

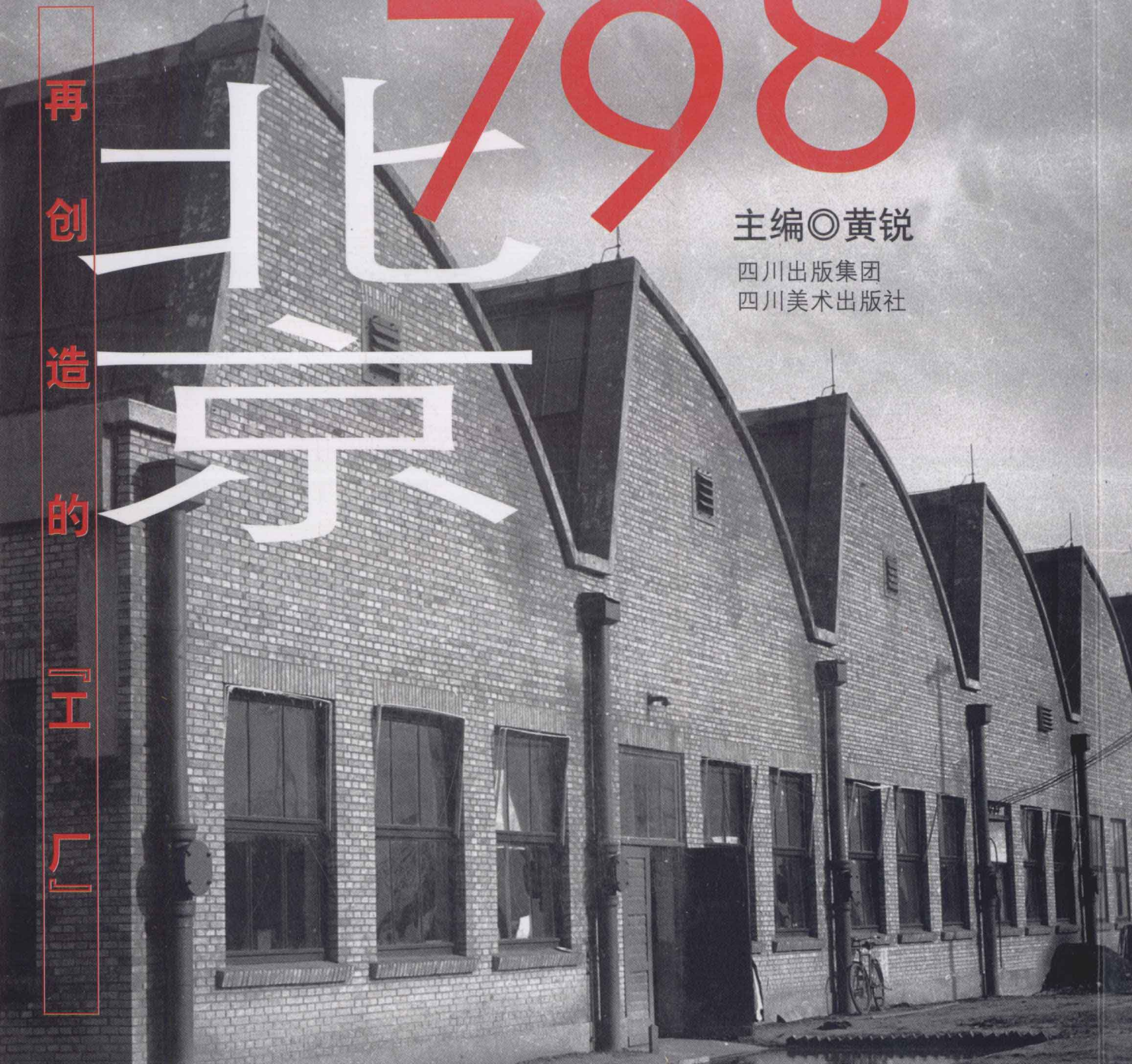
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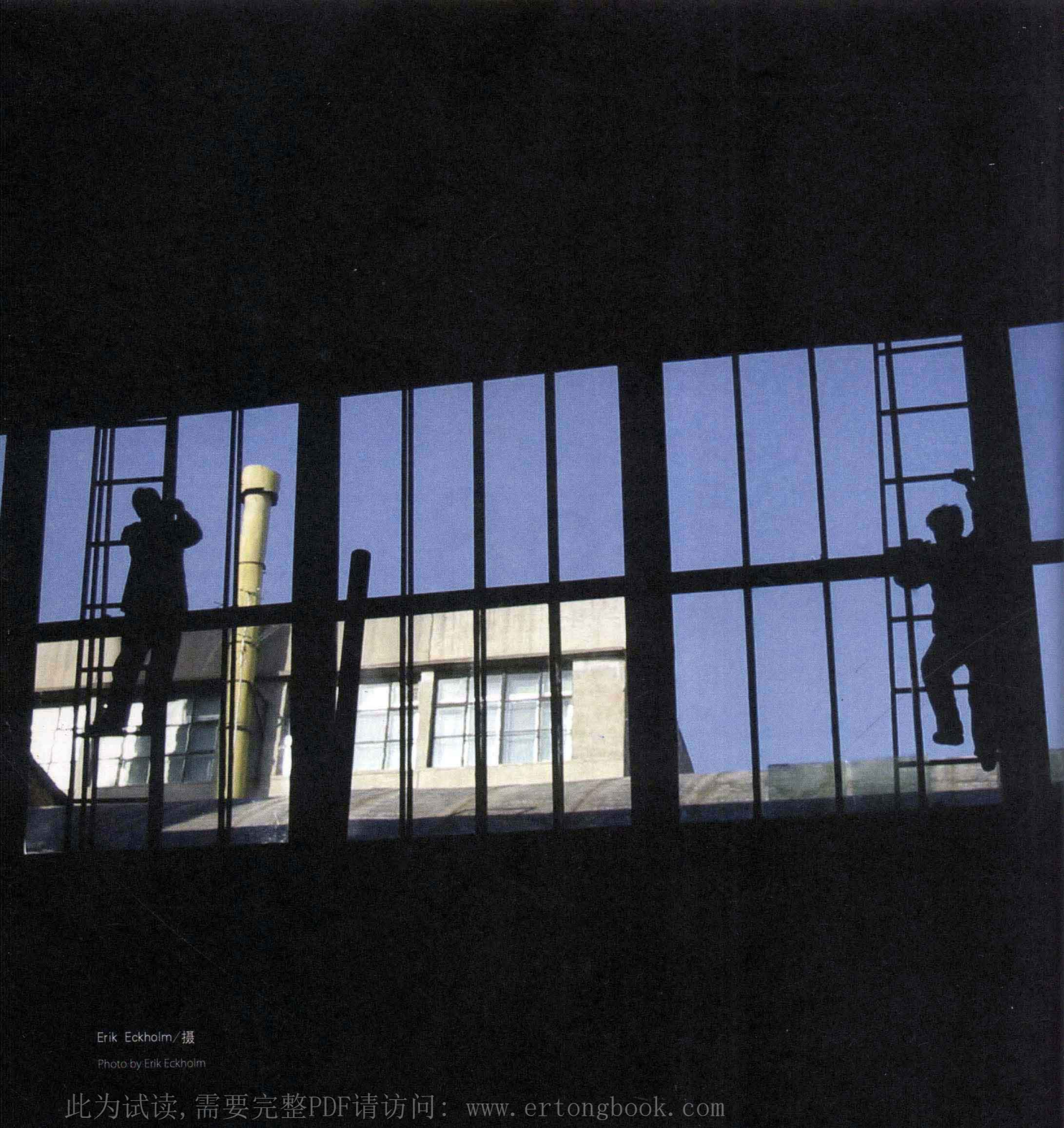
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BEIJING

798

Reflections on a "Factory" of Art



Erik Eckholm/摄

Photo by Erik Eckholm

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Contents

Texts on 798	002	1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 798, by Huang Rui
	012	798, a place of artistic possibilities, by Bérénice Angremy
	022	798 memoir, by Philip Tinari
	026	Weightlessness - 798 in the present continuous tense, by Ye Ying
	038	Excerpts from an interview with Ai Weiwei: Proving itself amidst absurdity, by He Wenzhao
	042	New frontier, by Jonathan Napack
	048	Tui-Transfiguration: an experimental exhibition at Factory 798, by Wu Hung
	058	Recollections on the History of 718, by Luo Peilin
	062	Project 157, by Li Rui
Photographs of 798	066	798 People
	090	Floating art
	126	Art spaces
	146	Vanishing factories
	162	Factory 798: History, 798 art district: Narrative
A Vision for 798	176	Architectural visions of the future, Two proposals for the rebirth of 798
Texts in Chinese		(page 2 from the back)

Note This book was designed to be read from the front in English, and from the back in Chinese. Historical black and white pictures of the 798 factory can be found in the Chinese half of the book.

Huang Rui

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 798

1. Prelude to a Tale

Originally I didn't want to write this article. Such a text could never come close to the pithy poetry of official documents nor capture the color and flavor of local legend. The story of 798 has innumerable angles. If we assume that, on average, every worker has ten stories, then consider that 798 has 1,500 workers and cadres on the job now and counts over 15,000 retired souls. In China, in this day and age of such rapid transformation, where slogans, propaganda and million-strong rallies color the nightmare of memory, so many stories have never been told. Luckily, 798's existence has already been acknowledged through numerous narrations and time has proven it a popular, magnificent yet still nascent art district. It's a government-invested moment of indecision. It's a model of cultural production. It's a major tourist destination on a par with

the Great Wall and the Forbidden City. And, without hesitation, we call it one of the great monuments left over from the factory age, a brand new city possessing the vestiges of ancient civilization. And from this relic of history great effort has been spent to carve out a new type of community, discrete from the city. It's a story created from numerous contradictions. Or maybe it's numerous stories existing within a contradiction.

"What vexes us is not things, but our conscious apprehension of things." – Ancient Greek proverb.

2. Time in Two Tones

You can turn the page on its side and read it that way.

People accustomed to reading English, written as it is horizontally from left to right, ought to get used to reading Chinese, which classically is written top to bottom and right to left. People accustomed to Chinese should likewise read some English. Both kinds of people will find much in the other's visual sensibility. The chronology of photos is like the arrangement of an English text. Flip through them right to left and they get younger and younger, newer and newer. One can appreciate this kind of understanding, but at the same time feel it is one-sided. Affairs of the remote past are not necessarily new.

In the factory, a group arrives, then departs.
A new group comes to replace them.

Look at the most colorful of painted pages. They represent the various guises of the proprietors of the art district. Look closely and you can almost see through them to

catch a glimpse of actual emotion. Look further and see their adamant ideas about one's role in society. Black and white photographs, by contrast, pluck the most vivid moments from the flux of great movements. If it were otherwise, light and shadow could never reflect the vigor of humanity. When the architects were trying to fashion New China, the ideal nation, the materials they used were invested with an exaggerated sense of discipline.

It's not a joke played on us by Time, no one can absolutely control their destiny. What we have left are the remnants of dedication, the bare outlines of people's feelings toward their work. It is a feeling somehow pure, intimate, unselfish and full of generosity. The object of that feeling is a vista,

a sense of responsibility, the problematic of language, the nation.

The attraction of history marks out a well-defined territory. Numerous people have trodden the time-worn concrete of 798's remaining spaces, wearing down their luster to a dull glow. Of these people a few have stopped here, looked around and breathed in earnest. Even if it's purely accidental, there is serendipity in it. Of these we can count such greats as Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De and Jin Richeng also had their moments here. Leaders from the East German Communist Party, government and army have come and gone. Artists Cang Xin, Chen Wenbo, Chen Lingyang and Li Xiangqun have



Overlooking sawtooth windows from the largest workshop of
Factory 798. Photo by Bérénice Angremy (2004)
在高处俯瞰 798 最大厂房的锯齿状玻璃窗 黎静 / 摄 (2004)

been here. There have also been publishers such as Robert Bernell and Hong Huang as well as entrepreneurs such as Cheng Lei and collectors such as Guy Ullens.

798 is a place reflecting great investment, but without much calculation of gain. People today always want to cut through any illusions and go right to the bottom line. Numbers now are what matter. Well, here's a number from the past that might surprise you: 150 million RMB invested in the 1950s. China and East Germany collaborated on the project, investing money, knowledge, spirit and faith—all for the sake of closer ties between the two polities. By the same token there is reason to be suspicious of newcomers. How will it change the working environment? Has there been any rational analysis? The managers of BTAP Gallery, 798 Space, Long March Gallery, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, what are they really up to in this square kilometer of territory? What kind of game are they playing and by what rules?

The first chief engineer of the 718 United Factory, Luo Peilin, gave East Germany carte blanche to order whatever they needed. This included not just basic equipment, but everything down to the last graduated cylinder and water dish. Although he had the government finance bureau behind him to foot the bill, it now looks like a kind of fever which buried the fledgling Chinese electronics industry under the foot of the bill.

Fate is a spiral. When it comes back around, not only does it supersede what we previously conceived of as "time", but also comes to rest on a higher plane. The proprietors of 798 today are accustomed to thinking independently, concerning themselves with this or that question. These questions are not only inextricable from the overall purport of this article, but also express its earnestness.

When people insist on taking their own future in hand, at the very least they should add a few colorful flourishes to the black and white images that compose history, if only for the sake of contrast.

3. Three Small Suggestions (*which can be skipped if you're so inclined*)¹

To the 798 Art District Management Office,
Recently, several cross-streets in 798 were upgraded for the summer season. The main road in the southern part was also upgraded. There is now a landscaping operation ongoing on the main road leading out of the south gate. We believe this will bring a breath of fresh air to the art district and add incentive for people who come to the district.

At the same time, as representatives of organizations in the south part of the art district, we would like to raise several suggestions in regard to the development and usage plan. We respectfully request your consideration.

1. Upgrade the Garbage Depot and Recycling Station

As everyone is aware, there are more and more visitors coming to the 798 art district. This is a direct result of the great consideration that 798 has received from every level of government and society-at-large. We can foresee that this fall and into 2008 the number will only increase. Of these visitors, many are long-time fans of art, with some curiosity-seekers mixed in. Regardless, the vast majority of those who come, will come to the south part because this is where the galleries and artist's studios are concentrated. The terminus of the main road in the south part is a 200

square meters garbage depot. On the north edge of the depot is a small business sifting trash for recyclable elements.

It's not an exaggeration to say that for two years artists' studios situated on the northern edge of chemical and industrial plant have all been deeply impacted by the unpleasant smell and clouds of dust. More importantly, all the feedback we've received from visitors and tourists has likewise been completely negative. Now that the art district is actively seeking a development plan, if these kinds of fatal environmental problems are not resolved, then area residents as well as visitors to the area will be unable to give the art district a positive evaluation.

We understand that there is a historical reason for the trash sifting business to be where it is. But we have faith in the ability of the 798 management bureau and related offices to handle this affair in accordance with the current "art district development comes first" policy.

We would also like to take this opportunity to point out the similar problems brought on by the recycling station currently inside the east gate of the south part, just adjacent to the South Gate Space theater. This station frequently generates rubbish, both of the construction and daily-use kind, which obscures the road, making it difficult for visitors to find the theater.

We are not alone in being critical of these things. 798, after all, is an open work unit. Besides many workers and artists who live here, every year we welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors. Our face is our asset (be assured it is also the asset of the management bureau). If we cannot get rid of these obstructions and thus improve our working environment, the conditions for tourists and the

overall impression of the place (which people will pass along by word of mouth), then we risk steeply discounting the art district's development.

2. More Green Space (the case for a small square)

This suggestion is related to the above. If the garbage depot can be removed, we recommend that it be relocated to the south side of the parking lot and in its place a "green" square with a very eco-friendly theme be built. It should be small in scale, very healthy and tucked away. It will require very high level management techniques.

This kind of public space is much needed in 798. 798 enjoys a unique geographic position, situated as it is on the outskirts of the city. Even though the management bureau has already forbidden taxi traffic inside the district, most visitors come by public bus. What that means is that after getting off the bus they need to go 500 or more meters before arriving at the art district. Wandering here and there into and out of the art district requires about two kilometers of walking on average. Without taking walking time into consideration, the average visitor spends two or more hours taking in a couple of exhibits, having a beer or a cup of tea, perhaps even having a meal. Foreign visitors will typically spend half a day here. Most other famous tourist spots provide some kind of free, public space. Like pearls on a string, they provide enjoyment for people.

At the southern extremity of the passage through Factory 798, Beijing Tokyo Art Projects and the Huang Rui Studio (closed in March 2007) opened a little garden which is already enjoying frequent usage. Not only does it contribute to the visual diversity of the art district, with its little steps and stone benches, it's also a great place for people to relax. Such a space draws attention to the

leisurely nature of the art district. And because it has received such a welcome, it has become a popular space for holding outdoor art events.

3. Open a Convenience Store

According to the new development plan, we hope to consciously introduce a convenience store. This idea here is based on two needs: one, greater convenience for workers and tourists; two, bolster the nightlife viability of the art district.

As mentioned above, the art district is situated outside the city proper. Traffic is not the most convenient, both getting to the art district and within the art district itself. This being the case, workers in the district generally come and go according to gallery operations. Near noon, the galleries open and then at dusk, they close for the day. Because of the obvious defects in facilities mentioned above and the inconvenient traffic situation, the art district has become one of those places which is bustling in the daytime, but idle and empty come night (save a few spaces like the South Gate Space theater and Beijing Cubic Space which regularly host evening events).

If the district had a convenience store which operated at night, this situation might change a bit. The convenience store is a symbol of night time activity, both lively and safe.

4. The New Sign at the No. 4 Junction

A few years ago, a critic friend thus described the development of the art district:

A handful of artists calling themselves tenants came to 798

and rented spaces. The proprietor wanted to make some money so he signed contracts. Then one day the tenants rebelled, saying that their homes were artifacts with cultural significance that needed to be preserved. They called for the establishment of an art district. The landlords were outraged and wanted to kick them out immediately. A dispute arose. Who knew the tenants had justice on their side? Turning the tables, the rebel tenants became the proprietors and immediately became famous. That is the story of 798.

Previously there arose a dispute over the usage rights for the main gate leading into Number 4. The first proprietor was the Number 11 Electric Company work unit, one of the nation's most important research and development units. I've heard that they do much more than just electrical stuff, they also carry out projects related to aeronautics and manned space flight. Without question this work unit is the pride and joy of the Chinese people, a symbol of national pride. Number 11's contributions have been great indeed. So one suggestion was to close Number 4 and connect the outside road directly to Number 11.

There's only one problem with this plan: 798's reputation as an art district which is connected to the national image of openness. Getting into the art district from the Number 4 entrance is already an established fact. As we approach the Olympics in 2008, continuation and deepening of the policy of opening has momentum behind it, moving forward like the hands of a clock. Many people have entered the art district from Number 4 entrance, including more than a few luminaries, billionaires, bigwigs and some 500-strong leaders. They've seen the galleries, met the artists and spoken effusively of art and the times over sumptuous Chinese banquets.

In order to finish off this business with the Number 11

work unit, I once proposed that the authorities dig a tunnel into the art district which both artists and visitors could use. I thought this was completely appropriate given that contemporary art itself emerged from the underground. There is no question that, in terms of official history, 798 has an important identity. It's a pillar of national defense and bearer of army secrets. To go in or out, one must undergo rigorous background screening. Three generations of the family must display exemplary history. No landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, corrupt elements or those with foreign relations are allowed. This is a standard political line. Even though this political standard is abstract, most people see it as a horizontal line. Anything above the line is authentic, good and orthodox while anything below the line is underground, bad and just plain weird. Contemporary art has imperceptibly undergone this kind of three-generation test because in the days of Mao, Deng and Jiang it was never acknowledged. In those heady days overflowing with brightness, there was no contemporary art. So if contemporary artists are indeed a clan, where did they live? Underground, of course.

Give contemporary artists the existing 798. Dig out a tunnel for them to pass through. It would be the perfect representation of the three-generations sloganeering. Not only would it be a polemic on identity, but would also be a kind of transcendence experienced within the web of time and space.

On the south side of Number 4 entrance, adjacent to Jiuxianqiao road, there is a big empty plain. Previously, this space was occupied by the 718 branch factory, consisting of a splendid group of Bauhaus style buildings scattered over more than twenty thousand square meters, surrounded in perfect array by trees and greenery shaped

like a big U. The buildings were marvels of cubist precision. With lines long and short, they existed in sublime harmony, a testament to a great and rigorous spirit. Regardless of whether you looked at them from the perspective of architectural aesthetics or the ideals of urban planning, these buildings were priceless artifacts. Yet in August of 2004, with one word from the proprietors, they were all torn down.

At that time, artists embarked on a broad campaign to connect with society. Now they bear the banner of protecting the 798 factory buildings. The demolition of the entire 718 collection of buildings made 798 lose face. Protecting current working environs must necessarily start from the historical value of the buildings themselves which have already been re-purposed into useful art spaces. Seen thusly, this tussle has been a draw between tenants and landlords. From today's 798, we cannot look back and see the old scenery. It's been wiped away without a trace. At least in the remaining art spaces we can still see the walls mottled with age and the preserved equipment bequeathed from the old factories. They symbolize 798. In the remembrance of things past we seek concrete memorials. Thus we carve old paintings onto new walls and produce historical monuments. When preserving the traces of factories becomes the mission of artists and the measure of their worth, history and reality wobble out of balance. Who is in charge of 798?

Drifting in the space above the city, spatial relations become clear: person – life – city – art.

Today's Number 4 entrance already has a new signboard: 798, made of steel, huge and red. Without question the solution to this problem will have very Chinese characteristics.

5. "Five Elements or Five Poisons"² the Real Countenance of Contemporary Art

"Blind faith does not produce creativity."

— Walter Benjamin.

Diverging from the scripts of official art and the frames of classical art, contemporary art has become the most liberal and unrestrained kind of creative activity within the system of cultural production. This is especially true within the last several years, especially since the advent of 798 onto the scene. Contemporary art is almost overflowing with a kind of savage energy. And, at least prior to 2005, 798 had become its most ideal and the most successful institution. Thinking back to the situation prior to 798's arrival, Beijing had around five galleries. Among them, two or three weren't even mounting serious exhibits of contemporary art. Let's take a look at the statistics today. In 798 alone there are 120 galleries. Outside of 798, gallery enclaves have been springing up like bamboo shoots after the rain. I've heard that there are now more than 500 galleries in Beijing. Another related query: how many works of art in how many different art spaces at how many different times have transgressed the boundaries of behavior?

Asking about the goal of art and its current situation is an awkward sort of thing to do, because art is always situated somewhere between reality and fantasy. There are some artists who use art to probe themselves and some who use art to say something to society at large. The real deal is this: art produces contradictions and exists within a contradiction. As far as conventional society is concerned, contemporary art carries a few narrow sets of expectations. Aside from the occasional achievement eliciting a round of applause, people expect contemporary art to do something new or unorthodox, to be arrogant and put on airs, to thumb its nose at the world or at the very least, to cause a stir. In reality, there is a great deal of freedom within the field of contemporary art, but commonly it must be seen as going too far, so far as

to be dangerous, in order to elicit a response. Underneath the blazing sun of the "limitless freedom" typically espoused by contemporary artists, is there not also a shadow of responsibility in evidence?

Is it not possible that the various kinds of censure society historically has hurled at new art can in fact become a kind of argument on its behalf?

Sure, contemporary art possesses numerous flaws and dangers. Yet 798's big covered wagon is still on the road, piloted by a line of actors all of whom take contemporary art as their road map, all the while pointing the wheel toward creativity. Now it is completely clear: Brazenly following any kind of slogan is the trendy thing, you just need to toss in a few visual gags. The image and the visual evidence of alienation are exactly what the contemporary art market wants. It's "contemporary" enough and, most importantly, it's "Chinese" enough.

6. Six Old Factories Laid Out Like a Checkerboard.

The allure of 798 is this: When you first step into the area and new things to see and experience are arrayed before you, you are simultaneously imbricated into historical time. Though 798 has numerous new spaces flaunting new kinds of performances, recollection disappears on the stage of history. It vanishes upon a historical street. It dissolves into the mist which liberates us from historical time.

Like the Long Corridor at the Foot of Longevity Hill on the bank of Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace, like two rooms juxtaposed by a gallery walkway, so too does 798 flourish and propagate itself. Even though 798 still belongs to the age of socialism and the factory remains its trademark, what is interesting about it are the spaces, some big, some small, housing all types of artists plying

their trade and all types of people who come to see the products of their labor. It's a kind of temporal movement and a spatial circulation. Add in the flow of people and you've got the makings of something with a life of its own.

Stroll the grounds at 798. If you're a shopper, there will be much to intrigue and delight you. Take a look at both sides of the lanes and see China's socialist epoch come to life before your eyes. You'll see genuine German Bauhaus style, Chinese attempts at Bauhaus and the faux avant-garde characteristic of the penurious period of the Cultural Revolution. Add in a bit of wind and rain and the whole thing tears away from its moorings in mundane reality to become an architectural kingdom. Even though it can't be attributed to the genius of one master builder, the feeling is there, lingering in the corners: an eternal romanticism. Understand it and you'll understand urban culture. Feel it and you'll get a sense of the classic. Appreciate it and you'll appreciate the art in architecture. Let it penetrate you and you'll see how people and art are woven of the same thread.

There are still many nooks and crannies remaining to be seen, even as the big spaces nibble away at the other spaces. It is the little spaces which dramatize plenitude and diversity. The big spaces manifest order and regularity. The clash of visual scale is what makes 798 so special.

7.9.8. A Weather Forecast for 798

According to the optimistic predictions of the Municipal Meteorological Bureau, Beijing will be able to meet its quote for sunny days in advance this year.

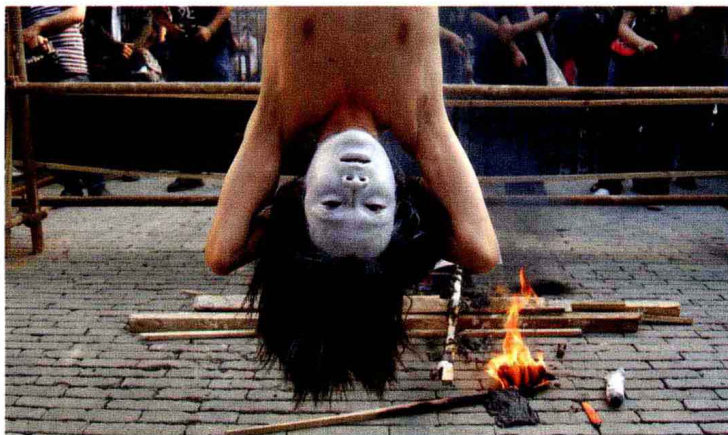
According to historical wisdom, Beijing is also on the leading edge of the turning of the seasons.

So, aside from the arrival of more and more big patches of blue sky and happy thoughts, we can expect squalls, snow storms, cold fronts, pollution and silt to occur in turn. In short, there will also be some rough weather ahead.

The old dream of 798 to be a white cloud floating above the grassy plain has been replaced by a big swath of clear blue sky. Only in the last

two years has the slogan "Look, Debate, Manage" been written in large flaming letters above 798. These words carry the weight of political and historical authority. 798 is a small area with a handful of artists in residence, several hundred workers and a couple thousand visitors. Sure there are a few artists here who delight in tantalizing and teasing, inscribing the walls with "I was here." But their methods can't be compared to the government whose policy, like the Golden Finger of Buddha, can either become a path or an impassable mountain.

After all, this finger, and the remaining four, now rest peaceably on the ground, opening up a wide path leading



Performance in Dadao Live Festival 2006. Photo by Li Tienan (2006)
2006年大道艺术节上的行为表演 李铁男 / 摄

straight to 798. On this road, all the struggles of yesterday have already been picked up by the scrap collector and tossed into the parti-colored wastebasket like so much scrap paper. The Beijing government has officially recognized 798 as an important base of cultural production. Government policy on all sides has been completely clarified. All eyes are open, so are the doors to the offices. The path forward? Given the current commodity climate we can say that it is paved with gold.

The future of 798 can be parsed directly from its official nomenclature: "cultural creation production base." "Creation" is a kind of start or a kind of explanation. "Production base" is frequently-used political jargon. If the average person thinks about it for a bit, he'll understand it. Contemporary artists, because they are so on the cutting edge, naturally get it quite quickly.

Another kind of executive power, maybe the most important kind, comes from the corridors of the official bureaucracy. In the past, most of them hewed to traditional form, thinking 798 to still be an electronics factory run by the government churning out computers, telephones and mobile phones. In fact I'd guess that still today many of them think mobile phones are more useful and expedient than art. But they've already pressed "enter" on the great keyboard of political decision-making. 798 is a fact. They have no reason not to be happy, no reason not to smile, no reason not to wear their suits and ties. There's no group of people more spic and span than they. These people walk in step, smile the same and speak in the same pitch, exactly like the portraits of the great men of the past.

Yesterday—because time goes by quickly, anything of pre-798 is "yesterday"—we looked forward to the day when the smoke would be clear and the rain clouds scatter. We looked forward to sunny days free from sudden squalls. And then it arrived. It arrived bearing predictions of the weather and of the future. It arrived bearing shining

announcements and halos of light. It arrived bearing cold hard cash.

The 798 art district, which once defined itself in opposition to the city, can no longer maintain its singularly mythic aspect: It has already changed fundamentally. No matter the geographic location or the degree of official supervision, 798 is hardwired into the urban economy. Every hidden corner now has a price tag on it, two actually: one price for today, the other for the future. When the sunlight glints off the Nike insignia like a thousand neon rainbows, will people's eyes have any strength left to go searching in the gloom for real art?

The poet Gu Cheng³ once wrote, "I have two eyes of black. I use them to go searching for the light."

August 2007

1, Letter addressed to the 798 administrative office on July 2006 (abstracts).

2, Five Elements: water, fire, wood, gold and earth. Five Poisons: scorpion, snake, centipede, lizard, toad.

3, Gu Cheng (1956-1993), famous modern Chinese poet, who was member of the "Misty Poets".

Translation by Lee Mack

Huang Rui is a Beijing based artist and curator. One of the co-founders of the Stars Group (1979-80), he lived and worked as an artist in Japan for over a decade before returning to Beijing where he helped to found the Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, initiated many art events in 798 and became the spokesman of the district's artistic community. He is also the artistic director of the Dashanzi/Dangdai International Art Festival (DIAF).



Bérénice Angremy

798, a place of artistic possibilities

Whether you are a genuine aficionado of 798 or your enthusiasm is somewhat tempered, 798 Art District is an inescapable part of the landscape when discussing contemporary art in China.

From underground to public arena

In the middle of the 1990s, several artists and intellectuals set up studios (and homes) in a series of abandoned factories in Dashanzi, considered outside the capital at that time. Those pioneers never imagined that the industrial complex they chose would one day become *the* contemporary art venue in China. In reality, the first 798 pioneers (designer Lin Jing, musician Liu Suola) were drawn to this disused and somewhat romantic industrial area because it provided space at low cost to make their very own creative universe.

It was not until 2001-2002 that a handful of artists – the prime mover being Huang Rui followed by Xu Yong, Li Xiangqun, etc, set their minds to creating something unprecedented in China: a contemporary art platform that would be in the public domain and open to all. From the start, their dream was to welcome all forms of art – painting, photography, artworks, performance art, video, etc. (later on they would add dance, theatre, film, etc). However, in order to exhibit and fund these art forms, they realised that what was lacking at that time in Beijing was a distribution system of complementary structures, such as artists' studios, galleries, foundations, spaces to rent, bookshops and artist residences. Their initial objective was not so clear cut, but was carried along on a heady wave of enthusiasm. Various projects were brought to life and the idea of making 798 the base for a community of 21st century artists was born. Furthermore, this was a chance to liberate contemporary art from the distribution constraints within which it had been trapped for the previous twenty years.

To truly measure the revolution ignited by 798, one needs to understand the contemporary art scene in China at the dawn of the 21st century. From the late seventies onwards, contemporary art developed on the margins of the art world. Official circuits considered it potentially subversive. In Beijing, the seat of state power and particularly sensitive to public expression, censorship was exercised more strictly than in any other city in China, so that contemporary art was still underground at the end of the nineties.

Artists chose to live in their own “artists’ villages” far from the city centre, where they felt a sense of security vis-a-vis an outside world that was often hostile towards them. A series of artists’ villages sprung up in Beijing from the end