuzhen was occupied by Japanese troops and Mao Dun stayed away from home, entrusting the family's compound to an old friend, Mr. Huang. It was then that Mu Xin discovered the library:

> The Shen family mansion was an old and ordinary looking house. With only one level, the front hall was dark and gloomy. The floor was paved with thick bricks, and the long and narrow windows were set in carved wooden frames. Passing the front hall, however, the space suddenly became spacious and bright, as I entered an open and comfortable Western-style room, painted entirely light gray. This was the "Mao Dun Library," as I have come to call it, but Mao Dun himself probably never promoted it as such. It housed an exceedingly rich collection of books. This place became my secret haven when I was a teenager living in an isolated and remote village. There I enjoyed reading all of the masterpieces of world literature, when war and chaos ruled outside. [5]

Mu Xin found a precious intimacy with literature in this place: as the library's only user he saw himself as its de facto owner. In the memoir he describes how he went through the books systematically, starting from classical Western philosophy and literature and gradually moving down to twentieth-century Chinese novels and plays. He found volumes autographed by Gorky and Babisai, gifts that these authors had presented to Mao Dun. He also discovered Mao Dun's own handwritten comments on many traditional Chinese texts, and for this reason read these texts again. Gradually, he acquired an interest in a book's physical form as well, comparing different versions and repairing torn pages whenever he found them. Unknowingly, without formal initiation he had grown into a book connoisseur. After the war, Mu Xin left Wuzhen to study painting in Shanghai. He bade farewell to the library and never saw it again. The memoir ends with a lamentation: the library was later destroyed, and all the books he read and repaired vanished without a trace.

But to Mu Xin, these books had become part of himself; he had internalized the library. The consequence of this experience was fundamental to him: he could never depart from his self-perception as a man of letters. Not coincidentally, in another place he dates the beginning of his literary career to 1941, when he was fourteen—the year he started to compose Western-style poems in secret after laboring over his daily homework of traditional-style writing.[6] It was during this time he was feverishly reading the library's holdings, including much Western-style poetry.

Of course, Mu Xin went on to read many more books after leaving Wuzhen, but the lost "Mao Dun Library" retained a special significance that was only revealed by later holocausts of his own literary work. Mu Xin's first piece of serious writing was a book-length treatise entitled *A General Discourse on "Hamlet"* (*Hanmulaite fanlun*), which he completed in 1949, when he was twenty-two. This treatise, as well as the numerous essays, novels, short stories, and poems he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, remained unpublished and were confiscated and destroyed at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Fewer than ten people read these handwritten manuscripts bound in twenty thick volumes. A surviving

FIG. 5: MU XIN, *Prison Notes*, 1971-1972.

list of these vanished writings reflects their author's appetite for all-inclusiveness:

Criticism: *A General Discourse on "Hamlet"*
Notes on Icarus
The Subtle Meaning of Orpheus
Jiamikelis Brothers (a series of nine essays)

Fiction: *A Window above the Street*
Wedding Vacation
The Pardon of Xiadi *Dangerous Houses*
A Stone Buddha
Journey to the Crimea
The Singer van Aire's Recital Luo-er and Luo-a
A Small House on a Raft

Essay: No. 15 Fanlun *Street* (a collection of 100 essays)

Poetry: *Like Smoke* (a long poem)
Sonnets, in a Non-Sonata Style (a collection of 100 poems)
On Protein (a collection of short poems)
Half of the Cross (a collection of short poems)
Leftover Manuscripts from the Studio of Jade Mountain in Cold Air
(a large collection of traditional poetry and prose-poetry)

Play: *Come In, Hero*

Both the vast quantity of this anthology and the broad range of literary genres are impressive; and indeed the anthology seems to have mirrored the destroyed "Mao Dun Library" in its miniaturized comprehensiveness. Also like the library, the destruction of this collection of writings was brutal and total, a massacre which left no trace of the victim. To overcome this destruction, Mu Xin had to start all over again, and this time he started in an unlikely place, an air-raid-shelter-turned-prison in which he was put in solitary confinement during the Cultural Revolution. The surviving 132 pages of the so-

called *Prison Notes* he produced during this period from 1971 to 1972 is evidence of a life-and-death struggle to maintain his self-identity as an author. Mu Xin covered these fragile sheets of paper recto and verso with some 650,000 characters (see "A Dialogue with Mu Xin" in this catalogue); the script is so tiny that the texts are nearly incomprehensible. To me, only the most committed determination "to execute the creative obligation of a writer" can explain the creation of these illegible writings, which had no actual use but could have brought him severe punishment. To Mu Xin, he "was fulfilling a providential task of guarding and caring for grapevines," according to the Biblical pronouncement: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away, and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:1-2).[7]

Thus, without any implication of a potential readership, in these notes he continued to discuss painting, music, world literature, and philosophy. All the sources for this discussion existed only in his head—the knowledge he had started to accumulate in the days he was reading in the Wuzhen library, a literary legacy that no one could take away from him. Ironically, this method of writing did not change after he left prison and even after he immigrated to America, as he told an interviewer in 1984:

> Now in America I don't have any books. All my knowledge comes from my memories. Sometimes I look around, feeling myself like a "Robinson Crusoe of literature" on a desert island. When I was young, I found in my village this home of a world-famous writer, which was tilled with Western classics. I devoured them and suffered from indigestion. But what I read then became what later I entirely depended upon. [8]

So once again, Mu Xin returned to the destroyed library when undertaking to complete a new corpus of treatises, essays, novels, and poems. This time, however, he could actually publish his work, a new reality that brought about a heightened sense of urgency. He derived most of his inspiration and materials directly from his "mental library," and wasted no time between one composition and another. In his small Jamaica Plains apartment in New York, he wrote 7,000 to 1 0,000 characters every day till midnight. Eight volumes of his new writings were published before 1992, the tenth anniversary of his immigration to America. But these only constituted a small portion of the encyclopedic corpus that he planned to complete. The last time I talked to him, in the early 1990s, he told me that he had been working on two monumental compilations for some years. The first, called Babylonian Linguistics (*Babilun yuyanxue*), would be a massive collection of writings in different genres; its length would exceed "millions of characters." He envisioned the second work, called *Memories of the Porcelain Kingdom* (*Ciguo huiyilu*) to be a fictional autobiography, which would be several times longer than the first one. He said that he would stop writing when he finished these two works.[10]

As I recall this conversation of almost ten years ago, I am tempted to pick up the phone and ask him whether he has completed either work. But such a call would be an intrusion into a private space that only Mu Xin himself can enter, because the question would be about the enclosure of his writing and about the voluntary end of an author. Happily, Toming Jun Liu's interview with Mu Xin in this catalogue tells me that this enclosure is yet to be completed:

> T: But some day you will be writing your memoirs. What would you do then?
>
> M: I am also waiting for that day. I have to wait till I can treat myself as the other, till the self is dispersed. That will be joyful. [11]

§

This exchange leads us back to an idea I proposed at the beginning of this essay, that to Mu Xin, his personal experiences are always secondary to his artistic experiences, and his artistic experiences must transcend particular historical or biographical situations. This is why he refuses to write his memoirs (at least in a comprehensive manner) before he can treat himself "as the other," because only when the self loses its historical particularity (or, in his words, "till the self is dispersed") can it become both the subject and object of artistic expression. Any meaning of art and literature generated by specific historical conditions constitutes what Mu Xin calls "the first level of significance," while transhistorical or suprahistorical experiences elevate art and literature to "the second level of significance." He declares, "It follows that when the first level of significance associated with things fades away, their second level of significance may possibly emerge. The second level of significance is usually more profound and closer to the essence of things."[12]

We can thus understand Mu Xin's reluctance to facilitate interpretation and appreciation of *Prison Notes* based on the manuscript's historical context and on his experience during the Cultural Revolution. To any Western viewer of this manuscript, it immediately evokes the image of Mu Xin as a political prisoner, suffering in a dark dungeon filled with filthy water while struggling to write down his thoughts under the dim light of a kerosene lamp. The tragic heroism embodied by this image is, in our historical perception, inextricably tied to the notion of political catastrophes such as the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution, and has provided the basis for numerous heroes and heroines in novels, plays and films. Interviewing Mu Xin about *Prison Notes*, therefore, Toming Jun Liu naturally starts from, and constantly returns to, this frame of reference. Mu Xin, on the other hand, remains determined to refute this mode of inquiry, because although the historical reality may be reconstructed, the reconstruction itself would inevitably produce a historical melodrama:

> Sir, perhaps you expect the author to give a romantic and realistic narrative in this dialogue on the manuscript. But I naturally prefer to describe my attitude in terms of cinematic stills and fade-outs. . . . But, didn't we agree at the outset to "de-emphasize certain temporal-spatial factors"? You cannot expect the author of the Notes to make too much of a confession. [13]

In a more profound sense, Mu Xin is refusing to view and interpret *Prison Notes*—and by extension himself—as a site of ruination. As many scholars have pointed out, ruins not only constitute an important subject of romantic poetry and art, but also typify any aesthetic experience embodying a retrospective perspective. The very concept of the ruin implies a backward gaze toward a lost totality; images of ruins in art and literature necessarily point to the passage of time, effacement, and memory. "The master figure there is synecdoche," writes Stephen Owen, "the part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality."[14]

Mu Xin is not interested, to say the least, in this type of romantic imagination, so at this point he divorces himself from most of his admirers and interpreters. To the audience of Prison Notes, the manuscript inevitably appears as a historical relic and as evidence for its creator's suffering and struggle during a political catastrophe—circumstances and experiences that a viewer can easily reconstruct in his or her mind based on a consensual narrative of modern Chinese history. But Mu Xin rather advises us to treat the manuscript as no more than an "independent existence in the nameless, constant realm of the conceptual."[15] He does not wish to see the manuscript, once having been resurrected from the past, "identified with any kind of ideology."[16] He does not want to have the text sorted out and published, because it belongs to the past and has lost its meaning (so he says, "That the meaning of words may be lost is nothing to be feared; indeed, it may even call for congratulations."[17]) Then what does

this manuscript mean to him? "This manuscript—what we're calling *Prison Notes*," he answers, "is not unequivocally a literary work. It is not calligraphy, or paint-ing, or a semiotic system of divination. Although a creative work is generally classified according to 'what it is,' this manuscript is distinguished by 'what it is not.'"[18] These words advocate a negation of the qualification of *Prison Notes* as prison notes: whatever this manuscript is, it is not what it seems to be.

We may find explanations for such adamant refusal of a painful, personal past in psychoanalytical theories. In particular, the study of trauma and its legacy through time prompts us to rethink the relationship between narrative and self. It has been recognized that experiences of torture, violence, and abuse can lead a person to "escape" the traumatic memory. Many theories have been developed to explain this phenomenon. For example, the theory of repression claims that when memories are laden with intensely painful feelings, they may be warded off over long periods of time, while the theory of *dissociation* accounts for the narrowing or splitting of consciousness so that some memories may be put aside. Dissociation seems especially relevant to Mu Xin because it represents an adaptive response to an overwhelming and inescapable threat, even though this threat was posed in the past. Most significantly, this type of adaptive response often underlies the effort of traumatic survivors to generate narratives about their own lives, and these individual narratives always depart from consensual or collective narratives about a past event. Laurence J. Kirmayer explains in his article "Landscape of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation":

> The fragmented nature of dissociative narrative comes from the focusing of attention in the traumatic moment and from the subsequent absence of consensual social factors to help weave together the dispersed parts. Dissociation is a rupture in narrative, but it is also maintained by narrative because the shape of narrative around the dissociation protects (reveals and conceals) the gap. Dimensions of narrative relevant to processes of dissociation include coherence, voice, and time: that is, the extent to which the narrative of self is integrated or fragmented, univocal or poly-vocal, and whether the flow of narrative time is progressive, regressive, or static. [19]

To a creative writer or artist, the formation of an individualized "dissociative narrative" amounts to a concealment of traumatic experiences in a unique literary or artistic self-expression. To understand this expression one cannot simply integrate it into a shared historical framework. Rather, this expression has to be analyzed and appreciated from within, regardless whether it omits or enhances certain "facts" and whether it agrees or disagrees with our common-sense view of the past.

Although Mu Xin opposes the resurrection of Prison Notes, some have been translated and are published in this catalogue. I would like to quote one passage to end this essay, not only because it resonates with many themes discussed in this essay, but also because it supports Mu Xin's appeal to dissociate the text from the circumstances in which it was written.

> "I have not yet loved you in the way as it is expressed in music"—suddenly I remember these words. Now that I am in prison, I cannot possibly find Wagner's original text, although I believe that is more or less what he said. Music is a form of art constituted by its own vanishings. In its essence and depth music is thus closest to "death." Before I turn forty I have no plan for writing memoirs, although I am quite impressed by Rousseau in his later work Reveries of the Solitary Walker. Turgenev's Literary Memoir is so thin a book that I once thought that it was not a must read. But it turned out to be an engaging book. As for myself, I still follow Flaubert's advice: "Reveal art; conceal the artist." [20]

Simply put, Mu Xin did not write this passage to respond to reality; he wrote it to erase reality.

2

ONCE AGAIN, PAINTING AS MODEL: REFLECTIONS ON CAI GUO-QIANG'S GUNPOWDER PAINTING

(2005)

"Painting as Model" is the title of an essay by my former colleague Yve-Alain Bois at Harvard, in which he argues, against the trend of theorizing about artists based on theories, for the necessity to restore painting's position as the primary source of our knowledge about an artist's inner logic and creativity. He does this by ruminating on Hubert Damisch's *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*,[1] and concludes:

> Because he considers painting a theoretical operator, a producer of models, because he agrees with this statement by Dubuffet given as a quotation—"painting may be a machine to convey philosophy—*but already to elaborate it*,"[2] and because he means in his work to receive a lesson from painting, Hubert Damisch offers us one of the most thoughtful readings of the art of this century, but one that also remains as close as possible to its object, deliberately situating itself each time at the very heart of pictorial invention.[3]

Now let us turn to Cai Guo-Qiang. There is no shortage of textual documentation and analyses of his works—a bibliography published two years ago already listed eighty-nine titles on the artist, many of which are full-length books and catalogues.[4] While this body of materials is indispensable for studying Cai's multifaceted art experiments over the past twenty years, it also demonstrates a tendency to classify his works into large, conceptual categories (such as projects centered on "heaven,

earth, and man") and to reduce their content to some overarching philosophical principles (such as *qi, yin* and *yang*, and the five elements). It is true that Cai Guo-Qiang has frequently talked about his debt to traditional Chinese cosmology, Taoism, oriental mysticism, and *fengshui* (an ancient Chinese system of geomancy)[5]. But to take such statements as a predetermined framework and conclusion for interpretation—to see Cai's projects as straightforward offspring of these concepts—has inevitably blurred the real significance of these projects as individual experiments. Here we should be reminded of Dubuffet's advice quoted by Damisch: "Painting may be a machine to convey philosophy—*but already to elaborate it.*" The question then becomes how works of art can both convey and elaborate abstract thinking. Damisch asks this question in his own way: "What does it mean for a painter to *think?*" [6] To Bois, it means that painting not only reflects the painter's speculative thought, but more importantly articulates such thought into concrete and nuanced visual expressions. To understand the logic of such articulation is to uncover certain "models"—perceptive, technical, symbolic, and strategic—as basic mechanisms of an artist's invention and self-perception.

This paper follows the approach recommended by Damisch and Bois: instead of contemplating the underlying *ideas* in Cai's art in a holistic manner, I explore specific problems raised by his gunpowder paintings at different moments in his career. I focus on this group of works for two reasons. First, although people are generally attracted by their aesthetic appeal, few writers have paid close attention to them.[7] A major reason for this lack of interest is that to these writers (who are in most cases advocates of new forms of avant-garde art), these works on paper and canvas seem subdued and even "conser-vative" compared to Cai's spectacular outdoor fireworks and politically-minded indoor installations.[8] The real situation is far more complex, however, and it is necessary to analyze this complexity in order to understand the relationship between these two-dimensional works and Cai's other projects.

Second and more important, Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder paintings occupy a special position in his art. It is, in fact, the only art form that he has consistently employed and developed during his entire career, while his other projects, whether land art works, performances, installations, or curatorial programs, have been linked to specific periods and interests. The reason, as I will propose in this paper, is that a majority of his gunpowder paintings are actually "think pieces," as their major role has been to help him articulate ideas through visual images. In this way, these works reveal a series of perceptive, technical, symbolic, and strategic models, which can further help us understand his artistic development as a whole.

THE BEGINNING

Any avant-garde artist must have an acute sense of the beginning of this identity—the moment of a radical change in his relationship with the rest of the art world. This is especially true in post-Cultural Revolution China (that is, from the late 1970s through the 1980s), where most avant-garde artists had actually received their education in art schools sponsored by the government and dominated by academic realism. Growing up in a traditional scholar's family (Cai's father is an amateur calligrapher and their home was a gathering place for traditional painters), Cai Guo-Qiang expressed his rebellious spirit early on by embracing Western art forms, mainly watercolor and oil painting. But this rebellion only led him from traditional art to academic art—he entered the Shanghai Academy of Drama in 1982, and for a while tried hard to master the artistry of oil painting.[9] Nineteen eighty-four was a turning point: he began to experiment with new painting materials and techniques that would give him "a sense of liberation."[10] These included blowing wet paint on canvases with a powerful electric fan, creating "whirlpools" in a series of paintings called *Typhoon*. On other occasions he made rubbings from rocks and tree roots and then painted over them. Experiments of a third kind were associated with fire.

After igniting a welding torch or sticks of firework on canvases, he finally focused on the potential of gunpowder as a painting material.

What do we make of these experiments, which seemed highly idiosyncratic and at odds with prevailing trends in contemporary art at the time? Various reasons can be proposed, including the impact of the '85 Art New Wave movement and the artist's heightening interest in mysticism.[11] But a major reason must have been a reassessment of his relationship with Western art. In short, he finally realized that he could not blindly follow the models and solutions provided by Western art history. As he recalled later:

> They (i.e. Western artists) responded to the issues of their time by very clearly distinguishing themselves from their predecessors. But we in China had not yet responded to the questions raised by our time. So there was a sense of urgency. However, we felt we shouldn't do as they did, but that we should resolve our problems in our own way.[12]

"Our own way" could not be traditional Chinese art, which Cai Guo-Qiang had rebelled against even before entering art school. Looking for solutions beyond the East-West dichotomy, he turned to nature. This is why his experiments during this period all employed natural materials (such as rocks and tree roots) or evoked natural forces (such as wind and fire), which he hoped to transform into images in painting. People who are familiar with Cai Guo-Qiang have no difficulty in seeing the profound impact of these early experiments on his later works, including large-scale performances and installations, as nature has continued to play a major role in these projects, albeit in increasingly varied forms.

Of the several unconventional materials that Cai Guo-Qiang experimented with around the mid-1980s, only gunpowder became a lasting means for him in making art. He has offered different explanations for this choice; and it is likely that his attraction to gunpowder is owed to multiple factors.

Though seemingly contradictory, these factors point to a complex set of issues connected to his cultural identity and political orientation. On the one hand, he takes pride that gunpowder was invented in China, and that the ancient Chinese did not invent it to abet violence—it was their search for elixirs of immortality that led to its discovery. On the other hand, he was also fascinated by the destructive force of dynamite, which was featured prominently in revolutionary movies, dramas, and cartoon books during the Cultural Revolution—images that surrounded him when he was young. On the one hand, people around the world display fireworks on holiday occasions to celebrate peace, unity, and prosperity. On the other hand, gunpowder also fills bombs and bullets to kill innocent people on a daily basis. There are further intimate connections between Cai Guo-Qiang and the material: his birthplace Fujian is famous for the manufacture of firecrackers. But he also remembers the repeated military drills in this southeastern province across a narrow strait from Taiwan, "The roar of reconnaissance planes flying over his head, and flashes emitted from explosions made an impression of both violence and beauty on him." [13]

Commentators on Cai Guo-Qiang's art have frequently noted his extraordinary ability to derive energy and imagination from contradictions, and have attributed his innovative use of gunpowder to this ability. But it is equally true that gunpowder—a supreme symbol of contradiction as well as a powerful substance to manifest conflicts—has played an important role in the formation of his worldview and political ideology. In this way, gunpowder is not just a novel material Cai Guo-Qiang has introduced into contemporary art, but actually indexes a special technological system. According to Robert M. Adams, as a social-technical system, "What under lies and sustains technological systems is partly institutional and partly technical, partly rooted in material capabilities and possibilities and

partly in human associations, values, and goals."[14] Explosions always have rich sociopolitical meanings in Cai Guo-Qiang's art, and his early employment of gunpowder in making painting was specifically connected with China's political environment in the 1980s. Thus when Gerald Matt asked him in 1999 whether his firework projects could be understood as political statements, he immediately turned to the moment when he first discovered gunpowder as an art material: "My work does have political aspects. I would not do such a system should always be thought of anything just for the fun of it, without any perspectives or background. In the mid-eighties, when I started out, repression was strong in China. Explosions were an outlet for me, something that could free me from the social pressure back then."[15]

Here "social pressure" means institutionalized order—both state ideology and the rigid program in art academies—forced upon an individual artist. However momentary, explosions disrupted such order and offered Cai Guo-Qiang an opportunity for personal freedom—a feeling that he still remembers vividly eighteen years later: "Explosions make you feel something intense at the very core of your being because, while you can arrange explosives as you please, you cannot control the explosion itself, And this fills you with a great feeling of freedom." [16]

No other work from this period better embodies this mixed feeling of suffering from social repression and ecstasy from breaking rules than his 1985 *Self-Portrait* (fig. 1). 167 cm tall and 118 cm wide, it is a fairly large painting on canvas. The near life-size figure evidently represents the artist himself. No detailed facial features are attempted, however. Standing naked, his dark silhouette emerges from an empty background. Traces of explosions are visible in various forms: the area around the figure is darkened, and the figure's contour is both obscured and accentuated by burnt markings left by gunpowder fuses. The combination of these traces and the painted figure inspires two different readings of the painting. It is possible to interpret the figure as the subject of repression and torture; and indeed his slender, elongated torso reminds us of those suffering saints in medieval European art, always depicted as martyrs enduring unbearable pain inflicted on their bare flesh. But it is also possible to see the figure as a godlike being, emitting rays of light from his head and body. These two readings are not true alternatives, however: still retaining many features of a conventional self-portrait, this early gunpowder painting emphasizes the artist's physical presence and experience, and encourages the spectator to adopt the first reading to see him as a victim. But when Cai Guo-Qiang further developed this composition after he had moved to Japan, he significantly reduced the size of his self-image, making himself the center of a much expanded energy field. Correspondingly, the significance of the composition shifted from political criticism to metaphysical contemplation.

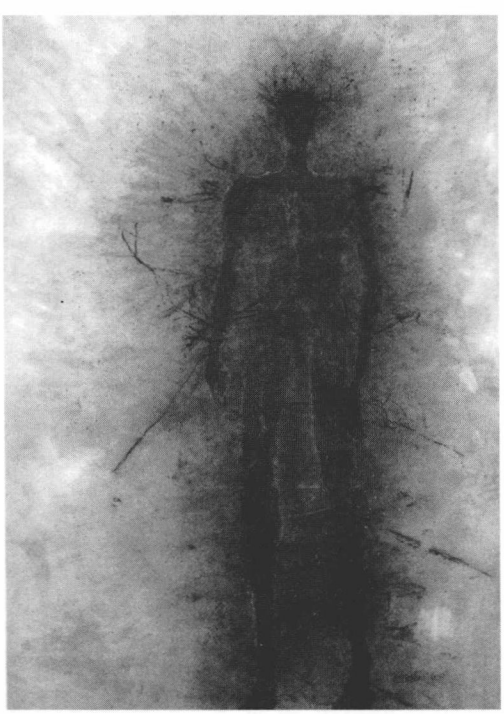

FIG. 1: CAI GUO-QIANG, *Self-portrait*, GUNPOWDER AND OIL PAINT ON CANVAS, 1985.

Cai Guo-Qiang immigrated to Japan in 1986 and began to exhibit his gunpowder paintings in 1987.[17] These works aroused considerable interest, and some galleries near Tokyo, including the Iwaki Gallery in Fukushima Prefecture and the Gallery Kigoma in Kunitachi, invited him to stage solo exhibitions over the next two years.[18]

These exhibitions reflected, at least superficially, a "return" to oriental aesthetics; it seems that the artist had distanced himself considerably from the tradition of Western oil painting, and had found paper and monochromic images a better means for self-expression. The Iwaki exhibition, for example, featured a group of paper shades mounted on thin bamboo sticks (fig. 2). Suspended from the ceiling in intersecting angles, they resembled a series of hanging scrolls found in a traditional Chinese or Japanese house. Stripped of their original role to exhibit ink painting or calligraphy, however, these scrolls were used to display damage left by gunpowder explosions engineered by the artist, which enhanced the scrolls' fragility and gave them a kind of delicate, tragic beauty.[19]

This "return" to oriental materials and aesthetics was a very important, but also very complex phenomenon in Cai Guo-Qiang's artistic development. Instead of taking it as a compromise with old traditions that he had previously opposed, I see it as another reassessment by the artist of his relationship with the history of art, this time with the art of the East. This reassessment was made possible by his immigration to Japan. In China, since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, traditional ink painting has been contrasted with art of the West to signify a set of "premodern" tastes and values. Throughout the twentieth century, no Chinese artist could escape this opposition, which set up a basic ideological framework in which to decide on the forms, materials, styles, and content of art, Japan's situation was different. Although Japanese culture absorbed many elements from ancient China, Japan's modernization process did not turn these elements into symbols of a backward, bygone era,

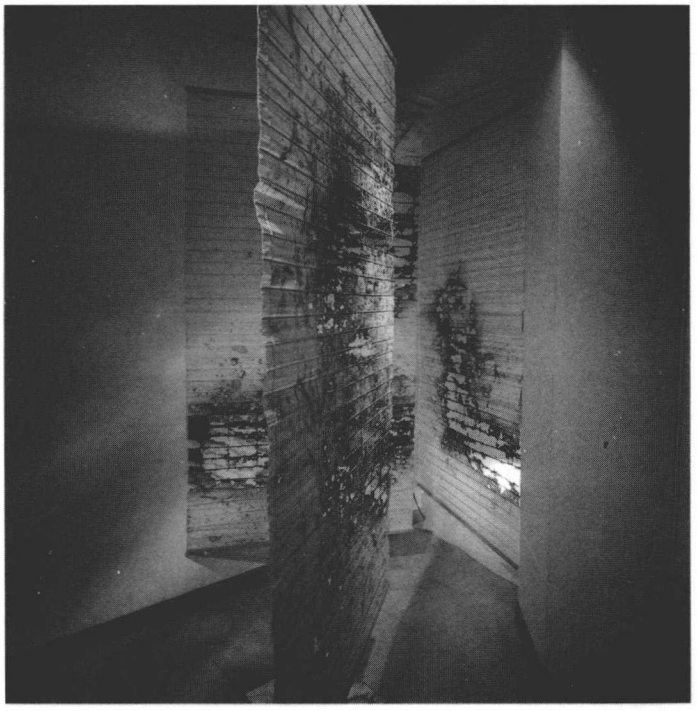

FIG. 2: CAI GUO-QIANG, *Space No. 1*, GUNPOWDER ON PAPER, INSTALLATION VIEW, KIKOMA GALLERY, TOKYO, 1988.