

AS 发光体2号 Seen2

Karen Smith

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UCCA

Ullens Center for
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尤伦斯当代艺术中心

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Notable Artworks
by
Chinese Artists

Karen Smith

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FOREWORD

Karen Smith: Witness to a World

Karen Smith is the most important chronicler of the emergence of Chinese art. Since she arrived in Beijing in the early 1990s, she has scrupulously attended, processed, recorded, and documented the birth and maturation of an entire world. Her early years in China unfolded at a time before contemporary art was governed by formal systems, and her encounters in those days were mediated by complex webs of personal and professional connections. She spent the 1990s going to exhibitions and performances, talking to artists, and going home to write down her memories and interpretations of these encounters. In a world where things have changed so quickly and thoroughly, Smith's diaries are probably the most comprehensive firsthand account that remains.

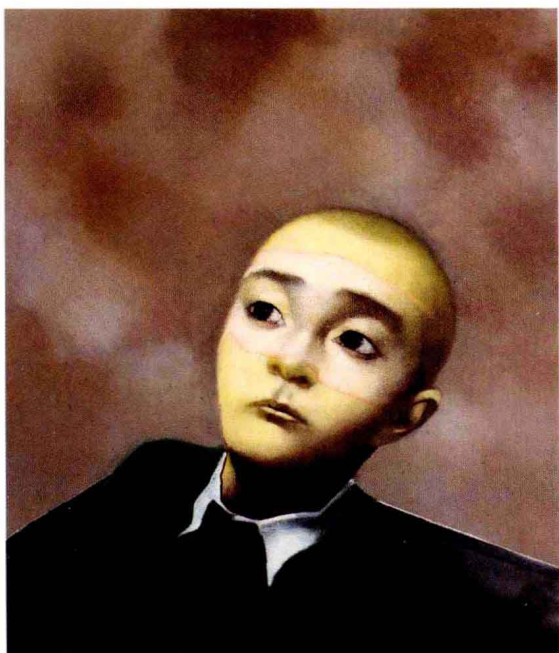
Though these early jottings form the basis for Smith's seminal book *Nine Lives*, a snapshot of the contemporary art scene in China through the personal and artistic stories of nine individuals which she authored in the early years of the twenty-first century, much more material from that period awaits publication in her next major book. Meanwhile, as the Chinese art scene has grown and flourished, so has Smith's place in it--she is now not simply a writer but also a curator, an arbiter, and a mediator in the broadest sense, offering her expertise to everyone from major Western institutions initiating projects in the PRC to newly founded Chinese museums looking to establish their taste and credentials. With her partner H.S. Liu, Smith has also acquired a deep expertise in Chinese photography, working on a major photographic history of Shanghai published at the time of that city's 2010 World Expo. But for Smith, even after two decades, the immediate written account remains the key vehicle by which she makes sense--for herself and her readers--of the complexities of Chinese art as they unfold, all around her, in real time.

The *As Seen* project was initiated two years ago by Post Wave Publishing Company, the publishers with whom Karen Smith had worked on several earlier titles including the Shanghai book. The idea was straightforward: Each year, for five years, she would choose fifty exhibitions that she found notable and write short accounts

of them. Accompanied by images, these volumes would become yearly references, reliable accounts of what had happened in a cultural field that continues to morph and grow. The books do not focus on the institutional or commercial developments that are all too often the way we signpost this story; in fact, the name of the gallery or museum where each exhibition took place is given rather secondary billing, collected together into an index at the back. Rather, this is an account of contemporary art over the course of a year told through much as the author experienced it: as a string of encounters with works by individual artists, a strand of aesthetic epiphanies, revelations, and recognitions that follow each other in chronological order.

Karen Smith has been a mentor and friend since I started my own work in China, about ten years after she began hers. During the autumn of 2002, I worked under her to edit the English catalogue for the first Guangzhou Triennial, and I will forever remember our weekly Tuesday morning sessions in her studio going over my translation of a chronology of the 1990s that was to be included in that volume. It was the Oxford tutorial system reinvented for early-2000s Beijing, with me reading my usually inept attempts to render a string of exhibitions and artist names into passable English, while she would expand and supplement the record with her deep firsthand knowledge of everything it contained. It is thus a great pleasure for me personally, and for the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art as an institution, to participate in the publication of this, the second volume in the *As Seen* series. Published simultaneously in English and Chinese versions, and distributed both through the official Chinese system and the international art world system, this volume goes a long way toward creating a common frame of reference for recent developments in Chinese art, both inside and beyond China.

Philip Tinari
director, UCCA



Zhang Xiaogang | 张
晓刚
Boy No.2, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm, 2012

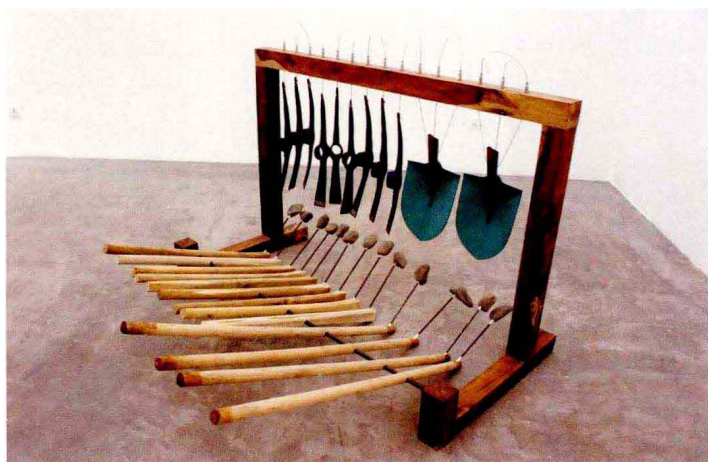
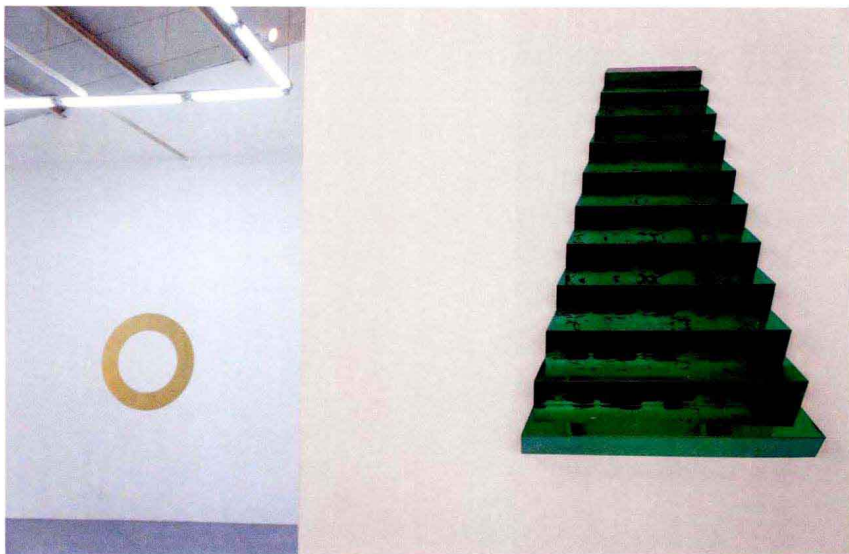
AS SEEN 2

*'The ancients would take years to mull over the correct answer to a question. Today we have only minutes to respond.'*¹

The words quoted above, from one of China's leading artists—the painter Zhang Xiaogang—were not, as might be imagined, written recently against the relentless pace of life in China in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Instead, this diary entry comes from almost thirty years earlier, in 1985. At that particular moment, viewed from the surface of society, economic reform was still more theory than practice. A Chinese art world was, however, beginning to emerge, signposted in the middle of that decade by the advent of the '85 New Wave. But even for the small number of artists involved—a tiny number relative to the size of China's population—the pace of life was far from accelerated; if anything, it was calmer than it had been in previous decades, notably during the last years of Mao Zedong's rule, which were marked by a frenetic succession of bitter ideological campaigns.

So if, in 1985, it seemed to Zhang Xiaogang that there were but minutes to respond, today, given the extreme demands of life in China—one of the few nations currently expanding in all directions at full throttle—that response time has been reduced to nanoseconds. There is barely pause for reflection: there is no time to pause. That seems to be true for all, be that artists, curators, critics, collectors, or even the gaze of a burgeoning public audience. No one intends this to be so. Rather, for those engaging with the art world, it is just a fact of having to accommodate an extraordinary number of invites, assignments, exhibitions, lectures, tours and mundane chores. All of that while simultaneously trying to keep up generally with the pace of change that is still perceived as unfolding into a bright new future, the arrival of which no one wishes to impede.

1. Zhang Xiaogang, 9 May 1985, in a letter to "Z.H.", *Amnesia and Memory - Zhang Xiaogang's Letters (1981-1996)*, Peking University Press, 2010, p.68



Gao Weigang
Vice, solo exhibition view

高
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Han Wuzhou
Piano e Forte, installation, 150 x 102
x 105 cm, 2011

韩
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Sui Jianguo
Legacy Mantle No. 1, clay maquette,
(h) 40 cm, 1998

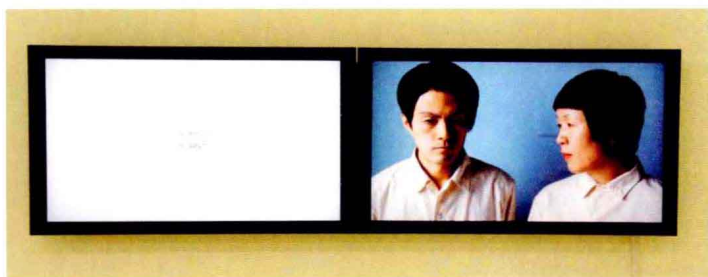
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The urgency here is both fuelled by the freedom from convention that imbued the Chinese art world with a particular dynamism in the mid-1980s, late 1990s, and early 2010s (as it regrouped after being driven off the rails by the explosion of the art market) and exacerbated by the lack of a cohesive, transparent art-world system. Add to this the emergence of social media as a primary source of information, promotion and publicity, as well as its role as a platform for the exchange of views, and one that demands daily (if not hourly) attention, and time simply evaporates.

If *Weibo* keeps the art world busy, it also increases the pressing nature of an already urgent obsession with “the next big thing”. Thus, as artists attempt to keep their careers on track, both the content and execution of works suggest that, in the absence of time to respond, they merely react. Encounters with the resultant works tend to encourage a similarly summary response in critics, curators and even audiences. In terms of the “contemporary”, the air of awe and meditative contemplation once associated with the experience of art is ever more diluted; the notion of a tortured artist engaged in a passionate search for meaning in life and a sense of the eternal is, it seems, officially dead. Well, almost.

This question of response versus reaction arose while preparing for this volume, and from surveying the volume of art recently produced in China, but this phenomenon did not spring up overnight. The problem is partly rooted in what generally constitutes post-postmodern art; that which is termed “contemporary” art. There is an air of duplicity in the nature of much art that aligns itself with this label, and not just in China. But in China, against the ongoing rush to internationalise and compete, and more, that duplicity can seem pronounced in a seam of art that, superficially, has all the right qualities and ticks all the right boxes; that speaks to the moment, to the perceived socio-political mood. But, when prodded, these elements are sometimes revealed to be red herrings: like a stage set with its painted backdrops and clever illusions. Not all art falls into this mire, of course. The key is weeding out the followers to give the leaders their full due.

In identifying strong works, one trend did suggest itself: a small number of significant artists appears to be opting out of the fast lane, taking a step back behind the front line to carve out time for a closer engagement with a personal value system as the core of their work. Gu Dexin's decision to retire entirely is an extreme example. Ditto, Geng Jianyi who has always been true to his particular stance, even if that meant disappearing from public view. More recently, Zhang Xiaogang and younger artists like



Zhang Peili

480 Minutes (detail), colour
30-channel video work, 480', 2008

Yangzi

Dialogue, colour two-channel video,
45', 2012

Double Fly

Death in Basel, colour single-channel
video, 17' 47", 2011

张培力

Yangzi

双飞

Liu Wei, Cao Fei and even Hu Xiaoyuan have each demonstrated a desire to take back control of the creative process.

The front line in China today is dominated by highly active young artists, a good portion of them, as I hope this volume demonstrates, producing exciting, innovative art. The best are defined by the energy and assertiveness they deploy through intuitive and unhesitating gestures and actions. Their works capture brilliant instances of vision. Their liberating and fearless path of “anything goes” leads to real innovation. If that’s hard to spot at times it’s because there is a far larger volume of artists producing art—this, the duplicitous portion—that is simply “anything you can get away with.” The problem is that the resulting artworks can appear disparagingly similar to the innovative pieces, which is great for clever individuals with a talent for imitation, but not so great for innovators deserving of attention.

“Anything you can get away with” as an observation of some art is not a recent thing, but words published by the venerable Marshall McLuhan, often described as a twentieth-century seer, in his seminal 1964 publication *Understanding Media*. McLuhan also wrote: “We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.” Events and attitudes in China show that to be a largely Western perspective. Contemporary art in China has little relation to history in the Western sense of continuum. Today, in terms of the cultural sphere, there are, for example, no museums where an overview of modern and contemporary art can be seen. And there are too few books on the evolution of China’s contemporary art forms; not a single tome viewed by consensus as objective or factually reliable.

The mindset of artists at work today feels unconsciously closer to that of the Italian Futurists, active a hundred years earlier, than any other state in evidence today. Yet the Futurists sought to destroy an “old world”—with museums they described as graveyards—that was deemed irrelevant to their future. In China, the art world increasingly sees the museum as an ultimate resting place: hence, perhaps, the astonishing volume that has, in recent years, sprung up across the country. We need rear-view mirrors. They show succeeding generations where they came from, warn of the pitfalls of unregulated human acts, and mark what has been overcome to endure the passage of time. Sentimentality aside, they offer confidence more than comfort per se. In China, the lack of an effective rear-view mirror is signalled by the ongoing state of nostalgia—a yearning for a different time that effectively obliterates history—revealed in the work of artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, but also Chen Wei, Utopia Group, Hai Bo,



Wang Guangyi

Sacred Object, oil cloth, lime, sand,
120 x 80 x 1000 cm, 2012

GUEST

*Standing on the Shoulders of Little
Clowns*, exhibition view, 2012

He An

Detail of installation, *Who is Alone
Now Will Stay Alone Forever*, 2012

Xie Nanxing

Velasquez' Innocent X, oil on canvas,
150 x 200 cm, 2010

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