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Synchronicities and Chinese Conceptualism:

The World of the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books (1994-1997)*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Art History

by

Ho Yuen Chan

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Synchronicities and Chinese Conceptualism:

The World of the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books (1994-1997)*

By

Ho Yuen Chan

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Hui-shu Lee, Chair

This paper examines three book-objects that have exerted an indelible impact on the emergence of contemporary art practice in China. Published between 1994–97, the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books* are most commonly known as the first independent, artist-run books of contemporary art (dangdai yishu) in China post-1989. Beyond considering their archival status and examining the books through a framework of dual “synchronicities,” this paper traces how the *BWG Cover Books* simultaneously created both a novel physical anthology of Chinese contemporary art, as well as a real and imagined community of nomadic practitioners. In simultaneously producing and archiving ephemeral, concept-based artworks and performances, the BWG Cover Books and their collaborators formed a distinct, conceptualist, and contemporary trajectory within the history of Chinese art.

The thesis of Felix Ho Yuen Chan is approved.

Meredith Cohen

Saloni Mathur

Hui-shu Lee, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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In October 2017, the Guggenheim Museum staged the much-anticipated survey entitled *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*. Twenty-eight years later, the “post-1989” historiographic context still seems impossible to avoid when it comes to surveying Chinese contemporary art; it is a significant temporal threshold not only for Chinese cultural discourse, but also for all aspects of Chinese life. Specifically, the year 1989 permanently altered the trajectory of Chinese contemporary art and culture through two major events. The first event was the “seminal, terminal” *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, which was shut down, twice, in just eight days after the opening: the first time after artist Xiao Lu fired two bullets into her installation *Dialogue*, and the second time after multiple bomb threats.¹ Many saw Xiao Lu’s gunshot as a “death dance” for the tragic Tiananmen Incident that followed just four months after, on June 4th, casting a permanent shadow over democratic reform and societal change.² Not only did the two events in 1989 crush artists’ hopes for that experimental, transgressive practices could ever be officially realized within China, but they also shook the existential core within many artists, resulting in no less than “a spiritual tradition in tatters” regarding their ideology and practice.³ Together, the two events would establish the nomadic and exiled status of Chinese modern and contemporary art, thereby also amplifying its avant-gardist aura in the West.

Commissioned to respond to the exhibition’s ambitious prompt (to survey China’s avant-gardist art practice post 1989), artist, critic, and curator Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969) tasked himself with creating a roadmap, or a prerequisite of sorts, for a largely non-Chinese audience before they proceeded to view the exhibition. The hybrid map-scroll spans over seven meters wide (just under

¹ For a recollection of the event, see Gao Minglu, “The ‘China/Avant-Garde’ Exhibition of 1989,” in *Total Modernity and the Avant Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 141-188. Also, see Chang Tsong-Zung, “Into the Nineties,” in *Chinese New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2001), 1-7.

² Huang Rui, “Chinese Time: 1989, Today and the Moment,” in *365 art days in China and Germany* (Beijing: Thinking Hands, 2009), 470.

³ *Ibid.*

twenty-three feet), and was hung in the entrance gallery of the Guggenheim's rotunda (Fig.1, 2). It offers a rare glimpse of what the "post-89" world looked like through an artist's eyes, almost three decades later. Unsatisfied with the collapsed causality that the exhibition title implied, Qiu significantly expanded the map's timeline beyond the prompt of the title: It stretches to include the beginning of the twentieth century — from the New Culture Movement in the 1910s to the Cultural Revolution era from 1966 to 1976—and stops just on the shore of the hyperconnected, global-capitalist world of today. What connects past, present, and future is an imagined terrain of mountains (*shan*) and water (*shui*) that sprawl in rhizomic patterns. The whimsical arrangement of spatial elements soon emerges as a self-reflexive mapping of Chinese modernity. Political ideologies, national policies, and global "isms" collide into one another, forming magnified canyons, valleys, and seas (i.e., "canyon of globalization," "valley of reform era," "peak of China Dream"). Between summits and schisms lie numerous artistic movements, works, and exhibitions that jockey for existence, seen as checkpoints on meandering train tracks, with plenty of detours made on the way (i.e., "curatorial experiments," "foreign galleries," "auction house road"). At opportune times, toponyms denoting various artist collectives and independent exhibition venues coalesce into plots of interconnected lands, forming sovereign communities that resemble recluse villages. In a similar manner, rivers and creeks diverge and rejoin at dispersed junctions, all flowing eventually into the stormy "sea of the cool war" — Qiu's cheeky metaphor for a dystopic future.

Qiu Zhijie's experimentation with cartographic technology and information systems promotes an awareness (more so than understanding) of seemingly disconnected truths.⁴ The unusual poignancy of the map lies not in its ability to tame fragmented episodes of histories into teleological models; instead, it stems from Qiu's depiction of the profound entanglement of personal

⁴ Press Release, "Qiu Zhijie: Mappa Mundi," Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Released January 19, 2019, Beijing, China.

histories, artistic aspirations, and sweeping social events—thereby asking its viewers to stand, simply, “before time.”⁵ The map willingly exposes its inability to “explain” history, showing art historical events unfolding precariously within unpredictable, yet decisive socio-political events and ideologies. In Benedict Anderson’s words, Qiu’s intensely personal historiographical account visualizes an “apprehension of time,” defined by the powerless anxiety of those who live in “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time.”⁶ Living through such displacements himself, Chinese rock musician Cui Jian famously evoked a similar psychic portrait, through the lyrics of his 1989 song, “It’s not that I don’t understand, it’s just that the world changes too quickly.”⁷

Qiu’s map (and/or his historical consciousness) concerns the central inquiry of this essay a great deal; it poses the provocative question of how one maps the peculiar “time” and space” of Chinese contemporary art. It is no surprise that in a section of the map entitled “The Reform of Media,” Qiu Zhijie prominently features *Black Cover Book* (1994), the inaugural issue of the three-volume artist-run publication that was instrumental in propelling Qiu’s career as an emerging conceptual artist in China during the 1990s (Fig.3).⁸ Published over two decades ago, the *Black*, *White*, and *Grey Cover Books* have attained a seminal status as the primary documents of the Chinese avant-garde art (*qianwei yishu*), often with most attention given to the inaugural *Black Cover Book* (Fig.4).⁹ Next to *Black Cover Book*, Qiu also mapped Zhang Huan’s (b. 1965) performance work *12*

⁵ For one of the most illuminating writings on this matter, see Anthony Grafton, “A New Chart of History,” in *Cartographies of Time* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 96-149.

⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, Before the Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” trans. Peter Mason, in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31-44. Also, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community* (New York: Verso, 2006), 22, 26.

⁷ Cui Jian’s 1989 song, “*Bu Shi Wo Bu Ming Bai?*” (It’s Not That I Don’t Understand), included in his album *Rock n’Roll on the New Long March* (1989), China Tourism Sound and Video Publishing Company.

⁸ Qiu Zhijie contributed to the *White* and *Grey Cover Book*.

⁹ See Philip Tinari and Stephanie H. Tung, “Black, White, and Grey Cover Books,” in *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017), 168-170. Note that the word “avant-garde art” “modern art,” and

Square Meters (1994), the collective performance *To Add One Meter to An Anonymous Mountain* (1997), as well as other momentous multimedia works that emerged in the second half of the 1990s—most notably done by artists who resided in the short-lived Beijing’s East Village (1993-1997) (Fig.5).¹⁰ These works—widely cited for their confrontational and allegorical performances of the “body” — belong to a decade full of vibrant experimentations in performance art in Chinese contemporary art and have since been included in the canon of contemporary performance art globally.¹¹ Photographic and video reproductions of these works are routinely highlighted within major international surveys of Chinese contemporary art.¹² That Qiu mapped the *Black Cover Book* next to such transformative artworks reveals the best kept ‘secret that’s not a secret’ of Chinese contemporary art history: *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books* served as the primary site for these then-marginalized works—where they made their collective debut in the short-lived anthology published between 1994 and 1997—allowing for a process of recognition and appraisal that would bring about their eventual canonization.

Frequently cited yet seldom carefully examined as book objects, the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Book[s]* (abbreviated here on as the *BWG Cover Books*) have too often been reduced to a silent repository of the most compelling performance and concept-based artworks in Chinese art history to-date. The *BWG Cover Books* demonstrate a paradoxical status: while its archival significance is

“contemporary art” in the Chinese context do not signify specific time frame; instead, the three were often used interchangeably to signify nuance between intention of the artist and other characterizations. For more, see Philip Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art’,” in *Art and China After 1989: Theater of The World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017), 50-67.

¹⁰ For the most extensive literature on Beijing East Village thus far, see Wu Hung, *Rong Rong’s East Village: 1993-1998* (New York: Chamber’s Fine Art, 2003). Also, see RongRong, *RongRong’s Diary* (Gottingen and New York: Steidl and The Walther Collection, 2019).

¹¹ Catherine Wood, *Performance in Contemporary Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2018), 79-81, 146.

Philip Tinari points to how *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition at Asia Society Galleries and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, along with Zhang Huan’s move to New York, contributed greatly to the American, and Western reputation of body-based performance. See Philip Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art’,” in *Art and China After 1989: Theater of The World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017), 59.

¹² For instance, Zhang Huan’s *Add One Meter to an Anonymous Pond* was the cover of Gao Minglu, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, (Berkeley, University of California, 1998).

widely recognized, the trilogy's visionary role in articulating and merging distances, discourses, and aspirations is often overlooked. Published in 1994, 1995, and 1997, the *BWG Cover Books* and their founding editors Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Xu Bing, (b. 1955), Feng Boyi (b. 1960), and Zeng Xiaojun (b. 1954), sought to broach and survey a wide range of site-specific, concept-driven performance art and visual art practices that were burgeoning both in China and the rest of the world during the 1990s, zooming in on artists' activities from Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Hong Kong, to Rome, New York, Paris, Singapore, and the Netherlands (Fig.6, 7, 8). Furthermore, the *BWG Cover Books* were the earliest known publications in China to systematically introduce seminal writings and reproductions by Western conceptualist figures such as Marcel Duchamp (1887-1986), Jeff Koons (b. 1955), Joseph Kosuth (b. 1945), Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), Jenny Holzer (b. 1950), and Barbara Kruger (b. 1945), sparking cross-cultural dialogue between geo-temporal spheres and discourses. Lastly, the books' "Art News" section aimed to create an up-to-date summary of noteworthy exhibitions by Chinese and international artists around the world, further envisioning a theater of the local and the global. Retrospectively speaking, the *BWG Cover Books* and their participants displayed a prescient commitment to local art ecology, as well as to fostering a "conscious internationalism" that bridged distant modes of modernity and contemporaneity.

Envisioned as an alternative exhibition space, the *BWG Cover Books*' status as crucial documents of Chinese contemporary art must also be contextualized *in situ* with the often-overlooked phenomenon of artists' books, a transformed and transformative artistic form of 20th century art.¹³ The reproducibility and portability of printed matter and multiples has been instrumental in forming informal networks within Euro-American modernist art movements such as

¹³ Johanna Drucker, "The Artist's Book as Idea and Form," in *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 2004), 1.

Russian Futurism, Dadaism Fluxus, Surrealism, and the American avant-garde.¹⁴ The archival and discursive potential of the book-object was famously articulated when Marcel Duchamp – Ai Weiwei’s (b. 1957) main avant-garde referent – mounted one of the most rigorous “archival system cum mobile museum[s]” of modern art, by miniaturizing his entire oeuvre to-date into a limited-edition book-object, *La boîte-en-valise*, in 1935 (Fig.9)¹⁵ Recent scholarship on modernist movements such as Dadaism and Fluxus focus on excavating not just the visual, but also the ontological implications of multiples which enable “a multitude of performed or materialized manifestations,” made possible by materials such as event scores, diagrams, and documentary images.¹⁶

Within the expansive field of transnational modernisms, the study of artists’ journals, periodicals, and book-objects has also served as an especially useful model that places pressure on the historized dichotomy of “center” and “periphery,” denoting a binary between Euro-American and non-Western modernity, as well as metropolitan and regional avant-gardism.¹⁷ Within the paradigmatic case study of the Osaka-based *Gutai* Art Association (*Gutai Bijitsu Kyokai*), Ming Tiampo has foregrounded the importance of *Gutai* journals in communicating its members’ ongoing engagement with informal and gestural abstraction in Japan—and, with this mobile medium, transcending their geographic isolation from metropolitan centers of modernist avant-gardism such as Tokyo, Paris, and New York. Ming borrows Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “lines of flight” to conceptualize the traveling that the books do for the artists, by dint of their self-circulation—closing the pragmatic and perceptual gap of *Gutai*’s geographic “periphery” (in

¹⁴ Drucker, “The Artist’s Book as Idea and Form,” 11. See David Joselit, “Dada’s Diagrams,” in *The Dada Seminars (Casva Seminar Papers)* (Washington: The National Gallery of Art, 2005), 221-239. Also, see Natilee Harren, “Diagramming Form, from Graphic Notation to the Fluxus Event Score,” in *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 27-70.

¹⁵ Okwui Enwezor, “Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument,” in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 10-51, 14.

¹⁶ Natilee Harren, “Prelude” in *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiple, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1-27.

¹⁷ Ming Tiampo, “Introduction,” in *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1-9.

Osaka).¹⁸ Ultimately, Ming argues that recognizing artists' books as an autonomous medium could serve as an effective foil against the "cultural mercantilism" found within the teleological model of art history, characterized by the uneven, single-sided "discourse of modernism that regulates the reception of cultural trade" from the West to the East.¹⁹

Similarly, the study of Chinese visual culture in the twentieth century confronts comparable anxieties and problematics of "influence" and "adaptation," which have concerned art historical readings of Chinese art since the late 19th century.²⁰ Recent scholarship has consisted of attempts to account for the at-once political, technological, and ideological experience of "modernities" through both case studies and self-reflexive methodologies.²¹ Pitching forward to the late 20th century, an additional set of challenges is posed with regards to understanding the transference of Euro-American postmodernist discourses to the increasingly mobile and diasporic arena of Chinese contemporary art by late 1980s. Specifically, *haiwai* (overseas) artists took part in a complex web of artistic and ideological confluence alongside local artistic communities— in France, in the United States, in Germany, in Japan—problematizing the binary framework of "Western conceptualism" and "Chinese Art."²² To put it simply: when a Chinese artist (such as the *BWG Cover Books*' artist-

¹⁸ Ming, "Lines of Flight: The Gutai Journal," in *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 75-98, 76. Ming writes, "Rather than just relying on the possibility of being noticed by *Life* magazine or *Art News*, Gutai took matters into their own hands and created a system workaround— the Gutai journal. Gutai members understood not only that they were situated on the geographic periphery of the art world but also that they were on the cusp of a generation change that would see artists taking charge of their own legacies, using new technologies to expand their geographic scope."

¹⁹ Ming Tiampo, "Introduction," in *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (University of Chicago Press), 4.

²⁰ Julie F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, "Art in the Creation of a New Nation," in *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 27-45.

²¹ See Gao Minglu, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth: Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 133-164. Gao Minglu writes, "the model of periodization natural to Euro-American modernity may not fit the experience of most non-Western countries, and in particular Third World societies, which lack a historical line of progression from premodern to modern and postmodern." Also, see Peggy Wang, "Introduction: Actors in the World," in *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 1-20.

²² Melissa Chiu, "Introduction: The Two Worlds of Chinese Art," in *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2006), 7-15.

editors Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing) sojourned overseas and established artistic and ideological contacts with geographically distant modes of artistic production, what have they really “brought back” with them when they returned to China? How does one begin to historicize the “gradient of influence,” while accounting for artists’ active agency in negotiating and narrating their increasingly complex identities?²³

In part addressing these challenges, I propose the framework of “synchronization” to examine the *BWG Cover Books*’ goals, namely 1) *inward* alignment, defined by artists’ urgent desire to engage with an immediate, local post-1989 reality, and 2) *outward* connectivity, wherein the same artists merged their immediate contexts (in China or overseas) with the global conceptualist community. Note that the synchronicities proposed here should not be equated with the “euchronistic consonance” that French theorist and historian Georges Didi-Huberman famously demythologized.²⁴ The “synchronicities” aspired to by the artist-editors of the *BWG Cover Books* do not seek to construct an empirical sense of spatial and temporal continuity (“a concordance of time”), nor are they motivated by an indebtedness to the Euro-American modernist avant-gardism (to “catch up”). This dual approach aims to provide necessary contextualization to the striking experimentations reflected within and articulated by the *BWG Cover Books*, as well as the stylistic confluences, artistic impulses, and disparate worlds the books embody. The pluralization of “synchronicities” hopes to salvage the interrelations and affinities shared among various regional modernisms, while stressing that such interrelations must be anachronistically and dialectally conceived. Ultimately, it hopes to account for the hypothetical space that the *BWG Cover Books*

²³ Phillip Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology,” 58. Tinari writes, “How to account for a gradient of influence that did, throughout most of this period, run primarily from the outside in, without sacrificing the autonomy of the artists involved, or negating the very real moments at which their works attained global relevance, even influence?”

²⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, Before the Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” trans. Peter Mason, in *Compelling Visuality the Work of Art in and out of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31-44, 35. Didi-Huberman writes, “Let us give a name to this canonical attitude of the historian: it is nothing but the quest for a concordance of times, a quest for *euchronistic consonance*.”

travels, which is simultaneously concerned with the lived reality of Chinese modernism and its ideological commitment toward the utopic project of "international contemporaneity."²⁵

The "Book Object" in China

The *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* derived their names from the monochrome appearance of each issue's cover. In Chinese, they are known as "black-covered book," "white-covered book," and "grey-covered book" (*Heipishu*, *Baipishu* and *Huipishu*). Each book is approximately 160 pages and measures approximately 9 x 7 inches (22.9 x 17.8 cm).²⁶ Plans for the *BWG Cover Books* began in 1993, when Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing were at the end of their sojourn in New York City. Upon their return to Beijing, Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing (founding editors), and Feng Boyi (managing editor) located a publishing house in Shenzhen—the city that shares a border with Hong Kong.²⁷ The three remained in Shenzhen for two weeks to typeset and manage the printing of the books. The founding editors, Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun released the following statement, clearly stating their goals for the project (Fig.10),

We hope that this medium serves as a platform for Chinese modern (*xiandai*) artists to publish, interpret, and exchange their experimental art. Through this interaction, communication, and debate, we hope to create an environment for Chinese modern (*xiandai*) art to survive and grow.²⁸

²⁵ See Tiampo, "Lines of Flight: The Gutai Journal," 75. Ming Tiampo has also used the term, as well as Arjun Appadurai's term "mediascape" to describe *Gutai Journal*. The term "international contemporaneity" borrows from Reiko Tomii's book title, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*. Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016). Also, see Lü Peng, "Conceptual Art and its Derivatives," in *A History of Art in 20th-Century China* (New York: Chartra Books, 2010), 1039-1061.

²⁶ Philip Tinari and Stephanie H. Tung, "Black, White, and Grey Cover Books," in *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications), 168-171.

²⁷ Feng Boyi picked the alias *Zigong*, the Chinese homophone with the word "ovary." Zeng Xiaojun, another founding editor, remained in United States at the time and provided major funding support for the books. See Feng Boyi, "The Before and Aftermath of The Editing of the Black Cover Book," *Art World (yishu shijie)*, issue 260 (January and February 2012). Digital Access.

²⁸ Edited by Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Xu Bing, and Feng Boyi (Zi Gong), *Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company), 159. Original Chinese text reads, 「以此媒介為中國現代藝術家的試驗性藝術提供發表、解釋、交流的機會。通過這種相互參與、交流和探討。為中國現代藝術創造生存環境，並促進其發展。」

Upon first glance, the books' monochrome design and adopted title might appear to be a gesture towards neutrality, or reminiscent of Minimalist language of the 1970s; however, the books' innocuous visual appearance aims to recall and subvert a highly specific group of books from the decades preceding and following the Cultural Revolution. Although books have played a decisive role in the linguistic and epistemological formation of Chinese artistic and cultural discourse for over ten centuries, "book form" took its most radical turn by the second half of the twentieth century.²⁹ During the ten-year Cultural Revolution (also known as the Great Leap Forward), one book established itself as the ultimate symbol of political orthodoxy and authority. Published two years before the Cultural Revolution in 1964, *Quotations from Mao Zedong*, also known as "The Little Red Book," (*hongbao shu*) was a compilation of lectures and quotes by Chairman Mao Zedong (Fig.11). A household item for virtually every Chinese citizen, *The Little Red Book* had a distribution of over one billion copies globally and became a stand-in for the "radical ideological purification" and eradication that affected artists and intellectuals to this day.³⁰

The name of the books derives from imported books with a plain soft paper cover and often marked with wording such as "closed-circuit publication. For internal review only." "Closed-circuit books" included a wide range of texts consisting of foreign fiction, non-fiction, tool books, and manuals. From the 1950s and well into the late 70s, an expansive group of foreign books collectively known as "closed-circuit books" (*neibushu*), also often known as "covered-books," were made available in China. These volumes had a low print run and would only be made available to high-ranking party members. Some books were specifically printed as antithetical examples to Communist ideology and the "anti-revolutionary" cause. For example, literary works by the likes of Yukio

²⁹ Wu Hung, "Introduction," in *Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute, 2006), 1-23. See also K.T. Wu, "The Chinese Book: Its Evolution and Development," *T'ien Hsia Monthly* 3, no. 1 (August 1936): 25-33.

³⁰ David Joselit, "Synchronicity," in *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2020), 38.

Mishima featured descriptors such as, “counter-revolutionary material, published for the purpose of criticism.” (Fig.12) Closed-circuit books would be familiar to the *BWG Cover Books*’ chief editor Ai Weiwei, who grew up among scores of such books in the household of his father Ai Qing (1910-1996), an influential poet and a veteran Communist party member. During the Cultural Revolution, however, Ai Weiwei had to help his father destroy his vast book collection for the sake of personal safety, as Ai Qing was condemned as a counterrevolutionary rightist during the Cultural Revolution.³¹ In later interviews, Ai recounted how the experience significantly impacted his relationship with books, which stayed with him as he moved to New York in 1981.

Following the death of Mao in 1976, the four-decade long economic and cultural embargo on contact with the outside world showed signs of lifting in the early 1980s, welcoming a series of political and economic reforms. As a result, art academies were able to subscribe to foreign magazines and purchase exhibition catalogues. Art journals, artist books, and catalogues served as crucial “contact zones” that fostered nascent explorations of and experimentations with artistic approaches and expressions in China.³² This open channel coincided with the first post-Cultural Revolution fine art graduates from academies, which had reopened starting in 1978, forming the first generation of the “independent artists they believed themselves to be.”³³ As a result, imported publications and catalogues became the quintessential platform to aspire to, and an opportunity to digest centuries of Euro-American art history, engendering no less than a “mind-blowing” response from arts students learning and dreaming of “innovative attitudes, ambitions, and creative activities

³¹ Various biographies and interviews of Ai Weiwei have touched on the relationship between him and his father Ai Qing. A specific interview with regards to books can be found at “Bu Du Shu de Ai Weiwei,” The Beijing News, 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060831001845/http://culture.thebeijingnews.com/0834/2006/05-26/012@085019.htm>

³² See James Clifford’s, “Museum as Contact Zone” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 189-219.

³³ Ibid.

around the country.”³⁴ Nevertheless, exhibition catalogues and artists’ monographs remained highly scarce and rare. In one instance, at Sichuan Art Academy, only one book on French impressionism was available. Being so precious and in such high demand, the book was cased in a glass vitrine with a new page turned every day, allowing students to study or sketch the displayed plate on the page.³⁵ At the same time, officially approved art magazines of Chinese origin prospered briefly during the 80s. A notable example would be *Meishu Yicong* (Art Translation Anthology), which was revived from the same periodical that had been discontinued during the Cultural Revolution (Fig.13).³⁶ It ran monthly from 1980-1989. *Meishu Yicong* systematically introduced art historical and critical texts on 19th-century European art movements such as Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, as well as seminal writings by famed art historians such as Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky.³⁷

The immense persuasive power of *Little Red Book*, the secretive status of *Neibushu*, and the discursive potentials of publications such as *Meishu Yicong* all factored into the making of the *BWG Cover Books* in intricate ways; or to put it more precisely, they set up the very paradigm that the artist-editors of the *BWG Cover Books* aimed either to manifest or to subvert. In comparison to magazines such as *Meishu Yicong* focused on 19th-century European modernism, and official magazines such as *Meishu*, the *Black*, *White*, and *Grey Cover Books* knowingly positioned themselves as taboo material and circulated among a clandestine audience. Managing editor Feng Boyi later recalled, “[Ai, Xu, and

³⁴ Karen Smith, “Introduction,” in *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 18-25. “A primary source of inspiration was the access artists enjoyed to publications imported from the free world. All of the individuals who played an important role in the New Art Movement— as the avant-garde is known in China— spent the most instructive hours of their academy training in its library. In the early 1980s, educational institutes were permitted to subscribe to international magazines and to order books from overseas during the Mao era. There was no commercial relationship between China and most western nations that would have facilitated this. For the art academies this represented a phenomenal range of previously blacklisted catalogues, monographs and art histories...What students gleaned from their pages was literally mind-blowing. All was hungrily imbibed and once digested regurgitated in a fusion of innovative attitudes, ambitions and creative activities around the country,” 19-20.

³⁵ Liao Wen, “Unrepentant Prodigal Sons: The Temper of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Chinese New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2001), li-lix, liii.

³⁶ See anonymous, “Introduction to the Reissue,” in *Mei Shu Yi Cong Art Translation Anthology*, Inaugural Issue 1980 (Zhejiang: Zhejiang Art Academy), 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Zeng] acutely detected a sense of obligation and responsibility that this epoch had bestowed on them.”³⁸ The editorial board originally brainstormed various titles, and at one point considered the much more provocative title *Hongqi* (red flag).³⁹ Eventually, the editors settled on the subtler title *Black Cover Book*. The journals were originally intended to be released quarterly among the Chinese artistic community both in China and overseas, with a print run of 3000 for each issue.⁴⁰ But due to a difference in editorial vision, Xu Bing and Feng Boyi dropped out of the project after the first issue, while Ai Weiwei and Zeng Xiaojun remained on board to edit the remaining, final two issues. *White* and *Grey Cover Books*, published respectively in 1995 and 1997, arguably reflect the singular editorial vision of Ai Weiwei, with the help of managing editor Zhuang Hui. In the spring of 2000, the original editors of *Black Cover Book* reconvened hoping to organize a thematic exhibition entitled “Doing Whatever” (*Zenme Nong Douxing*). But Feng Boyi recalled that “the mood and spirit felt in the beginning of the 90s when we collaborated on the *Black Cover Book* was completely lost. On the notion of ‘doing whatever’ — perhaps ‘not doing anything’ was also one way of illustrating ‘doing whatever.’” Feng’s recollection signaled that the editors themselves felt like the short span of time between 1994 to 1997 represented a distinct zeitgeist and environment – something even they themselves found difficult to reconstruct or rehabilitate.

Confrontation and Negotiation of the “Chinese” Artist in New York

³⁸ Feng Boyi, *Art World* 藝術世界 (*yishu shijie*), issue 260 (January and February 2012). Digital Access: <http://www.yishushijie.com.cn/magazines/content-1165.aspx>

³⁹ Lee Ambrozy, “Introduction to: ‘A Conversation with Hsieh Tehching, from The Black Cover Book,’” *ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (2015): 97–107.

⁴⁰ Philip Tinari and Stephanie H. Tung, “Black, White, and Grey Cover Books,” in *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017), 168-170. According to the recollection of Feng Boyi, however, the *Black Cover Book* had an initial print run of 2000. Also, see Feng Boyi, “The Before and Aftermath of The Editing of the Black Cover Book,” *Art World* (*yishu shijie*), issue 260 (January and February 2012).

To fully understand the ideological conception of *Black, White, Grey Cover Books*, one must trace back to founding editors Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing's sojourn in New York from late 1980s to early 1990s. Specifically, it can be traced back to a significant conversation that took place between Ai and Xu, with performance artist Hsieh Tehching (b. 1950) on October 25th, 1993, in New York. This dialogue would subsequently be transcribed and serve as the opening piece for the *Black Cover Book*; more importantly, it would raise central inquiries that resonate through all three books across four years. Spanning nine full pages, the trio covers a wide range of topics and issues, including the Gulf War, Marcel Duchamp's artistic legacy, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the "gambit" nature of modern avant-gardism.⁴¹ Tactile or technical perspectives on artmaking were conspicuously absent; instead, the three artists were most occupied with how to deal with the existential crisis of an overseas Chinese artist within the increasingly capitalist New York art scene, as well as the global capitalist museum and art market system in the 1990s. What connected the artist-editors Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei, and Hsieh Tehching, was a deep anxiety as immigrant artists coming "late to the scene." (Fig.14). Whereas Ai Weiwei lamented increasing alienation between art and social reality, Hsieh maintained the position that artistic practice must be rooted in personal experience. The following exchange encapsulates their diverging stances with regards to an artist's engagement in "systems" of cultural production:

Xu: In fact, everyone must belong to some sort of system. The only difference is whether it is "not by choice" or "by choice." When you come from Taiwan to the United States in order to enter the "system" of international vanguardism, this is a choice.

Hsieh: It is hard to say, that's not necessarily the case. We came to the United States to absorb some of the quintessence of the West. We all have to find a place to live, it is just a matter of convenience, it is whatever. You don't have to be in New York, you can be in Wisconsin or some other place. If you could realistically do some things and do them with freedom, then you do not necessarily have to be in New York.

⁴¹ Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits: 1888-1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 20.

Ai: I want to reach a “zero” state —where one does not have to do a particular thing and minimizes the effort to survive other affairs and be exposed to fewer restraints and influences from the external environment. Like the vacuum or constant temperature state in a laboratory, a standard condition. A common standard is a collective issue for humans and not bound to specific time and place, like a majority of political movements and cultural trends.⁴²

Among the first in his generation to move to New York from his native Beijing in 1981, Ai Weiwei first settled in Berkeley, California, then Philadelphia, and later enrolled briefly at Parsons School of Art in New York, studying under artist Sean Scully.⁴³ Although Ai Weiwei’s return to Beijing after a decade-long sojourn in New York could be historicized as a turning point in Chinese contemporary art in its own right, his sojourn must be further understood within the greater context of the increasingly mobility and cultural contacts that touched artists’ lives by the early 1990s. Contrary to belief, New York—home of the modernist giants that tremendously influenced his practice (Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Joseph Kosuth)—did not provide Ai’s preordained entry into the world of high modernism, nor was it the modern art pilgrimage site that supposedly cracked open his break with traditional Chinese art making. Rather, Ai’s decade in New York was marked by odd jobs with newspaper agencies, house cleaning, and paintings portraits at Times Square. That being said, Ai Weiwei’s apartment on West 3rd Street became a hub for diasporic Chinese artists and intellectuals, including Xu Bing, Hsieh Tehching, poet Bei Dao, Shu Ting, and composer Tan Dun. Notably, Beat-generation poet, writer, and photographer Allen Ginsberg also frequented his apartment.⁴⁴

To Ai Weiwei, the New York art scene in the 1980s presented a refreshing degree of personal and artistic autonomy; however, he was equally disillusioned by the rapid changes afoot

⁴² Ai, Zeng, Xu, and Feng (Zi Gong), “An Interview in Hsieh Tehching,” in *Black Cover Book* (Hog Kong: Taitei Publishing Company, 1994), 8-17.

⁴³ Ai Weiwei, Stephanie H. Tung, and Alison Klayman, “Interviews, Conducted by Stephanie H. Tung, Alison Klayman and Ai Weiwei,” in *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* (Beijing: Three Shadows Press Limited, 2010), 33-41.

⁴⁴ See “Plates,” *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993*, 43-294.

which, in his opinion, detracted from the vibrant global art center that he idealized.⁴⁵ Whereas alternative social spaces in New York flourished from the 1950s to the 1970s, the 80s presented unprecedented challenges around dwindling funding, censorship, as well as other factors that greatly affected many artists, as well as independent and alternative venues.⁴⁶ For example, the National Endowment of Art, a central source of funding for many independent arts spaces, was severely reduced in New York in the 1980s.⁴⁷ Additionally, commercial galleries and real estate developers began to displace traditional art districts such as Chelsea and SoHo at a drastic scale. As a result, the alternative spaces movement in the mid- to late-60s, which was a “radical, utopian effort to circumvent the commercial gallery system, especially its social exclusivity and economic prerequisites,” faced a steady decline towards the end of the twentieth century and to this day.⁴⁸

From the conversation, it appears that Ai, Hsieh, and Xu projected their concerns around their crisis of identity as diasporic Chinese artists living in the West, who see increasing exposure in the arena of “global” contemporary art in the 1990s.⁴⁹ For example, the artists-editors were definitely aware of the *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) exhibition staged at the Centre de Pompidou in Paris, the first blockbuster survey of global contemporary art in the postcolonial context. Notably, *Magiciens de la Terre* featured the works by Chinese artists Huang Yongping (b. 1954), Gu Dexin (b. 1962), and Yang Jiechang (b. 1956) (Fig.15).⁵⁰ As much as the exhibition signaled the West’s curiosity towards Chinese avant-garde art practice, the exhibition’s default Western perspective, coupled with its

⁴⁵ Ai, Tung, and Klayman, “Interviews, Conducted by Stephanie H. Tung, Alison Klayman and Ai Weiwei”, 33.

⁴⁶ See Julie Ault, “A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists’ Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-85,” in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17-78.

⁴⁷ Brian Wallis, “Private Funding and Alternative Art Space,” in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002), 161-181.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁹ Chang Tsong-Zung, “Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider’s View,” in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), 67-75.

⁵⁰ See Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989). See Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin and Yang Jiechang’s spreads in page 152-153, page 144-145, and page 264-265 of the catalog.

essentialist approach to cultural identities and practices, received widespread criticism.⁵¹ The controversy around *Magiciens de la Terre* generated a vast discourse around a new set of oppositions, othering, and primitivist regressions presented by “globalization” through mega-exhibitions and international biennales.⁵² While centering identity politics permitted the appearance of previously disenfranchised voices in group exhibitions, it also engendered a dystopic brand of tokenism within cultural production. When participating in exhibitions became a way to represent a larger cultural, national, or socio-political identity, artists and critics alike risked losing their unique practice to a “totally predetermined” identity linked only to their place of birth, or, barring that association, be deemed the “resistant other.”⁵³ Taken to their extreme, nation-based models of exhibitions present what George Baker defines as “a process of Westernization, not its critique” and ultimately spread amnesia of suppressed historical narratives or local visual expressions.⁵⁴ The Paris-based critic and curator Fei Dawei in an article in 1992 entitled “The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas,” reflected specifically on the dilemma that lurks underneath the increased presence of Chinese-born artists in biennales and international surveys, epitomized by *Magiciens de la Terre*, which he helped organize in 1989,

Chinese artists abroad have been unable to bear the responsibility for promoting contemporary Chinese art, nor have they been able to “represent” anyone. We only want to free ourselves from our conceptual limitations by means of individual creativity. We do not want to be pure “Chinese artists.” Nor do we want to be “Western artists.” We do not want to be avant-garde artists, anti-avant garde artists, or post-modernists. Only by daring to

⁵¹ Norman L. Kleeblatt, “Identity Roller Coaster,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 61.

⁵² See Tim Griffin, Francesco Bonami, Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, et al, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition,” *Artforum* 52, no. 3 (November 2003). Digital Access: <https://www.artforum.com/print/200309/global-tendencies-globalism-and-the-large-scale-exhibition-5682>. Enwezor writes, “The discourse in “*Magiciens*” was still very much dependent on an opposition within the historical tendencies of modernism in Europe—namely, its antipathy to the “primitive” and his functional objects of ritual, and, along with this process of dissociation of the “primitive” from the modern, its attempt to construct exotic, non-Western aesthetic systems on the margins of modernism.”

⁵³ Miwon Kwon, “Flash in the East, Flash in the West,” in *Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011), 196-205.

⁵⁴ George Baker, “The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor,” *Documents* 23 (Spring 2004), 20-25.

liberate ourselves from every sort of absurd limitation, can we find our way to our true spiritual home. Our art is Chinese, but it also belongs to the world.⁵⁵

A central question thus arises for Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and perhaps many others: How to navigate the New York art scene in the midst of seismic shifts, from a center of Post-War avant-gardism to the wrestling ground of global capitalism and identity politics of the 90s? In other words, how can one make use of their *situation-ness* within a global contemporary art center like New York, while operating *outside* of its increasing constraints? These concerns emerge as central issues that Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing hoped to confront head-on and, in some ways, hoped to interrogate through the project of the *BWG Cover Books*.

The editorial gesture of featuring Hsieh Tehching as the headlining artist was precisely a reflection of the complex ambivalence that remained at the center of their concern. A Taiwan-born artist who arrived in New York in 1974, Hsieh staged five “One Year” performances between 1978 and 1986, which were known for their physical extremity, and rigorously practiced through a self-enacted contract of one-year durations. The *Black Cover Book* featured Hsieh’s first three *One-Year Performances*. Photo documentation of Hsieh’s performances are interspersed with reviews translated from English to Chinese by Claire Fergusson, a New York based artist, and two translated entries by Jonathan Siskin (Fig.16).⁵⁶

Although the theme of self-exile runs through Hsieh’s “lifeworks,” it is made most clear through Hsieh’s third, *One-Year Performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)*, spanning from September 1981 to 1982 and featured in the *Black Cover Book*. For an entire year, Hsieh lived completely outdoors, refusing to set foot in any indoor structure.⁵⁷ Throughout the year, Hsieh endured the polarized

⁵⁵ Fei Dawei, “The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas,” in *Chinese New Art Post-1989*, trans. Don J. Cohn (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2001), lx-lxi, lxi.

⁵⁶ Edited by Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Xu Bing, and Feng Boyi (Zi Gong), *Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company), 18-29.

⁵⁷ Hsieh Tehching was arrested once during the year-long performance.

climate of New York's winter and summer, while documenting his detailed footprints on a Manhattan street map as well as his daily diet and daily actions through photography and journaling (Fig.17).⁵⁸ If Hsieh's first two performances (locking himself in a cell for an entire year, punching a timesheet every hour for a year) confront issues of bodily nature and of social code, the "outdoor piece" more directly confronts "the social location, institutional structures and function of art," further highlighting the "outsider" status of the artist.⁵⁹ The performance has subsequently been seen as a commentary on his double-outlying status as both an immigrant and an artist. Such a reading echoes the conscious editorial decision to bold a footnote printed at the bottom of Hsieh Tehching's biography page in the *Black Cover Book*, which reads "Note: from 1974 to 1988, 14 years in United States. No legal resident identity" (Fig.18).

Anchoring Hsieh Tehching's radical performance as a departure point, the artist-editors Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing came to dual self-identifications and aspirations, as cultural revolutionaries and artist-philosophers living in the ever-more dystopian present. This identification denotes a greater turn within the broader context of Chinese contemporary art in the post-89 era. Firstly, artists no longer examined domestic issues pertaining only to China, but felt connected to deeply embedded issues of global conflict and power struggle— what Édouard Glissant considered to be the collective "disorientation of the world."⁶⁰ Together, the conversation, along with the artistic nomadism embodied by Hsieh, marked the significant transition from exclusively fighting for visibility within official institutions (academies) both inside and outside of China, to creating an autonomous,

⁵⁸ Edited by Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 30.

⁵⁹ Adrian Heathfield, "Impress of Time," in *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 16.

⁶⁰ Édouard Glissant, "Introductions," trans. J. Michael Dash, in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996): 3-12. Glissant writes, "Nevertheless, we are part of the disorientation of the world." See also Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, Hsieh Tehching "An Interview in Hsieh Tehching," in *Black Cover Book*, 11. Ai Weiwei writes: "The biggest difference between us today and those from the past is that we are unanimously sure of the end of the world. We have never recognized this so clearly as we do today." Translated by the author of this thesis.

alternative system that fosters self-reflexive thinking and experimentations. Conceived in the very beginning as a nexus of transgressive artistic and cultural practice, the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* piece together a discourse of visual modernity in China, while envisioning a newly engineered global congruency. Seeking ways to unite with a virtual community of transcultural and transnational conceptualism through its interrogation of precarious issues in global cultural politics, the books aim to establish a genealogy of Chinese modernism that nevertheless escapes China's geographical confines.

The Studios as Sites

With Chinese contemporary art's geographical complexity in mind, how do the artists-editors of the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* even begin to accommodate the equally complex range of historical and contemporaneous consciousness within the "book" medium? Whose vantage point do they highlight? In the essay "The Function of Studio" (1971), conceptual artist Daniel Buren (b. 1938) identified the studio as the unique place of *production*, versus the place of *exposition* that defines the function of a museum. Buren famously concluded, "the art of yesterday and today is not only marked by the studio as an essential, often unique, place of production; it proceeds from it. All my work proceeds from its extinction."⁶¹ Buren's emphasis on studio as an essential site corresponds with what critic Susan Sontag called a "flight from interpretation," signaling a strategic formation in modernist aesthetics where artists adopt a "non-art" stance to combat the impulse to tame artmaking into a schematized, hermeneutic exercise.⁶² Viewed in this light, artists and cultural

⁶¹ Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio," *October* 10 (Autumn, 1979): 51-58, 58.

⁶² Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 1-10.

workers alike carry an “obligation” to “overthrow any means of defending and justifying art which becomes particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs and practice.”⁶³

Per Buren and Sontag, the studio's walls offered protection from the politics of display and vagaries of interpretative models—and the *BWG Cover Books* editors eagerly adopted this studio-centricity as its operative logic. Through the “Studio” section, *Black Cover Book* introduced the works of 28 artists, *White Cover Book* featured works from 25 artists, and *Grey Cover Book* from 31 artists (Fig.19). Devoid of the administrative language commonly found in exhibition catalogue design, artworks were often presented with a straightforward layout of images and plain text. The “Studio” section takes its readers through the experience of a studio visit, which would be familiar to artists who resided and worked in artistic communes such as Yuan Ming Yuan Painters’ village, Beijing’s East Village, and later in Song Zhuang and 798 Art District. The “Studio” section argues for the *primordial* nature of artistic production, an “original position” that precedes any external interpretations or interventions.

Just like the cult of artistic persona that its downtown art scene produced, New York also had a thriving print culture which remained a resonant, aspirational model to the editors of the *BWG Cover Books*. Like alternative artist spaces, site-specific installations, and performance art, artists’ books emerged as a potent “antiart” medium: open to artistic experimentation, yet yielding “no product of salable art” that would have “served the purposes of the museum or gallery.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the organizational strategy of artistic content in the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* traces back to several important precedents within the vibrant artist-run magazine scene in New York in 1960s and 1970s, including *Avalanche* (1970-1976) and *Art-Rite* (1973-1976). Much like the *BWG Cover Books*,

⁶³ Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 3.

⁶⁴ Brian Wallis, “Public Funding and Alternative Spaces,” 167.

these two New York-based artists-run publications posited themselves as an alternative platform against and a gesture to resist external intervention or valuation from critics, galleries, and museums.

While *Art-Rite* was especially remarkable in its experimentations with photographic images, poetry, drawings, and typography, *Avalanche* consists of artist interviews, critical writings, and photo documentation and features a highly seductive cover image by one artist including Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, and Philip Glass (Fig.20, 21, 22), with each issue.⁶⁵ Most importantly, both magazines granted artists with a “canvas” to document and publicize their site-specific performance and installations. The vibrancy of New York’s underground art publication scene clearly resonated with the editors of the *BWG Cover Books*. For instance, a clear juxtaposition in both logic and design can be read between an *Avalanche* spread featuring two 1970 bodyworks by Vito Acconci, and Ai Weiwei’s triptych *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) featured in *White Cover Book* (coincidentally both on page 20 and 21): both artists harnessed the cinematic potential of images to embody the fragmentations of their bodily motions, thereby transforming the pages and their corporality into what early twentieth-century critic Guillaume Apollinaire famously defined as “livres d’images.”⁶⁶

The concept-based practices developing in China were an emerging artistic mode at the end of the eighties and faced many local challenges. Chief among them was the near-unanimous skepticism and criticism among the academic and critical circles in the country. A thorough analysis of hostile gestures towards conceptual art is beyond the scope of this paper; however, one palpable factor was that a majority of art historians and critics felt nostalgic for a modernist ethos traceable at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. Modernist giants such as Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Lin Fengmian (1890-1991) and the trailblazing modernist collective *Storm Society* (1931-1935) from

⁶⁵ Amy Ballmer, “Avalanche Magazine: In the Words of the Artist,” *Art Documentation: Journal of Art Libraries Society of North America* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 21-26.

⁶⁶ David Joselit, “Dada’s Diagrams,” in *The Dada Seminars (Casva Seminar Papers)* (Washington: The National Gallery of Art, 2005), 221-239.

Shanghai were celebrated and acknowledged for their ambition to synthesize Western visual modernity with traditional Chinese visual sensibility at the turn of the twentieth century. They set the bar for what would become a century-long pursuit, by artists and intellectuals alike, of humanism through multiple channels—-independent artistic expression, establishing art academies, staging independent exhibitions, or engaging in political activism.⁶⁷ And to many, the more recent *The Stars Group* (1979-1983) and the 85' New Movement continued in this vein [fell short due to sweeping social events such as the Civil War and Cultural Revolution]. They too carried a profound sense of societal commitment through a humanist approach to artistic expression, which is not unlike the artistic and cultural reform envisioned by education philosopher Cai Yuanpei, or the “universal syncretism” of Lingnan School painter Gao Jianfu (1879–1951).⁶⁸ But by the end of the eighties, artists, the highly influential curator and critic Li Xianting summarized,

The reaction of many was to turn against the heroism, idealism, and yearning for metaphysical transcendence that characterized the 85' New Wave movement, and turn instead to their antithesis: a form of anti-idealism characterized by an immersion in popular culture and a deconstructionist approach that for many quickly resolved itself into Cynical Realist and Political Pop styles.⁶⁹

Li Xianting's historical diagnosis of the “post-89” generation of artists was regarded as a worrisome trend by many contemporaneous critics. With the humanist legacy of Chinese visual modernism in mind, many critics found it difficult to digest the playful, or even antagonistic aura of concept-based art practice. Artists' experimental practice (both in content and approach) was soon

⁶⁷ See Wu Hung, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary’: in Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 290- 306, 292. Wu Hung writes, “When avant-garde Chinese artists and critics called themselves ‘modern’ in the 1980s, they identified themselves, first of all, as participants in a historical movement that had been interrupted in China by communist rule.” See also Gao Minglu, “From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China,” in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, 149-166.

⁶⁸ See Ralph Croizier, “The Theory of the New National Painting,” in *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906-1951* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 110-114. Also, see Gao Minglu, “Toward a Transnational Modernity,” in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 15-40.

⁶⁹ Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Chinese New Art Post-1989*, trans. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2001), pp. x-xxii, x.

criticized as a belated, and even opportunistic exploitation of Post-War European-American art. One critic lamented artists' tendency toward retinal art (as coined by Duchamp), or, "artists who were occupied with absorbing foreign thoughts early on soon embraced formalism and aestheticism. Those who engaged [with western artistic thoughts] later on are unable to rid themselves of the obsession with 'art for art's sake.'"⁷⁰ Indeed, artists' renouncement of painterly expression and formalistic beauty was being interpreted as an abandonment of humanist spirit or enlightenment philosophy—hence signaling a self-indulgent, even hedonistic attitude. In a conversation "Vanguard Art and Cultural Reality: A Conversation on the *China/Avant Garde* Exhibition" held by Gao Minglu, Tan Qingnian, Fan Dian, and Zhou Yan, the discussants lament the fall of the 85' New Wave Movement and identified a "feverish bandit-ism" within the Chinese art scene.⁷¹ Gao Minglu, the curator and organizer for the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, was especially vocal. "Art in recent two years is not ideal... it fell from a heroism, or tragic mindset to merely a reflection of life... art is not built upon a rational, authentic experience of life."⁷² In the same conversation, artist-curator Tang Qingnian's comment conveys a very biting sentiment that reflects a desire to revert to a universalist humanism in the arts and elsewhere: "whether societally, economically, or culturally, we have all missed the opportunity to catch up with Western Enlightenment."⁷³

As a publication made *by* and *for* artists, *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* recognized the urgency in organizing an artist-based critical circle that could combat the near unanimous disdain among art critics in China for their experimental practices. This strategy plainly foregrounded the body-based

⁷⁰ Yang Xiaoyan, "Say Goodbye to Opportunism: Looking at the Trajectory of 90s Chinese Art Through Several Case Studies," *Anthology of Twentieth-Century Chinese Art 2* (1999): 846-859, 846. Translated by the author of this thesis.

⁷¹ Gao Minglu, Tang Qingnian, Fan Dian, and Zhou Yan, "Avant-Garde Art and Cultural Realities: A Conversation on the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition," in *20th Century Chinese Art History Reader* (Hebei: Hebei Meishu Chubanshe, 2017). Online Edition. Translated by the author of this thesis.

⁷² *Ibid.* Translated by the author of this thesis.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Translated by the author of this thesis.

performances and site-specific logic of printed medium in order to deliberately go against the grain of canonized artistic formats exalted in the orthodox art academy curriculum, as well as official exhibiting sites. In point of fact, this was not such a departure: the impulse to interrogate natures of “site” could already be traced back to the watershed event of the ‘89 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. In addition to Xiao Lu’s infamous *Dialogue*, which resulted in the exhibition’s ominous closure, artists Huang Yongping, Wu Shanzhuan, and Zhang Nian also staged guerilla-style happenings within the National Gallery of Art— that is, without official approval from the cultural bureau and/or the organizing curators. Wu Shanzhuan, for example, began selling shrimp on the opening day, which has been interpreted as a prescient commentary on the imperative role of the market in artistic production.⁷⁴

Other than ideological reasons, vigorous engagements with concept-based practices— seldom producing preservable materials—also acted as a pragmatic measure taken against the draconian censorship of outsider artistic expressions after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. Arrests and harassment were typical, most famously during Ma Liuming’s performance *Fen-Ma Liuming’s Lunch* in 1994, where a considerable number of members of the Beijing East Village were taken away by authorities at the site. (Fig.23)⁷⁵ Just like the pre-reform era, artists faced a hostile environment, routinely threatened by arrests and forced evictions (a problem that persists to this day).⁷⁶ Opportunities to present works without the sponsorship of cultural authorities remained vanishingly rare. Furthermore, the taboo nature of many of the works strayed far from the positive tenor of official art magazines such as *Meishu*, making artists’ works impossible to be published anywhere

⁷⁴ See Jane DeBevoise, *Big Business, Selling Shrimps: The Market as Imaginary in Post-Mao China*, e-flux, 2016. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/71/60526/big-business-selling-shrimps-the-market-as-imaginary-in-post-mao-china>

⁷⁵ For first-person account of the daily living and art-making condition in Beijing East Village (1994, 1997), see RongRong, *RongRong’s Diary: Beijing East Village*, see RongRong, *RongRong’s Diary: Beijing East Village* (New York and Göttingen: The Walther Collection and Steidl, 2019).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

mainstream.⁷⁷ As such, performances and installations often needed to be carried out in the outskirts of the city, with an extremely limited audience only from inner circles being able to experience the site-specific works first-hand. Diagrams, photography, and video documentation became the main material evidence for these ephemeral works. First as documents of events and later as sole material witnesses, performance documentations entered the cultural sphere as significant mediators that eventually overshadow the actuality of the events. In other words, the visual and material evidence of performance engender its own form of performativity, which were harnessed by the *BWG Cover Books*.⁷⁸ RongRong, the resident photographer and collaborator of the Beijing East Village reflected on the significance of the *BWG Cover Books* to his morale at the time and his career later on:

At the time, our performance activities received very little attention. The situation worsened when artists were arrested and taken away in 1994. However, the *Black Cover Book* came out at the same time which brought so much positivity to everyone's morale, even though the arrest was ominous. Having a printed publication, although not official nor widely circulated, meant so much to us. For the first time, my work was treated with dignity.⁷⁹

What critics at the time might have overlooked was the complex chain of rigorous reorientations that artists went through that, through their conceptual works, established some of the most powerful works that critique China's cultural and political mechanism by the end of the twentieth century. Far from being disengaged from socio-political realities or the integrity of artmaking, artists began to seriously reconsider the material nature of artistic and cultural production for both *pragmatic* and *ideological* reasons. When the legitimacy and autonomy of their practice no longer became feasible, nor idealized, a desire to engage in the propositional aspects of artmaking became increasingly intensified: a primary impulse lay in the process of deconstruction untethered to aesthetic procedures (*doing art*), rather than materializing their ideas into exhibitable objects (*making*

⁷⁷ Interview with RongRong, May 2019, Göttingen, Germany.

⁷⁸ Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (September 2006): 1-10.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

art). As a result, the distinct trajectory of localized conceptual practice that formed at the end of the 1980s thus came to full fruition throughout the rest of the 90s. Such transformation was clearly the case for Ai Weiwei, the *BWG Cover Books*' chief engineer, who gave up painting over the course of his stay in New York and was soon attracted to the disruptive act of appropriating the object, an art historical genealogy that established Duchamp as its patriarch.⁸⁰ Learning of Marcel Duchamp's work through a translated biography, Ai Weiwei recalled his fascination with the artist in an interview in 2010:

He's probably one of the few artists in the world whose actual work you don't actually have to see, you can just read about it and that's it. I mean, the work itself is interesting and reflects his approach, but there's not much you can learn from it. I don't think anybody can learn directly from the product.⁸¹

Ai Weiwei's remark suggests that he renounces any formalist, morphological reading of Duchamp's vast oeuvre, but was interested in the "allegorical procedure" unleashed by his conceptual approach. The "allegorical procedure," as art historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh defines it, signals an approach that complicates the signifying function of the art object through its material intervention and appropriation.⁸² In other words, what appeared attractive to Ai Weiwei with regards to the Duchampian paradigm of conceptualist art is precisely the ways in which physical form serves as a "catalyst" for provocations of "visual and textual reverberations"—in his case, newly localized in the unique discourse of Chinese modernity.⁸³

Converging the currents of conceptualist thinking through its site-specificity, the pages of the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* demonstrate an experimental practice of collaging photographic documents, diagrams, and text. Together, these "book-specific" installations signal an autonomous

⁸⁰ Ai, Tung, and Klayman, "Interviews, Conducted by Stephanie H. Tung, Alison Klayman and Ai Weiwei," 38.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedure: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *ArtForum* (September 1982): 43-56.

⁸³ David Joselit, "Dada's Diagrams," in *The Dada Seminars (Casva Seminar Papers)* (Washington: The National Gallery of Art, 2005), 221-239.

exhibitionary landscape that proclaims the transference of ideas—rather than exhibiting venues—as their ultimate end. Artists, albeit trained in traditional mediums, moved deliberately away from figuration and dissolved their artistic sensibility into a seamless interface between ideation and content. Specifically, the contributors of the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* turned to a characteristically “inexpensive, ephemeral, and unintimidating” medium to visually translate the happenings and performance art staged by artists in all corners of the world, consolidating their often-ephemeral works onto the material reality of the books.⁸⁴ Between the pages of the *BWG Cover Books*, it is easy to observe the ways in which texts were explored beyond their descriptive and illustrative functions, and instead communicate to viewers as a self-reflexive creative medium. In short, what Benjamin Buchloh calls the “spatialization of language and the temporalization of visual structure” unfolds as readers’ hands meet the turning pages of the *BWG Cover Books*.⁸⁵

Ultimately, the contextual appropriation of the allegorical, propositional language of 1960-1970s conceptual art seeks to facilitate a critique of institution, which interrogates the implicit and explicit structures of power within the context of China and the globalized world. Ai Weiwei writes with a manifesto-like language in an essay entitled “Making a Choice,” in *Grey Cover Book*, juxtaposing his text with his famed “Study of Perspectives”—a photo series where he gives the middle finger to monumental sites such as the White House, Tiananmen Square, and the skyline of Hong Kong Island (Fig.24,25). Viewed with the artistic statement, the series reveals the “uncooperative attitude” that later defined Ai’s persona as an artist-activist,

Modernism does not need all sorts of masks and titles; it is the primal creative act of an awakened artist; it is the ultimate concern of existence’s meaning and real circumstances; it is

⁸⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), vii-xxii, vii.

⁸⁵ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual art 1962-1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 514-537.

a sense of vigilance, non-compromise, and un-cooperation towards societal and humanitarian crises.⁸⁶

A prime example that demonstrates Ai Weiwei's specific meditation on the highly centralized ecosystem of cultural production in China could be found in a rarely seen work entitled *Shutting Down the National Gallery of Art* (1993), featured on page 42 to 47 of the *Black Cover Book*. Ai Weiwei's "print-specific" work consists of a frontal image of the National Gallery of Art in Beijing, along with a written proposal to rent the building and shut down all current exhibitions during the rental period (Fig.26). Although the formal quality of the work evokes the visual language of "institutional critique" most well-known through artists Hans Haacke and Adrian Piper in the late 1960s and 1970s, Ai Weiwei critiques a cultural constraint specific to China, embodied here by the fastidious rental contracts of the NGA that Ai Weiwei included.⁸⁷ One amendment, under the "National Gallery of Art Exhibition Management Rules" writes,

If any incendiary slogans, brochures, damages, theft, or bandit-like activities occur, one must report immediately to related departments. If the person could be apprehended on site, please do so. Protect the site.⁸⁸

The anti-museum gesture signaled by Ai Weiwei and others foreshadowed a crucial transformation of attitude, declaring a distance from official institutions and the wish to consider other cultural alternatives. The specific intervention of "site" seen in *Shutting Down the National Gallery of Art* is also explored in sculptural modes in a work by Qiu Zhijie featured in *White Cover Book*. Qiu Zhijie constructed a glass structure modeled after a Chinese public lavatory and entitled the piece *Public Life*. Undoubtedly with Duchamp's *Fountain* in mind, Qiu Zhijie's appropriation of a taboo site seeks to unleash "un-hygienic" thoughts (excrements and bodily fluids), and make those thoughts as

⁸⁶ Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Zhuang Hui, *Grey Cover Book* (Privately Published), 9-11.

⁸⁷ Edited by Kynaston McShine, *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 57, 111.

⁸⁸ Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 46.

transparent as the translucent glass structure (Fig.27).⁸⁹ Both artists' interrogations of the fraught boundary between private space and public structures echoes a contemporaneous proposal featured in the *Black Cover Book's* "Art News Section" by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, namely a work that would cover the Reichstag building in Berlin with fabric in 1995 (Fig.28).⁹⁰

Viewers find a much more explicit assault on culture as an institution, of both China and the West, in Xu Bing's much studied work *A Case Study of Transference (The Cultured Animal)*, staged in Beijing's Hanmo Art center, an alternative exhibition space in Beijing, in 1994.⁹¹ Xu Bing picked a male American Yorkshire pig and a local Chinese female pig and "tattooed" the male pig with nonsensical Roman letters, and the female pig with pseudo "Chinese" letters (Fig.29). To the audience's shock and embarrassment, the male pig mounted the female pig for hours on a pile of used books.⁹² The work has long been interpreted as a poignant critique of the transgressive nature of China's cultural agency and the hegemonic force of Western cultural values, and pointing specifically towards the passivity of the "East" as cultural receptors.⁹³ It seems as if Xu Bing took Robert Smithson's exhortation in 1972, "once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society," and staged the most extreme reversal possible.⁹⁴

What separates the experience of performance art as a time-specific event, from its placement in the *Black Cover Book*, can be seen in a detailed Q&A between Xu Bing and an anonymous interviewer, where the artist recounts his process of the work in writing. In the dialogue, Xu Bing detailed his process of selecting the pig breeds, as well as specific strategies of sedating and

⁸⁹ Ai, Zeng, and Zhuang, *White Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company, 1995), 42-43.

⁹⁰ Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 148-149.

⁹¹ Silvia Fok, *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 120-121.

⁹² Hou Hanru, "Theater Du Monde: To Be Unthought," in *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*, 68-77.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 280-282.

maintaining their libidos. Xu came to the conclusion that *A Case Study of Transference (The Cultured Animal)* exposed the discomfort of human beings, and not of the pigs.⁹⁵ This textual dimension shares a great deal of affinity with text-based works by Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, and Robert Morris, which famously appeared in the MoMA 1970 artists' book *Information*, edited by Kynaston McShine (Fig.29, 30, 31).⁹⁶

Printing “culture” on animals, [in contrast to on human beings], carries chaotic connotations on biological, evolutionary, cultural, and communicative fronts. It demonstrates the significance of culture as tattoos. Two beings who have no human consciousness, but the physical marks of culture and only the most instinctual way to communicate. This simplicity and directness reach the degree of the unspeakable and the speakable.⁹⁷

As evident throughout the three books, the highly codified language of conceptual art became a potent language through which artists unraveled the convulsive historical processes that were responsible for the precarity and disjuncture of China's political and social reality at large— what Qiu Zhijie made clear in his 2017 map *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*. To quote Buchloh again, conceptual practices allowed the artist to “speak publicly with hidden meaning.”⁹⁸ And often, the critique of institutions is not limited to specific conditions within China, but extends to a critique of global systems of power. As the critical site for these works and thinking, *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* find themselves at the heart of artists' ambitions not only to participate in the celebratory aspects of globalization, but also to reckon with its “displacement, slippage, interruption, and alienation.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 86. Xu Bing writes; “it turns out that our embarrassment (on behalf of the pigs) was excessive; they were not concerned at all...human beings modified and changed pigs' environment, which ironically ended up embarrassing themselves (human beings). This exposed our discomfort, rather than the pigs'.” Statement translated by author of this thesis.

⁹⁶ See Robert Morris, “A Method of Sorting Cows,” in *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 87.

⁹⁷ Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 87. Statement translated by the author of this thesis.

⁹⁸ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedure: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” 43.

⁹⁹ Saloni Mathur, “Introduction,” in *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011), vii-xix, xi.

To this point, the “Modern Art Documents” and the “Art News” sections of the books situate the artworks’ in dialogue with the “orthodox” history of Euro-American conceptualism. Within “Modern Art Documents,” the editors included seminal essays and interviews featuring Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Jenny Holzer. The inclusion of classic writings such as Duchamp’s “The Case for R.T Mutt,” or Joseph Kosuth’s “Art After Philosophy.” (Fig.32, 33) Although the editors risk of predetermining Western modernism’s positivist legacy, it very well provided moralistic encouragement for local practitioners in China: to see themselves alongside, and within, the historical trajectory of international conceptual art—readymade, Dada, pop art, and text-based art.

Supplementing the “Modern Art Documents” section, the “Art News” section of *BWG Cover Books* provided real-time updates of exhibitions and artistic events within China and overseas. Notably, the sections featured the “export” of Chinese contemporary artists in the international arena, such as Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Yu Youhan, and Zhang Xiaogang appearing in the 22nd international Biennial of Sao Paulo in October of 1994; and a group photography exhibition on “Chinese Modern Art Witnesses” at BTAP Tokyo Gallery in April of 1995. Combined with reports of local solo exhibitions and projects, the “Art News” section tells the persuasive narrative of artists who devise artistic languages to localize their practice, as well as those who stage encounters that extend beyond cultural confines. As such, *Black, White, Grey Cover Book* aims to create a synchronous interface, a signal of contemporary Chinese art’s aspiration to be recognized among the international artistic community, while insisting upon the importance of interventions in their immediate environs.

The Artist's "Body" and the Beijing East Village

Within the gamut of conceptualist practice, the body emerged as a potent metaphor of selfhood and artistic agency for Chinese diasporic artists in the 1990s. In particular, the Beijing East Village (1993-1997) and its resident artists became the paradigmatic case study.¹⁰⁰ In the derelict village in Beijing, artists such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Cang Xin staged a series of striking performance artworks, characterized by an explosive range of experimental practices that explored multivalent issues including bodily autonomy, gender, and technology. Accounting for artists' seemingly abrupt turn towards site-specific performance remains a complicated project. The matter is further complicated by the fact that most artists received academy training modeled after Soviet Realist tradition and abandoned their rigorous, formalist training in paintings and sculpture.¹⁰¹

In his groundbreaking study on the Beijing East Village and photographer RongRong, Wu Hung posited the Beijing East Village's "ruinous" site as part of a symbolic network that merged the Chinese poetic sensibility of decay with the modern, visual representation of "ruin pictures" and "ruin architecture." Wu further argues that the unique topos of the Beijing East Village provided the necessary soil for artists' intense, synergistic exploration of their physical selves as the medium.¹⁰² Observing the happenings and performances by artists such as Allan Kaprow, Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneemann in New York's downtown scene of the 1960s, Susan Sontag provided a thoughtful reading of the painterly impulse found within body-based art, which she further defines as a "painters' theater," and "animated collage." Whereas artistic engagement with the body might

¹⁰⁰ Fok, *Life and Death*, 208. See also Thomas J. Berghuis, "Introduction," in *Performance Art in China*, (Beijing: Timezone 8), 1-11.

¹⁰¹ See Katherine Grube, "The 85' New Space Exhibition: Radical Experiments and the Academy, in Zhang Peili: From Painting to Video, ANU E Press, 2019, 41-63. Digital Access.

¹⁰² See Wu Hung, "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern," in *Inside Out: China's New Art*, 59-66. Also, see "Ruin as Autobiography: Chinese Photographer Rong Rong" in *Persimmon Asian Literature, Arts, and Culture* 2, no. 3 (Winter 2002), 36-47.

read as an utter rejection of traditional modes of artmaking, artists' utilization of their own corporeality as a medium in fact signals an expanded definition of painterly, sculptural expression. Specifically, Sontag understood "happenings" as an "ideological development" of the New York school of paintings of the 1950s.¹⁰³ In particular, artists transitioned from two-dimensional canvas to the all-encompassing site-specific practice, which can be seen as an expansive "latent intention," through 'supra-personal or impersonal treatment of persons,' incorporation of sound, absence of words to "overwhelm and envelop the spectator."¹⁰⁴ Within the development of body-based performance in China, the works emerging out of the short-lived Beijing East Village demonstrate resonant characteristics summarized by Sontag but take place against the distinct backdrop of the rapidly transforming quasi-urban landscape of China.

Black, White, Grey Cover Books' importance to the Beijing East Village is undeniable. The activities of the Beijing East Village-based artists were extensively documented and recorded throughout all three issues of the *BWG Cover Books*, rendering the trilogy the crucial (if not the only) sites that narrated the trajectory of the "body" in Chinese contemporary art.¹⁰⁵ First of all, photography, and video's role in not only documenting but providing secondary interpretation must be acknowledged. Although their status might initially be referential to the actual events of the happenings, they evolved into simulacra— as "detached signifiers" that solicit a distinct chain of signs and responses.¹⁰⁶ Consider the affinity between photographer RongRong, musician and poet

¹⁰³ Susan Sontag, "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin Classics), 263-274. Sontag writes, "The gigantic size of many of the canvases painted in New York in the last decade [the 1950s], designed to overwhelm and envelop the spectator, plus the increasing use of materials other than paint to adhere to, and later extend from, the canvas, indicate the latent intention of this type of painting to protect itself into a three-dimensional form."

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Sontag subsequently identified three central characteristics of Happenings, which are 1) the "supra-personal or impersonal treatment of persons," 2) "its emphasis on spectacle and sound, and disregard for the word," and 3) "its professed aim to assault the audience."

¹⁰⁵ See Press Release, Christopher Phillips, "Body, Self, Society: Chinese Performance Photography since the 1990s," The Walther Collection Project Space, New York. April 2017.

¹⁰⁶ See Hal Foster, "The Return of the Real," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 127-170.

Zuoxiao Zuzhou (*Curse*), and Zhang Huan in mapping the synergistic environment of Beijing East Village.¹⁰⁷ Arguably the most monumental work from the Beijing East Village, Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* made its first appearance in the *Black Cover Book*. Through Ai Weiwei and RongRong's lens, Zhang Huan appears with his body slathered with fish oil and honey, while sitting in a poorly maintained public lavatory for two hours in the middle of the summer (Fig.34, 35). As the high contrast, close-up monochrome images capture Zhang Huan, covered with perspiration and countless flies, a lyric-poem by Zuoxiao Zuzhou (also known as *Curse*) is juxtaposed,

A fly, an ant, a maggot
Who brings death to whom?
Who dies in the hands of whom?
They are all quivering due to fear¹⁰⁸

Zhang Huan's body, *Zuoxiao Zuzhou's* text, and RongRong's photography of *12 Square Meters* perform a collective, interpoetic transmission on the concepts of intrusion and baseness. Zhang Huan's unflinching determination to place himself in physically and mentally tormenting experiences echoes the practice of Hsieh Tehching in New York, but also forms a powerful discourse of its own. First, the body presents a universalism that is grounded in the physical realities of the artist, which serves as an effective visual language that triangulates selfhood, corporeality, and environment (body, self, society). For example, performances lead to self-affliction and pain. The rehearsal and representation of "pain" becomes a metaphorical language, which also has to do with subverting the very political system that produced such sensation: for Zhang Huan, "The body is the only way I

¹⁰⁷ Silvia Fok, "Photography, Performance Art, and the Beijing East Village," in *RongRong's Diary: Beijing East Village* (New York and Göttingen: The Walther Collection and Steidl Verlag, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 66.

come to know society, and the only way society knows me.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, the site-specificity of the Beijing East Village can be read as an allegorically dense, and even subversive locale. Artists’ allegorical usage of nudity, represented against the backdrop of the peripheral, squalid urban village of *Dashanzhuang*, can be interpreted as defiant gestures against orthodox thinking enforced by the state-sanctioned ideology. A hallmark event would be the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, a nation-wide cultural movement launched a decade prior. This all-pervasive political movement was facilitated to sanction against “revisionist discourse” on humanism and universalism through the banning of “pornographic, absurd, and anti-revolutionary” materials.¹¹⁰ Through his artistic statement for *12 Square Meters* which appeared on the *Black Cover Book*, Zhang Huan specifically defended the procedural (over the visual) nature of his site-specific works,

I go out of my way to experience the real felt through the process of my work. I do not understand the nature of my work, and what I’ve expressed until I finish a work. I am in fact disgusted by the performative aspects of my work.¹¹¹

Echoing the practice of fellow Beijing East Village artists such as Ma Liuming, Zhu Fadong, and Cang Xin, Zhang Huan’s meditation on the *process* of body art (instead of its prescribed meanings) pushes the limit of both the personal and the political (Fig.36, 37, 38).¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Qian Zhijian, “Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China, Conversation,” *Art Journal* (Summer 1999): 60-81. Also, see Elaine Scarry, “The Interior Structure of the Artifact,” in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 278-326. Scarry writes, “as physical pain destroys the mental content and language of the person in pain, so it also tends to appropriate and destroy the conceptualization abilities and language of persons who only observe the pain,” 279.

¹¹⁰ Wang Ruoshui, “Ren de Nanchan— Rendao Zhuyi Zai Zhongguo de Mingyun He “Qingwu” Yundong,” in *Tan Suo*, Issue 5 and 6 (1992): 21-30, 68-78.

¹¹¹ Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 154.

¹¹² For example, Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 34-35. Ma’s statement writes, “A person who is situated in a specific scenario—whether mind or body—is in itself a great piece of work. The reason why I chose this form of expression or medium is because this is the only type of existence that I perceive. Therefore, a performance art, to an artist, feels like two familiar yet estranged people of opposite sexes who examine one another.” See also Ai, Feng, Xu, and Zeng, *Black Cover Book*, 70-71. Zhang Huan’s statement reads, “Through very mundane everyday existence, I experience the most essential matters of humanity, and also experience the paradoxical relations between elements that belong to humanity and elements that belong to built environments.”

After a series of arrests and raids made by cultural authorities, the Beijing East Village and its members were forcefully evacuated in 1994. Members of the group would reconvene and continued to collaborate until 1997, producing works such as *Primordial Sound* (1995), *Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond* (1997) —which are featured in the *White* and the *Grey Cover Books* (Fig.39, 40, 41). The contents of the *BWG Cover Books* physically embody the fragility of local artistic communities— consider a statement in the “Art News” section of *Black Cover Book*, which begins with a celebration of the birth of an idea, but not before a sentence is hastily added right before the book goes to press (Fig.42),

They are concerned with the shifts of society, political reality, and culture; they want to compile the colossal existential experiences, using total art mediums to convert such experience into art. They consider it to be a way to actualize the value and function of art...

Another news item: It has been confirmed that by the deadline of this book’s editorial process, the “Beijing East Village” no longer exists.

The ephemerality of the Beijing East Village as a physical site further affirms the ability of images and texts to transcribe the time-specificity of the performance events into discursive spaces, among which the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* serve as the nexus that accommodate the intermedium representation and meditation on the “body.”

While its influence remains incontestable, the duration-based, physically demanding qualities that characterized the “Hsieh Tehching” and the “Beijing-East Village” paradigm of body-based performance does not serve as the only defining model for the “body” in *Black, White, Grey Cover Books*. A wide range of material relations and experimentations emerged against the backdrop of various urban environs in China, works that have been categorized as “countermonument[s]” or “antimonument[s]” by Wu Hung.¹¹³ For example, engagement with domestic materials can best be

¹¹³ Wu, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary,’” 296-297.

seen in Lin Tianmiao's *Entanglement and Unentanglement* (1997). Staged in her apartment, Lin Tianmiao wrapped her daily tools (needle, lighter, pot, sewing machine) with white strings, rendering them useless: A defiant gesture against the gender-prescriptive role of a homemaker, as well as the modes of alienation found within a consumerist society (Fig.43, 44).¹¹⁴ The *BWG Cover Books* also show works reckoning with industrial materials as seen through the rapidly urbanizing cityscapes across China. A member of the Guangdong based "Elephant Tail Group" (another group that received much coverage in the *Black Cover Book*), Chen Shaoxiong, mounted an assemblage of a "body" consisting of a hanger, a wedding gown, empty frames, and a cable TV (Fig.45, 46). Chen encourages readers to consider switching the current channel of the TV, because, supposedly, as the eponymous title suggests, "changing the TV channel will change the decision of the bride."

Between the pages of *Black, White, Grey Cover Books*, it is easy to see that artists adopted a new, quotidian language to meditate on social political realities and on the expansive notion of selfhood. On July 1st of 1997, the date when Hong Kong transferred its status as a British Colony to the sovereignty of People's Republic of China after a century-long British rule, Zhao Bandi transported a 25cm soil cube from the Northern side of Beijing and unloaded it at a construction site in Dock Lands, London. He transported the same amount of soil back to China to fill the void in Beijing, which suggested that artists no longer perceived their works and process to be mediated by external sites (Fig.47). The gesture of the everyday, through the simulation of labor, lends a potent allegory to political and historical processes, and their fatalistic consequences on daily life. The personal is political.

In conclusion, the astounding range of "body art" highlighted in the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* carry profound implications for the concepts of material and site. Through site-specificity and

¹¹⁴ Ai, Zeng, and Zhuang, *Grey Cover Book*, 86-87.

perishable materials (including the body), artists take comfort in the liminal spaces between their artistic gestures and its complete dispersion into life.¹¹⁵ The body performs its ethereality and fragility for the book medium. In comparison to exhibitions, books deal with the perceptual disjuncture between the shapelessness of an idea and the tactility of an object with a surprising ease. The books function as a sort of gravestone, instead of a shrine, for these ephemeral works, not to deny their deaths, but to affirm that they did, in fact, exist.¹¹⁶

Coda: The Agency of the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* and the Post-89 Contemporaneity

This essay considers *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books* as an overlooked catalyst of the development of conceptualism in China— defined by an explosive range of multi-media practices which not only concerns itself with experimentations in the form and content of artmaking. It is also further defined by a newly formed agency that seeks to reconfigure the very condition of Chinese modernity through newly codified and allegorical languages (arriving at a contemporaneity). While it was not the intention of this essay to typologize the diverse practices found within the *Black, White, Grey Cover Book*, it was concerned with the at once *spatial, morphological, and ideological* breaks that the *BWG Cover Books*' and their participants declared from previous artistic currents within an astoundingly condensed timeline. From establishing legitimacy through official exhibiting venues, to later seeking alternative modes of artistic sociability through printed matters; from an intensive, almost exclusive, engagement with easel-based painting, to an almost complete abandonment of the canvas just years

¹¹⁵ Seth Price, *Dispersion* (Self-Publishing, 2002), 5. Price on the site-specific art of Martha Rosler and Robert Smithson, “Not surprisingly, the history of this project is a series of false starts and paths that peter out, of projects that dissipate or are absorbed...Immersing art in life runs the risk of seeing the status of art— and with it— the status of artist— disperse entirely.”

¹¹⁶ Felix Ho Yuen Chan, *Conceptual Art in Print: Information* (1970), *Heichi Magazine*.
<http://www.heichimagazine.org/en/articles/217/information-1970-conceptual-art-in-print>

later; from deep investment in the project of artistic humanism in China, to intense examination of precarious psychic selves and others.

Furthermore, an underlying project of the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* was to map the geo-temporal space of “post-89” through a set of “synchronicities” aspired to by the artist-editors and their collaborators. To return to a question posed in the beginning of the essay, “what could the “post-89” world possibly look like to an artist,” the demarcation of the “post-89” historiographical sphere should be understood not only as a latent response to sweeping social events and historical trauma, but also as a stylistic turn that deserves further art historical reading. Although the two decisive events in 1989 shut the door for artists in devastating ways it nevertheless marked an opportunity that had significant consequences for their self-identification, the nature of their practice, and the envisioned path of their work. Chang Tsong-Zung writes,

The shattering of idealistic fancies also forced artists to re-examine the premise and validity of their artistic pursuit, and of the delicate tensions between form, aesthetic matter, and reality, which eventually gave birth to an altogether stronger and more personal breed of art.¹¹⁷

Although artists were focused on aligning their artistic practice with the immediate context of China and their selfhood, they were equally interested in how their works would be interpreted under the rapidly expanding timelines and histories characterized by globalization.¹¹⁸ With this in mind, “synchronicities” was posited as an aiding framework to balance art history’s traditional interest in the inventions in forms, as well as social history’s interest in collective effects and paradigmatic shifts. Although the sense of “rupture and demarcation” in the early 1990s has been recognized by art historians such as Lü Peng and Wu Hung, *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* constitute a concrete site where the books’ editors and their contributors collectively negotiate with the currents of socio-

¹¹⁷ Chang Tsong-Zung, “Into the Nineties,” in *Chinese New Art*, 1.

¹¹⁸ For a discussion on artists’ “worldly ambitions,” see Peggy Wang, “Introduction: Actors in the World,” in *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 1-20.

political realities, parallel art histories, and dissonant ideologies.¹¹⁹ As a result, *Black, White, Grey Cover Books*' idiosyncratic chronotype forms a comparative network that constitutes what art historian Reiko Tomii categorizes as “connections” and “resonances.”¹²⁰

Artists' self-imposed urgency among the crisscrossing of multiple histories and timelines is not only demonstrated through the interrogations of their increasingly complex identity as Chinese artists, but also seen in the internalized reflection of the procedural nature of their work. That being said, it is always important to recognize that such synchronizations do not always lead to positive results, and at times lead to the privileging of certain master-narratives of art history, or conflating the process of artmaking with the masculinist, gambit culture within avant-gardism, which is best characterized by the Xu Bing's reading on Marcel Duchamp using the metaphor of weapons,

Let's put it this way— Duchamp is merely someone with a gun. He was the first to use the gun where those before him only used arrows. People after Duchamp are competing with each other only in terms of accuracy, quality, and scores of the rounds. However, disciplines outside of art have already used ballistic missiles. “Guns” do not match this battlefield; or let us say that the way of warfare has already changed. But those who are on the frontline with guns still have not learned this fact.

If not made explicit enough prior, this essay is not only interested in *Black, White, Grey Cover Books*' role; rather, it considers the books as an autonomous space. My inquiry frames the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* as self-reflexive objects that preserve the crucial evidence of “complex processes of cultural transfer, transformation, and transgression” that characterized Chinese contemporary art at

¹¹⁹ Wu Hung, “A Case of Being Contemporary,” 293.

¹²⁰ Reiko Tomii, “Introduction to ‘International Contemporaneity’ and ‘Contemporary Art,’” in *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 11-44. Tomii writes, “In practice, a comparative perspective derived from “international contemporaneity” prompts us to consider ‘connections’ and ‘resonances’—two modes of connectedness that can be deciphered as “similar yet dissimilar phenomena.” “Connection is more obvious and more direct, encompassing events that actually happened,” whereas “Resonance is far more indirect and post hoc in nature but as vital as connection in our study. In resonances, there may have existed little actual linkage between two parties at the time, but a visual and conceptual parallel can be found often retroactively.”

the end of the twentieth century.¹²¹ In exploring their objecthood, I drew upon Johanna Drucker's description of books as "a highly mutable form" that negotiates "its identity as a set of aesthetic functions, cultural operations, formal conceptions, and metaphysical spaces."¹²² My study of the three books operates in a highly idiosyncratic, alternative space—not unlike Qiu's self-reflexive map.

Viewed as such, *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* coalesce into memory-sites (*le lieu de mémoire*) that battle suppression and amnesia—made most strong for case studies such as the Beijing East Village, a site that only lasted from 1992 to 1994, and was not only *preserved*, but *reimagined* through the book form by the ensuing *White* (1995) and *Grey Book* (1997).¹²³ The books harnessed the "mutual supplementarity" between documentations (images, videos, books) and the actuality of the events (performance, happenings, exhibitions).¹²⁴ As a result, the images of Beijing East Village performances were instrumental in disseminating and publicizing artists' practice.¹²⁵

Without a domestic art market, or a fully-fledged biennale system which proliferated a decade later in the twentieth century, the artist-editors of the *BWG Cover Books* took matters in their own hands and created an interface that effectively contests geographical isolation, the limits of identities, and the culture-specific mandates of "modernism." Even though many artists have since shifted their practices away from those seen in *Black, White, Grey Cover Books*, their contribution to *BWG Cover Books* nevertheless marked a critical reference point of their conceptual trajectory, thus continuously exerting profound influence on their artistic identity and approach. As a highly

¹²¹ Thomas J. Berghuis, "Social-Political Actions and Early Group Performances in China, 1976-1986," in *Performance Art in China* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2006), 34-64.

¹²² Johanna Drucker, "The Artist's Book as Idea and Form," in *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 2004), 9.

¹²³ For the term memory-site, see Pierre Nora, "Between Memory of History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 7-24.

¹²⁴ Amelia Jones, "Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 16. Quoted by Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (September 2006): 1-10.

¹²⁵ Fok, *Life and Death*, 208. Also, see Thomas J. Berghuis, "Introduction," in *Performance Art in China* (Beijing: Timezone 8), 1-11.

idiosyncratic and self-reflexive site, the *BWG Cover Books* stand out and manifest what John Lewis Gaddis calls “moment[s] of sensitivity,” where “small shifts at the beginning of the process produced large consequences’ at the end of it.”¹²⁶ But perhaps more importantly, the *Black, White, Grey Cover Books* have mapped out an imagined space consisting of multilateral dialogues and encounters, a utopic promise still actively being fulfilled through the various mediations of the art world today.

¹²⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, “Molecules with Minds of Their Own,” in *Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

APPENDIX I. Plates



Figure 1. Qiu Zhijie, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, 2017, Ink on paper, mounted to silk, 94 1/2 × 283 1/2 in, 240 × 720 cm.

Figure 2. Installation view of *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Photography: Ben Hider.



Figure 3. *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, detail.

Figure 4. *Black Cover Book* (1994), *White Cover Book* (1995), and *Grey Cover Book* (1997)



王世華、蒼 鑫、高 揚、詛／咒、馬忠仁、張 洹、馬六明、張彬彬、
段英梅、朱 冥
《為無名山增高1米》1995·北京 攝影：呂楠

Figure 5. Wang Shihua, Cang Xin, Gao Yang, Zuoxiao Zuzhou, Ma Zongren, Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhang Binbin, Duan Yingmei, and Zhu Ming, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995, *White Cover Book*, pg. 115.

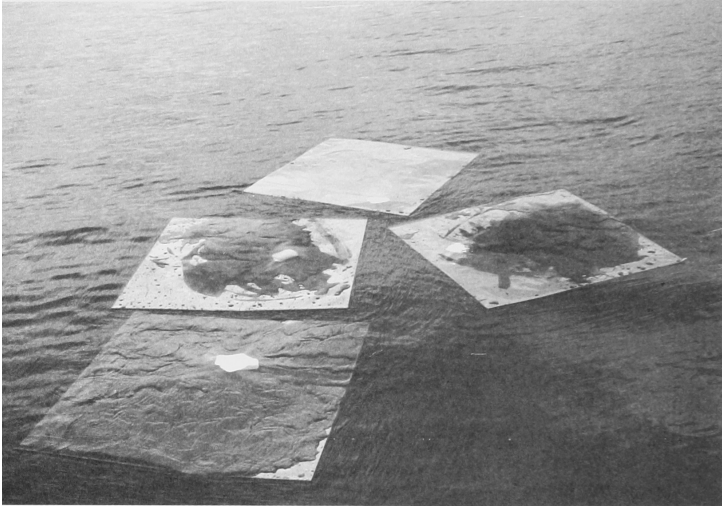


Figure 6. Wang Jin, *Erasing Traces*, 1995, Hangzhou, *White Cover Book*, pg.32

Figure 7. Pan Xinglei, *Red Mission*, 1995, Hong Kong, *White Cover Book*, pg. 64.

Figure 8. Wang Huimin, *Like the Sound of a Bullet Sent Your Way: Pang! Pang!*, 1997, Singapore, *Grey Cover Book*, pg. 53.



Figure 9. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), *Boîte-en-valise* (*De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy*), conceived 1935–41, H: 15 7/8 in. (40.3 cm) W: 14 15/16 × 3 9/16 in. (37.9 × 9 cm), D: 3 9/16 in. (9 cm), sixty-eight miniature replicas and reproductions of works by Duchamp in a cloth-covered cardboard box, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

編 者 的 話

這是一本由藝術家獨立編輯，自籌資金出版的關於中國現代藝術的學術性內部交流資料。

本刊選編的內容注重海內外中國現代藝術家思想、觀念及活動的最新狀態；創作的原始性資料和檔案的記錄、整理、研究；注重藝術家的自我分析、批判、總結的過程；注重國際當下文化焦點問題的討論，以及與中國文化進程、現代藝術發展的多樣性和特殊性關係；介紹有價值的國際現代藝術運動經典文獻。

以此媒介為中國現代藝術家的試驗性藝術提供發表、解釋、交流的機會。通過這種相互參與、交流和探討，為中國現代藝術創造生存環境，並促進其發展。

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編 者：曾小俊 艾未未 徐 冰

執行編輯：梓 工

香港大地出版印刷公司印刷

Figure 10. Editorial Statement, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 159.



Figure 11. Unidentified photographer, [The Red Guards hold “Quotation from Chairman Mao Zedong” in hands during the interview in 1966 in Beijing, China], China Foto Press/Gerry Images.

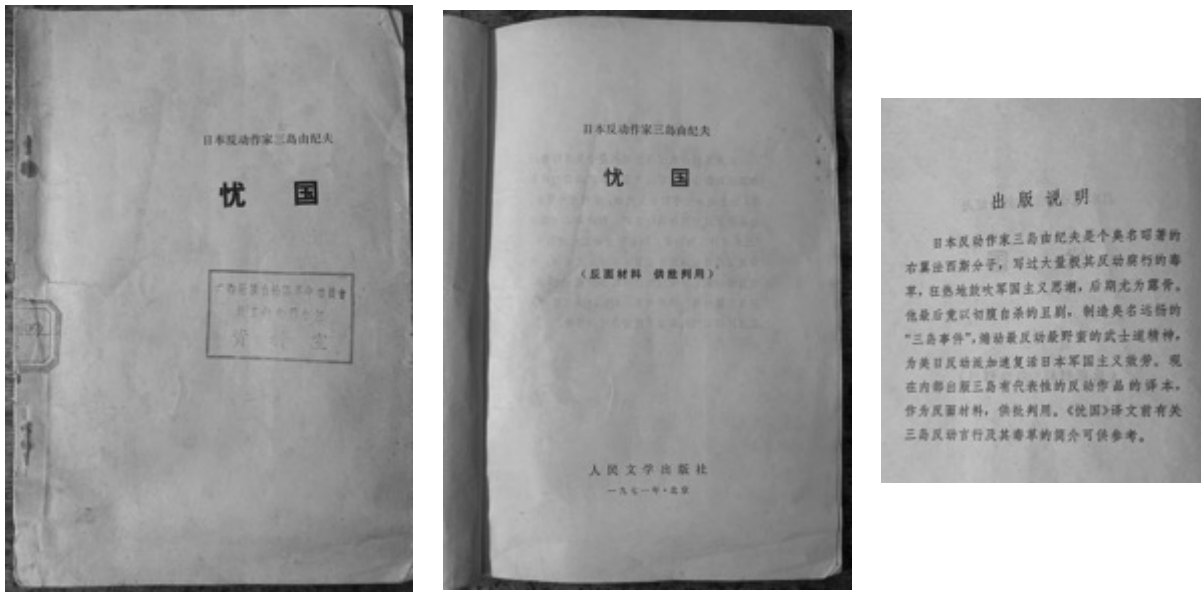
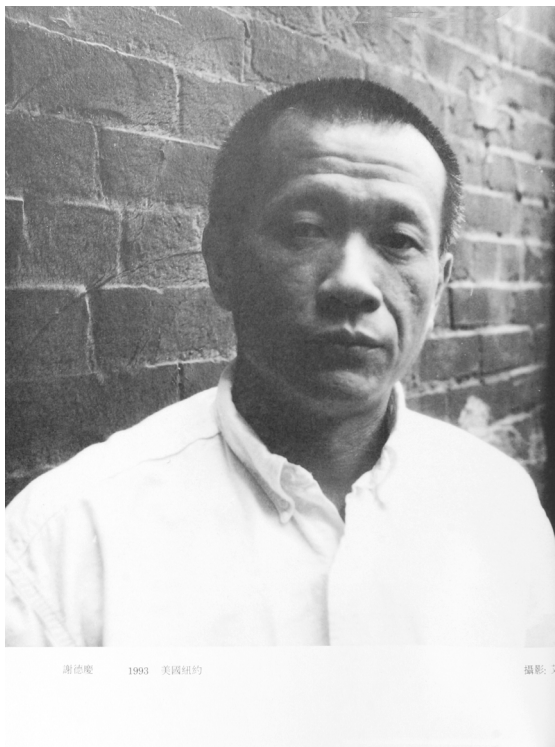


Figure 12. Cover, colophon and preface of a 1971 “closed-circuit book” of Yukio Mishima’s 1960 short story *Patriotism*. With byline “counter-revolutionary material, published for the purpose of criticism,” as well as preface detailing Mishima’s notoriety as a “right-wing fascist.”



Figure 13. Cover and Index of the *Meishu Yicong* (Art Translation Anthology), inaugural issue, 1980. Cover Image: Vincent van Gogh, *Vase with Gladioli and Chinese Asters*, 1886.



與謝德慶對話

1993. 10. 25
美國紐約

謝德慶 徐 冰 艾未未

徐：當時對你活動的報道非常多，好像很受關注。

謝：那是那一年最大的活動。

徐：哪年？

謝：83、84年。

徐：這些人很健忘。這才過了九年……

謝：我沒有再發表作品，健忘不要去在意。許多藝術是因為一再地重復，再現才被人們記住。

艾：藝術已經不是一個能夠引起人們注意的事情了。海灣戰爭事過一年已經被人們所忘記，就跟一個孩子上街玩了次電子遊戲機一樣。藝術已無法引起人們廣泛的興趣，常常只是藝術家個人的問題。

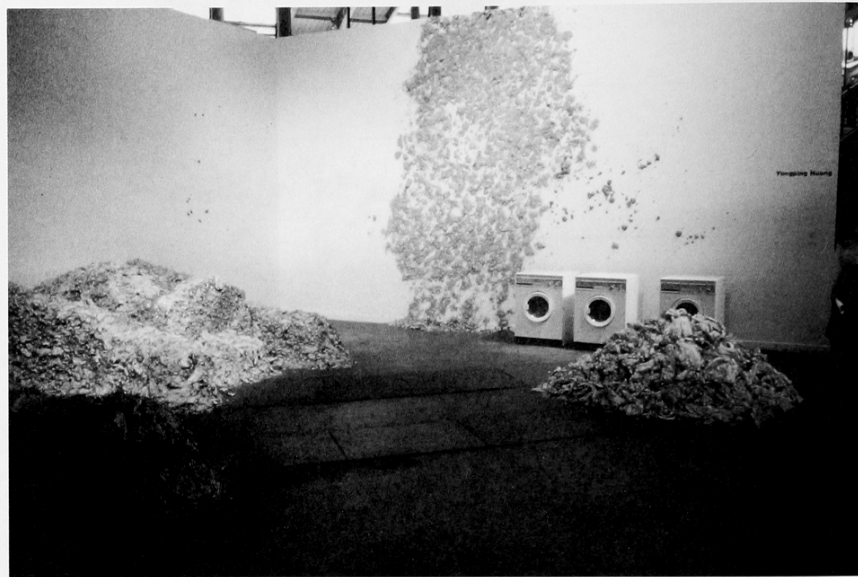
謝：事實上，這個社會沒有讓我們變成參與者。我們並不需要去成名，不需要去借助這種經驗就可以了解這是怎麼回事，沒有必要去走不必要的道路。許多事情可以通過智慧而不必去走經驗的路，把時間縮短，跳到重點問題，向前多走幾步。我講這番話是因為我已經有一些這樣的經驗，這些經驗會幫助我作一些觀念上的選擇，比較不會受到這方面的干擾。這是經驗的好處。更理想的是不需要這些經驗，在智慧上解決問題。

艾：這是立足點的問題，立足點高，可以排除很多非本質的問題，否則會作許多不必要的努力。

謝德慶 1993 美國紐約

攝影：艾未未

Figure 14. “Conversation with Hsieh Tehching, 1993. 10.25, New York, United States of America, Hsieh Tehching, Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei,” the *Black Cover Book*, pg. 8-9.



黃永砅
《爬行動物》1989
法國巴黎

Figure 15. Huang Yongping, *Reptile*, at *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1989, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 104

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謝德慶一年的行為藝術1980—1981
攝影：沈明昆

Figure 16. Hsieh Tehching, *One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)*, 1980-1981, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 24

September 26, 1981

STATEMENT

I, Tehching Hsieh, plan to do a one year performance piece.

I shall stay OUTDOORS for one year, never go inside.

I shall not go in to a building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, tent.

I shall have a sleeping bag.

The performance shall begin on September 26, 1981 at 2 P.M. and continue until September 26, 1982 at 2 P.M.

Tehching Hsieh
Tehching Hsieh

New York City



Figure 17. Hsieh Tehching, *One Year Performance (Outdoor Piece)*, Exhibition Catalog, Franklin Furnace Gallery, 1981-1982.



附注：自1974年至1988年，在美14年間，無合法居留身份。

Figure 18. Hsieh Tehching, *One Year Performance (Outdoor Piece)*, 1981-1982, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 26, 31.

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第2屆聖·保羅雙年展邀請位中國藝術家參展			
St. Paul's Chinese Artists Invited to Participate in the 22nd International Biennial of Sao Paulo			
SHS小組的《大玻璃——夢想天堂》			
“Large Glass—Heaven in Fantasy” by SHS Group			
W.A 趙 兪 兪 徐志偉 路青 榮榮			

Figure 19. Table of Contents, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 4-5.

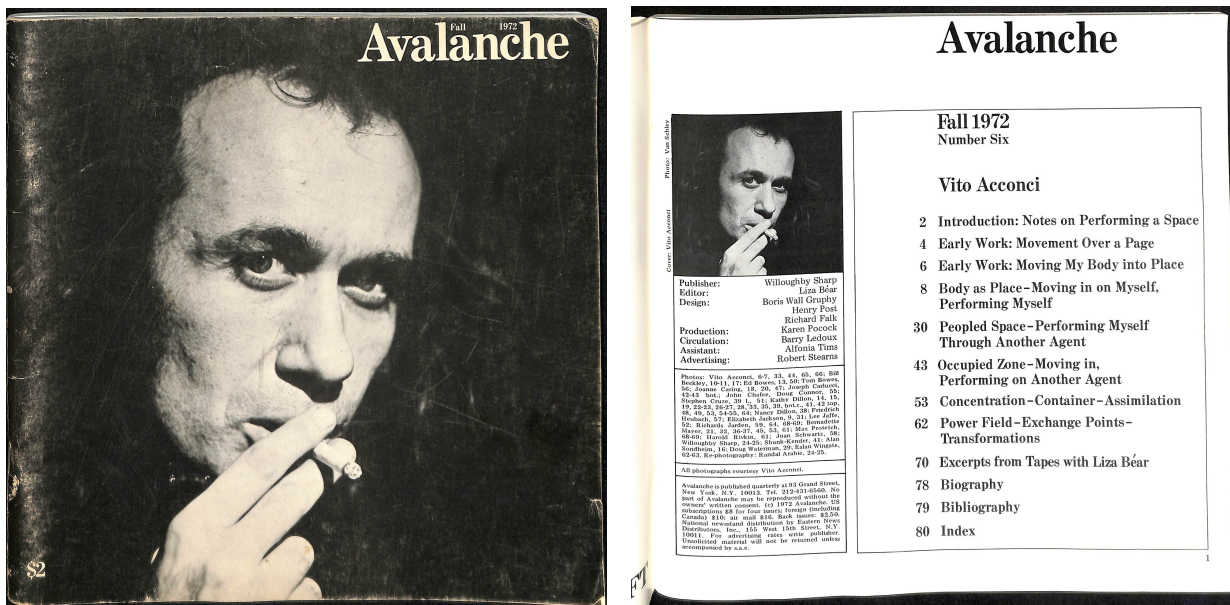


Figure 20. Cover and Table of Contents, *Avalanche Magazine*, Fall 1972 issue.



莊：80年代之後美國藝術有什麼重要的事情發生嗎？

艾：我個人認為，八十年代是一個糟糕的時期，是藝術商人掙了錢的時期，是多數藝術家在精神上感到壓抑的一個時代。

莊：進入八十年代末期，由於全球冷戰結束，蘇共陣營解體，歐盟各國加大了共同合作的步伐。在這種前景下，流行於學術界中的後現代主義多元理論也迅然奮起，從某種意義上講，歷史為今天的人們賦予了新的責任。我們已經逐漸消除了對那些所謂的民族主義、國家利益等等話題關懷的熱情。

艾：九十年代的藝術發生了一些變化，人們從八十年代轟轟烈烈的潮流中走向了藝術的個人化、多元化，這實際上是人們對個人狀態和個人方式的重新審視，由於近幾十年來電視、電腦、信息網絡的發展，使代表著個人意志、個人特征的藝術形式在逐漸消弱，（包括受安迪·沃荷爾思潮的影響。），這種處境一旦被人們省悟，就會發現我們作為個人存在的方式已經不存在了，這是一種人類前所未有的狀態。

莊：那麼，我們最終要尋找什麼樣的結果呢？

艾：最終，是否要達到一種群體性的思維方式，還是像人們今天鼓吹的走向個人自由化的狀態，還需要人們去探討。當然，從某些意義來說，現在存在的方式還是比較古老的，只有幾個共同的價值觀，在精神上實際沒有太大的不同。

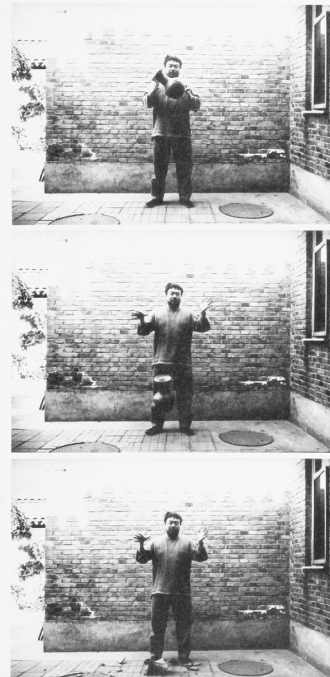
莊：你認為藝術中存在所謂的創造性嗎？

艾：我不喜歡創造這個詞，它是一個比較宗教的概念，是我們談上帝的時候從無到有的一種奇跡般東西，談創造性是誇張了自己的功能。

莊：最後你是否能談一下目前藝術家所普遍面對的一些問題。

艾：我認為，現在的藝術家無論中國還是西方的，都普遍對藝術的原始功能、今天的藝術到底是什麼？這方面問題的發問比較少，而對功利及短期效益的考慮比較多。所以，多數人還是屬於機會主義的方式，我們的時代缺少有獨立人格的、有自己獨特價值觀的一批藝術家。

（根據錄音整理）



艾未未 演 碎陶罐 1995，北京

Figure 21. *Avalanche Magazine*, Fall 1972 issue, pg. 20-21.

Figure 22. Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, the *White Cover Book*, pg. 20-21.



Figure 23. Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch*, 1994,
White Cover Book, pg. 26-27. Photography by RongRong.



Figure 24. Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective*, 1995-1997, *Grey Cover Book*, pg. 10-11.



Figure 25. Ai Weiwei, *June*, 1994, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 109.



艾未未
《閉館》
1993
中國北京

艾未未

租用中國美術館。關閉全部展廳。關閉時間為租用期全部時間。

租用展廳部位：一層：中央方廳、圓廳、東側廳、西側廳、東南角廳、東北角廳、西南角廳、西北角廳。

二層：中廳、東側廳、西側廳。

三層：兩個展廳。

總展出面積為6000平方米。

租用合同以《租用中國美術館展廳合同書》為準。

租金和其它費用參照《中國美術館展廳及附屬用房租金表》。

租用手續參照《在中國美術館舉辦展覽要求》。

租用期間遵照《中國美術館展廳管理規定》、《中國美術館展覽安全保衛規定》。

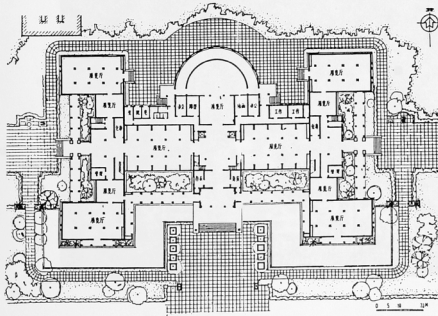
1993 北京

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中國美術館展覽安全保衛規定

1. 凡在我館舉辦的展覽，展出期間安全保衛工作(從展品進館開始至展品出館止)，由主辦單位負責，我館保衛部門協助。
2. 凡來展單位與館展覽部簽定展出合同後，應立即到保衛處聯繫安全保衛工作，制定展出期間安全保衛措施。待各項安全措施(包括消防措施)落實後方能開展。
3. 主辦單位，應指定專人(來展單位的正式工作人員)負責安全保衛工作。
4. 布展和撤展期間主辦單位要派專人把門，無關人員禁止入展廳。
5. 凡在我館舉辦展覽開幕式及重要活動，涉及到政協副主席、副總理、副委員長、最高人民檢察院檢察長、最高人民法院院長以上領導人及友好國家領導人，主辦單位均應事先通知有關保衛部門。

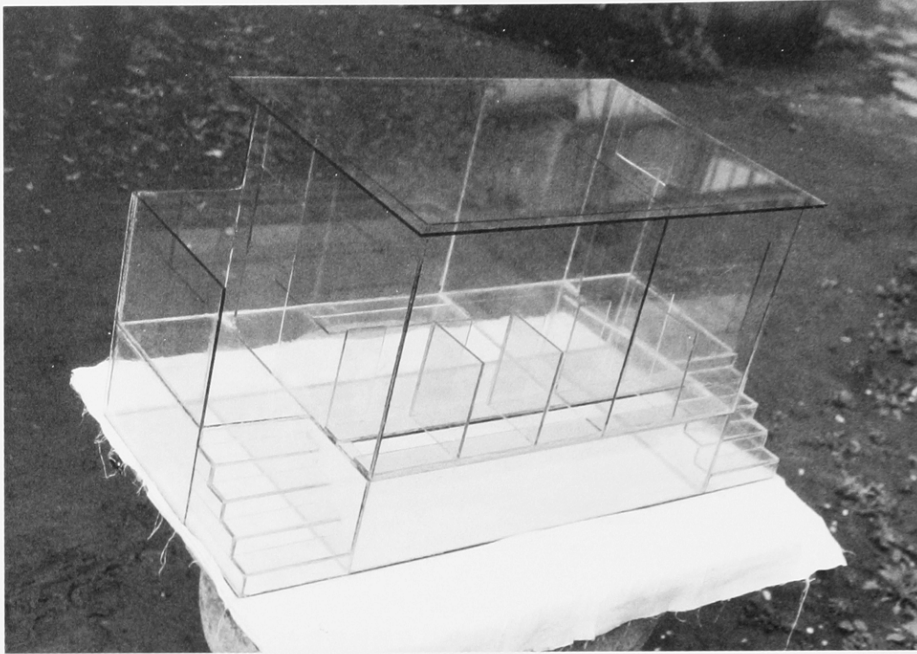
中國美術館人保處



中國美術館一層平面圖

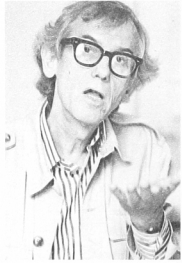
47

Figure 26. Ai Weiwei, *Shutting Down National Gallery of Art*, 1993, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 42-43, 47.



邱志杰
《公共生活》 玻璃·公共厕所模型 100mm × 70mm × 70mm 1994 · 北京

Figure 27. Qiu Zhijie, *Public Life*, 1993, *White Cover Book*, pg. 42-43.



設計草圖



克利斯托

包裹德國“帝國大廈”議案終獲通過

1994年2月25日，德國議會以292票對223票多數，通過了著名行為藝術家Christo包裹德國“帝國大廈”的議案。Christo 22年來的夙願終於可以付諸實現。

Christo的這一念頭起於1971年，當時他正在美國科羅拉多州做項目，他的朋友、助理Michael Cullen寄給他一張明信片，上面印的是德國帝國大廈。Cullen寫道：“這難道不是你的下一個項目嗎？”然而，那時東西方處於冷戰期，柏林，對於這位1956年逃離保加利亞，1973年才獲得美國公民權的藝術家仍是禁區。直到1976年，他才第一次親眼看到了“帝國大廈”。Christo在描述當時心情時說：這座飽經戰爭風火，曾象徵着德意志威嚴的建築，那樣孤獨淒涼地立在東西柏林的邊界，離大牆只有28米遠，周圍是一片空曠，它好象每時每刻都在譴責那種分隔局面。由於柏林當時緊張復雜的政治環境，Christo的這一行動方案一再遭到德國政府的拒絕。但他從未放棄過他的計劃，一直不斷地進行着各種準備工作。1989年11月9日，柏林牆的突然倒塌，給Christo帶來了新的希望。德國的統一，更使一切又成為可能。1991年底，德國議會主席聚斯梅特女士寫信給Christo，表示願意幫助他實現這一願望。同時，德國總統瓦爾蔡克及柏林市長迪普根也表示支持Christo。於是，Christo與妻子Jeanne Claude一起，走訪了250多位德國議員，盡可能詳細地給他們提供信息，爭取他們的理解和支持。

直到今年2月25日議會的最後一次討論，整個過程沒有涉及費用問題。因為Christo早就聲明，項目所需一千萬馬克資金，全部由他個人支付，這就省去了許多德國納稅人的擔心。爭論的焦點一直圍繞着德國的尊嚴問題。執政總理科爾及另一些保守派竭力反對Christo的計劃，認為“帝國大廈”象徵着德意志國家及人民的尊嚴。這樣一座重要的建築，隨便讓一個藝



1884年德意志帝國皇帝威廉二世(WILHELM II)時期竣工的帝國大廈。集文藝復興時期、新古典主義、新巴羅克建築風格為一身。



1933年2月27日大火後的“帝國大廈”



1990年德國統一後的“帝國大廈”，它將被重修後成為新的德國議會大廳。

Figure 28. Coverage on the approval of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag* proposal in 1994, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 148-49.

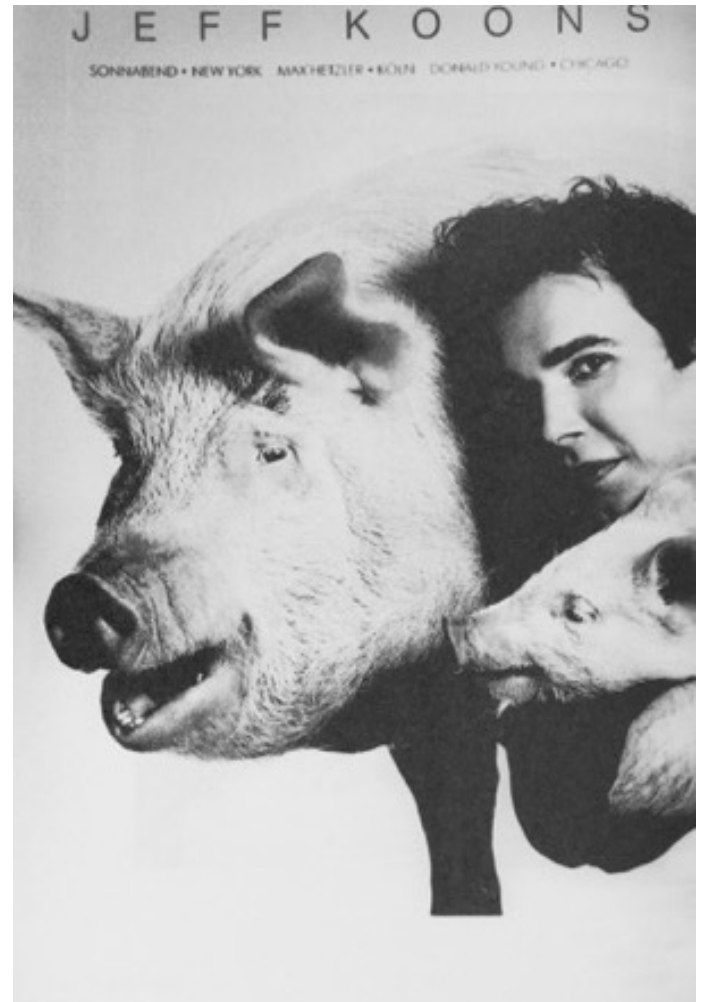
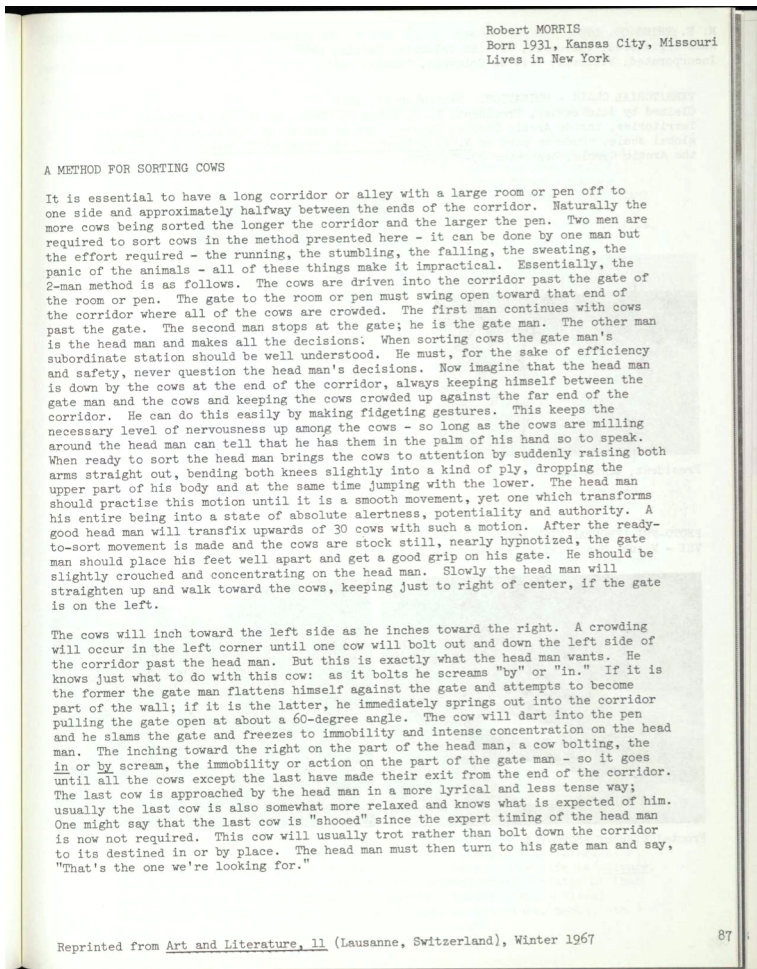


Figure 30. Robert Morris, *A Method of Sorting Cows*, 1967, *Information*, MoMA, 1970, pg. 87.

Figure 31. Jeff Koons, *Art Magazine Ads*, 1988-1989, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 142.

稱之為“輔助的現成品”(readymade aided)。

又有些時候，為了揭示藝術與現成品之間的根本矛盾，我想出了“互補的現成品”(reciprocal readymade)一詞：把一幅倫勃朗的作品用作熨衣板。

我很快就認識到隨心所欲地重復這種表現形式所存在的危險，決定將“現成品”創作的範圍每年限制在很小的數量。當時我意識到，觀眾甚至藝術家更覺得藝術是一種容易讓人上癮的毒品，我希望保護我的“現成品”不受這種污染。

“現成品”的另一方面就是缺少獨特性……一件“現成品”的復制品所傳達的是同樣含義。實際上，今天所存在的幾乎每一件“現成品”在傳統意義上都不是什麼新創。

在這次自大狂式的演講最後，我想再說一點：

既然藝術家所使用的顏料管是批量生產的現成產品，那麼我們就可以得出這樣的結論，世界上的一切繪畫都是“輔助的現成品”，也是集成的作品。

馬塞爾·杜香 1961年

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本篇為杜香于1961年10月19日在紐約現代藝術博物館的談話內容，發表于《藝術與藝術家》(倫敦)第一卷第四冊(1966年7月)第47頁。講話原稿為賽蒙·瓦特森·泰勒(Simon Watson Taylor)收藏。

(翻譯：野 水)



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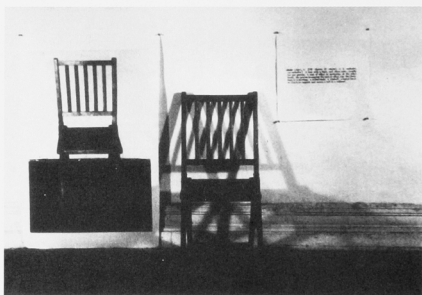
扮裝的杜香
1920—21
攝影：Man Ray

馬塞爾·杜香
《自行車輪》
1913
法國巴黎

Figure 32. Marcel Duchamp, “On Readymade” (1961) with photograph by Man Ray and image of Bicycle Wheel (1913), *Black Cover Book*, pg. 132-133.

哲學之後的藝術

高基夫·科瑟斯



高基夫·科瑟斯
《一個和三個椅子》1965，紐約，現代藝術博物館

最近，物理學家們都盛行對宗教持同情態度……這一事實表明物理學家們對自己對學術假設的正確性缺乏信心，對他們來說這是對19世紀科學家反宗教的教條主義的反動，也是物理學剛剛渡過的危機的自然結果。——A.J. 艾爾 (Ayer)

……人們一旦理解《Teactatus》，就不會再有興趣將自己與哲學相聯繫，因為哲學既不像科學那樣以經驗為依據，也不象數學那樣繁瑣，人們會象維特根斯坦在1918年那樣拋棄哲學，因為按照傳統的理解，哲學的根源是混亂無章的。——J.O. 厄姆森 (Urmason)

傳統哲學幾乎可以肯定地說是關注未被言說者 (the unsaid)。20世紀注重分析的語義哲學家近乎排他性地專注於被言說者 (the said)，因為他們都認為未被言說者之所以未被言說是因為它不可言說 (unsayable)。黑格爾哲學的意義是在19世紀，對剛剛越過休謨、啟蒙運動和康德的這個世紀來說，它是一個慰藉。(1)黑格爾的哲學還能夠庇護對宗教信仰的捍衛，為牛頓力學提供了一種可行的方法，適合於將歷史的發展作為一門

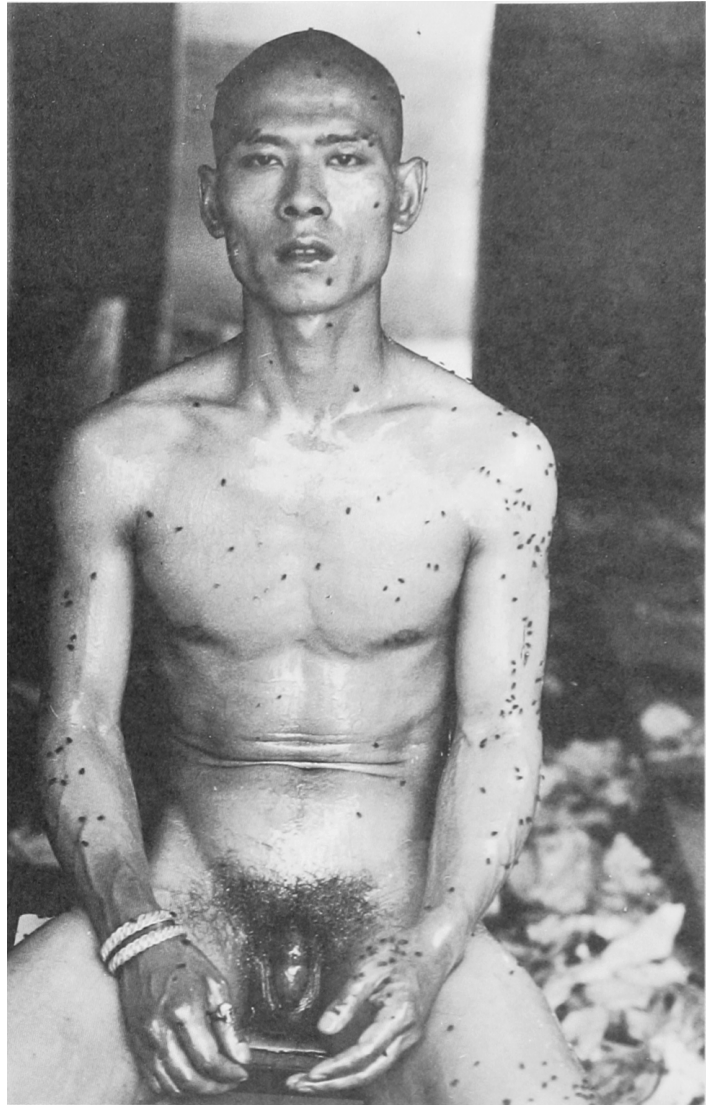
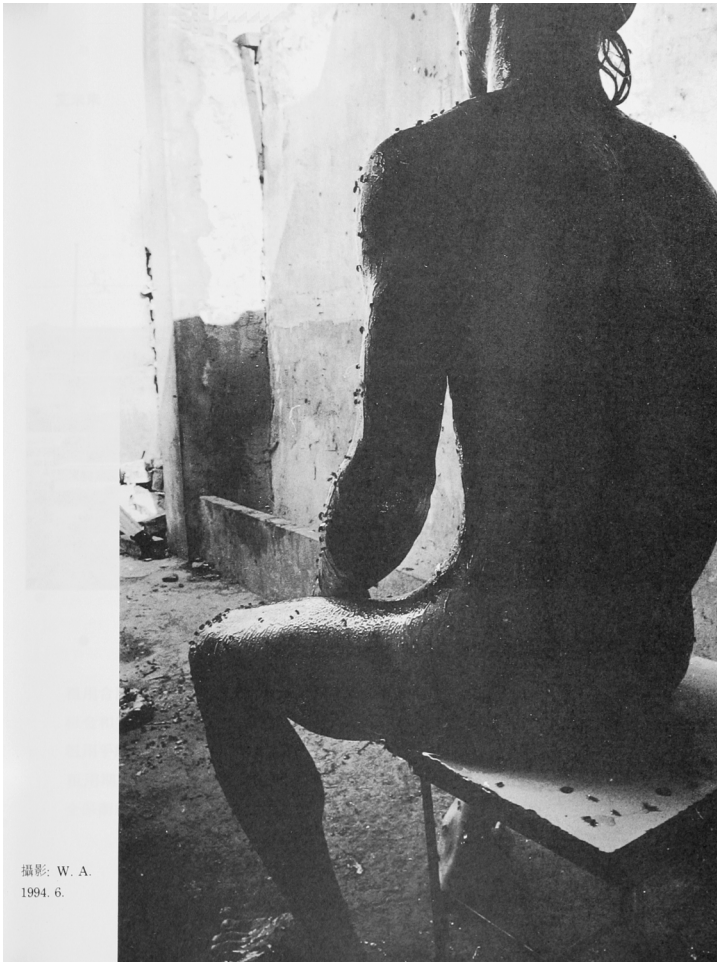
Figure 33. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965) and essay *Art After Philosophy* (1969), *White Cover Book*, pg. 118-119



攝影：榮榮
1994. 6.

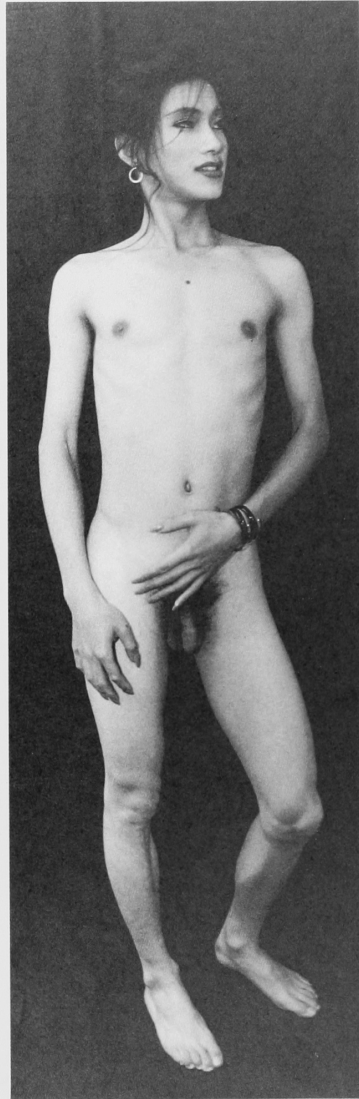
蒼蠅、螞蟻、蛆和瓶
子、肛門、酒
詛咒
你道出一條線索
蛆是蒼蠅的祖宗
螞蟻是蛆的喪鐘
蒼蠅是螞蟻的鰥父
蒼蠅、螞蟻、蛆
誰是誰的喪鐘
誰死在誰手中
它們嚇得哆嗦
你理出一條繆論
酒是瓶子的脈搏
肛門由瓶子制造
瓶子、肛門是難友
瓶子、肛門、酒
誰是誰的朋友
誰會死在誰手
不要留下活口
不要砸壞瓶口
蒼蠅、螞蟻、蛆
瓶子、肛門、酒
一九九四六月十日

Figure 34. Zhang Huan, *12 Square Meters*, 1994, artist's statement and a lyric-poem by Zuoxiao Zuzhou (Curse), *Black Cover Book*, pg. 66.

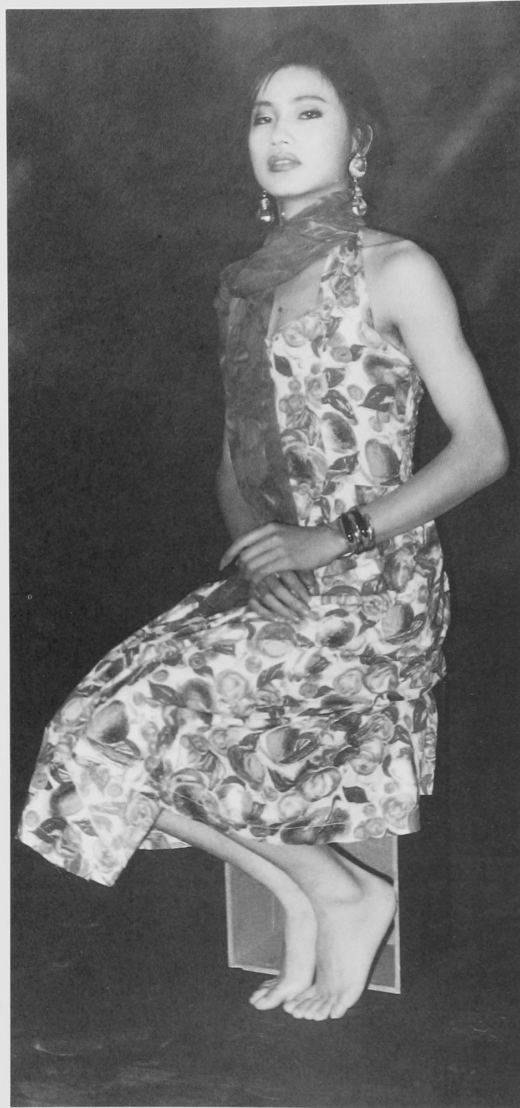


攝影: W. A.
1994. 6.

Figure 35. Zhang Huan, *12 Square Meters*, 1994, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 41, 70.



馬六明《裸臉》之一
1993
中國北京
攝影：邢丹文



馬六明《芬·馬六明》之三
1993
中國北京
攝影：邢丹文

Figure 36. Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming* series, 1993, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 34.



Figure 37. Zhu Fadong, *Person for Sale*, 1994, *Black Cover Book*, pg. 56.



Figure 38. Cang Xin, *Stepping on Faces*, 1994, *White Cover Book*, pg. 103.



张 洵
《为鱼塘增高水位》1997·8·北京

Figure 39. Zhang Huan, *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond*, 1997, *Grey Cover Book*, pg. 112.

“中國現代藝術見證人”攝影展

徐志偉、邢丹文、榮榮應“東京畫廊”邀請，於1995年9月4日—22日在日本“東京畫廊”舉行“中國現代藝術見證人”攝影展。

這次展出作品共八十多幅，三位攝影家主要以北京文化藝術領域為題材，介入文化的變遷，向外界展現了近幾年北京的藝術現狀，特別是已不復存在的“北京東村”、“北京西村”藝術家多年的聚居地。

這是“東京畫廊”首次作攝影展。



榮榮 《十二月三十一日》



《原音》

《原音》

在藝術家詛咒、羅林、何銳軍、高馥、榮榮、宋曉紅、朱發東、蒼鑫、張洵、宋冬、王世華、馬六明的共同策劃下，1995年1月23日晚22點，北京市東便門立交橋下，12位藝術家以各自不同的行為方式，試圖發覺隱含於自身中最初的原音。

Figure 40. Report on “Chinese Modern Art Witnesses” Photography Exhibition in Tokyo Gallery, 1995, *White Cover Book*, pg. 149.

Figure 41. Report on Zuzhou, Luo Lin, He Ruijun, Gao Fu, RongRong, Song Xiaohong, Zhu Fadong, Cang Xin, Zhang Huan, Song Dong, Wang Shijie, Ma Liuming, *Primordial Sound*, January 23rd, 1995, *White Cover Book*, pg. 150.

北京東村——“流浪”藝術家的聚居地

繼北京“圓明園畫家村”之後，一處“流浪”藝術家新的聚居地——“北京東村”已經形成。它位于北京東郊，長城飯店東側約一公里的農民村落——大山莊和四路居。

兩年前，以在中央美術學院油畫系進修班學習的畫家為主，開始散居此地。隨後，一些外地藝術家投奔到這裏。目前約有二十幾位藝術家在此安營扎寨，從事創作及藝術活動。他們是：來自河南的張洵，來自山東的張揚，來自湖北的馬六明，來自內蒙古的高揚、王世華、孔布、于國明，來自黑龍江的蒼鑫、段英梅(女)，來自湖南的徐三、向維光、朱雯等。其中還包括于1993年成立的地下搖滾樂隊——NO樂隊的主唱手詛、咒和樂手夜千、邊平巴措、盧奇等。

據由“北京東村”藝術家集體口述，孔布整理的“核聚反應——‘北京東村’藝術家觀念寫真”一文的介紹，聚居“北京東村”的藝術家們，強調的是生存體驗和對當下文化氛圍的感悟性。注重作品產生的特定語境及必然性。崇尚藝術總體媒體對藝術觀念及生存體驗的到位轉換，苛求建立他們自己的一種使觀念轉換，且具有開放樣式的體系。他們對中國藝術未來不以為渺茫，不因身處當下的歷史境況自愧，也無畏西方藝術的輝芒，竭力使“民族主義”與“國際化”的“對立”在他們的藝術活動中消解。意欲創作人類總體文化感召下極具人類普遍性的作品。不幻想西方大師們的優越境況，只從自身條件允許的範圍內創作。他們不同于受雇他人依賴薪水的工作者，不願把藝術只投向受人指使的層面。同時，也不是些急功好利者，不同意“排除一切不符合流行標準”的作法。他們關注所處的社會、政治現實及文化變異趨向，欲把大信息量的存在體驗集成，用總體藝術媒介直接轉換為藝術，真正實現藝術的價值與功能。

又訊，據證實，到本書截稿之時，“北京東村”已不復存在。

“北京東村” 94. 6. 11 攝影: W. A.



Figure 42. “Beijing East Village: A Settlement for ‘Stray’ Artists,”
Black Cover Book, Details, pg. 154.

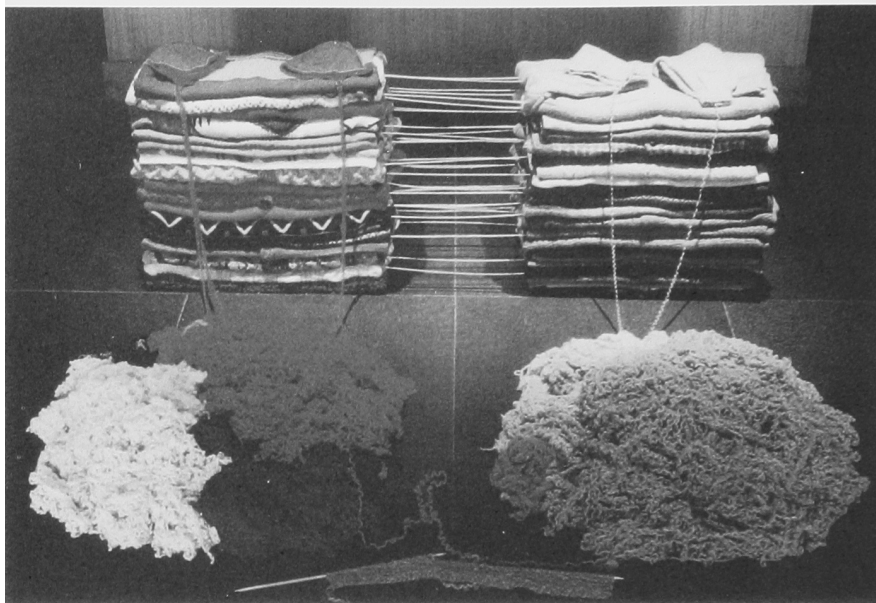


Figure 43. Lin Tianmiao, *Entanglement and Unentanglement*, 1997, *Grey Cover Book*, pg. 86.

Figure 44. Yin Xiuzhen, *Yarn*, 1995, *White Cover Book*, pg. 34.



Figure 45. Chen Shaoxiong,
*Changing the TV channel Will
Change the Decision of the Bride*,
1994, *White Cover Book*, pg.
52.



Figure 46. Chen Shaoxiong,
5 Hours, 1993, *Black Cover
Book*, pg. 120.



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赵半狄

《1997年7月1日。置换中国和英国土地25 × 25 × 25cm》

6月22日，在北京北部十三陵附近挖掘一块25 × 25 × 25cm土地，装箱。
6月26日，携土地到伦敦（作为行李）。
7月1日，在伦敦dock lands置换中国和英国土地。将英国某工地25 × 25 × 25cm土地装箱。
7月5日，携带英国土地回国。
7月9日，把英国土地放置于早先的空缺中。

Figure 47. Zhao Bandi,
Exchange, July 1st, 1997, *Grey
Cover Book*, pg. 84-85.

APPENDIX II.
“Conversation with Hsieh Tehching,”
Ai Weiwei, Hsieh Tehching, and Xu Bing, New York, 1993.10.25¹²⁷

Translated by Felix Ho Yuen Chan

Xu Bing: There was a lot of coverage on your activities at the time; it seems like your work garnered a lot of attention.

Hsieh Tehching: Those were my most active years.

Xu: 1983 and 1984.

Xu: These people are forgetful; it has only been nine years...

Hsieh: I have not released any work since, do not worry about the forgetfulness. Many works of art became memorable because they were repeated again and again.

Ai Weiwei: Art is no longer something that draws attention from people. People have already forgotten about the Gulf War after only one year, as if some child just went out to play in an arcade. Art no longer attracts wide-ranging interest; instead, it is often just a personal matter to an artist.

Hsieh: In fact, this society did not treat us as its members. We do not need to be famous, nor do we need to use fame to gain insight into how this all works. There is no need to go down unnecessary paths. Many things can be understood through a subjective understanding instead of an empirical understanding. One can shorten time and jump to the essential issues, walk a couple steps ahead. I said what I mentioned above because I have had some of these experiences. Experience helps me make some conceptual decisions, so that I can be relatively free of distractions. These are the benefits of having experience. But the more ideal situation is not to rely on these experiences and solve problems intellectually.

Ai: This is about the issue of status. A higher standing enables one to exclude a lot of unessential questions; otherwise, one would make a lot of wasted efforts.

Hsieh: With regards to how to be involved in the Western system, my view is that there is no need to be involved. It is not necessary to go through the process of trying to assimilate into the Western system. Art does not have to be involved in any “system.” This is not to say we should lose our self-awareness of and vigilance towards current issues, or our observation and insight into things. It is better to know more and understand extensively about external affairs. However, it is best if one could not be involved in any system— it is true that it enables one to go further.

Ai: The “system” is often man made. It is often created under a specific environment, which has little to do with essence. But the problems we seek are of essence — what does that involve? And what are the circumstances [associated with taking part in this inquiry]? But an unfavorable “system” compromises these essential questions, making those involved in this process victims. This

¹²⁷ *Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company), 9-17.

is why a system collapses. A powerful kingdom or dynasty collapses because a “system” is unreasonable.

An artist or an individual derives value from creating an independent way of life through independent thinking. The functionality and strength of independent thinking allows a person to walk out of a conventional “system.” This is not an easy thing to do; it is built upon critical thinking about this system.

Xu: In fact, everyone must belong to some sort of system. The only difference is whether it is “not by choice” or “by choice.” When you come from Taiwan to the United States in order to enter the “system” of international vanguardism, this is a choice.

Hsieh: It is hard to say, that’s not necessarily the case. We came to the United States to absorb some of the quintessence of the West. We all have to find a place to live, it is just a matter of convenience, it is whatever. You don’t have to be in New York, you can be in Wisconsin or some other place. If you could realistically do some things and do them with freedom, then you do not necessarily have to be in New York.

Ai: I want to reach a “zero” state —where one does not have to do a particular thing and minimizes the effort to survive other affairs and be exposed to fewer restraints and influences from the external environment. Like the vacuum or constant temperature state in a laboratory, a standard condition. A common standard is a collective issue for humans and not bound to specific time and place, like a majority of political movements and cultural trends.

Hsieh: After all these are personal matters. One has to walk on a path that has not been walked before. Almost none of these questions can be answered through the external world. Even the way we have approached things thus far is rarely heard of in a place like New York. Unless you have your own sufficient judgement, there is no ‘finished product’ that can be directly adopted. This is not something that one could attain from going to a couple more galleries or exhibitions. Many things in our living environment can train our judgement. Although life has its mythologized aspects, but it ultimately does not stray from an inquiry into universal essence. Western artists also face the same issues, these are not just our own problems.

Ai: Today’s cultural scene has gone through seismic changes. Modernist movements were developed during the peak of post-industrial capitalism, amid the rise of consumerism and the bourgeois. Today, however, modernism faces the post-capitalist “information revolution,” cultural structures are going through changes alongside global economy structures, and “new orders” constantly renew themselves. New economies and ways of spreading information break the gridlock of cultural hegemony, liberating newly global and multivalent cultures from regional prestige. However, art today has yet to show signs of this most recent revolution.

Hsieh: The art we see today in New York can no longer shock people; nothing makes you see the future.

Xu: This means that that art is optional.

Ai: That is not a given. New awareness and expressive forms will emerge. Avant-garde art has lost its “avant-gardeness” and is trailing behind its time/epoch. The early period of avant-garde movements had direct relations with the future and circumstances of humanity. But nowadays, artists have lost this basic concern.

Hsieh: That was the heyday, we're now at a declining period. Postmodernism is blurry and has no strong power, even if some refuse to let it go. One ought to disassociate oneself from the epoch. If people do not clearly recognize this, then they make a wrong estimate.

Ai: The biggest difference between us today and those from the past is that we are unanimously sure of the end of the world. We have never recognized this so clearly as we do today.

Hsieh: What causes you to adopt old practice, or do meaningless things? But if you dare to do it, then the art carries this tragic element. Especially for people like us, we recognize that doing things is futile—but we still do it. We all have a rational and irrational side. We all have a set of values.

Ai: These values go through changes, and that is the biggest issue we face as humans. If you do not die today, then you need a reason to live. You need a reason to wake up every morning. For example: "I have a letter to mail today." If [basic] motivations like these are gone, then the end has truly come. You would use strength to get rid of a hand that tries to strangle you, but what if you happen to be the one that strangles your own neck?

Xu: The entire human race now is strangling our own necks— this is the reality.

Ai: The world no longer needs a revolution; it has already collapsed. What is left is self-revolutions: achieving the ultimate spiritual harmony and finishing the remaining journey. This perhaps is the ultimate goal of the mind. Find a spot, a position, and confirm the reality of your existence. We won't find anything, but it would be impossible to give up the search.

Hsieh: We are all preparing to do something—Ai Weiwei will return to China, Xu Bing will be coming to New York, I will be in Taiwan. These are very small changes, but we are all ready to do something.

Ai: But for foot soldiers like us, the regular warfare is over.

Xu: Guns are useless; we are facing newer weapons— lasers, missiles, and such. For modernist artists, we must learn how to use missiles.

Hsieh: Artists these days should suspend activities. Many approaches are meaningless. One should focus on one path. If this path is right, the work will be right.

Ai: This summarizes Duchamp.

Hsieh: In fact, in the grand perspective of time, there has not been much progress made five to six decades after him [Duchamp]. If Duchamp achieved such a state, then it is pointless for other artists to continue; but why are we still doing anything if there is no need to do anything? This is a worthwhile question, unlike those minute questions.

Xu: Let's put it this way— Duchamp is merely someone with a gun. He was the first to use the gun where those before him only used arrows. People after Duchamp are competing with each other only in terms of accuracy, quality and scores of the rounds. However, disciplines outside of art have already used ballistic missiles. "Guns" do not match this battlefield; or let us say that the way of warfare has already changed. But those who are on the frontline with guns still have not learned this fact.

Ai: Duchamp had foreseen the future, which is why he could do what he did.

Hsieh: He was on a periphery; however, we are even further on the periphery. We should not play the Western game, but we must still learn their game. This way we can disrupt it. Our periphery is more intuitive.

Ai: When a terminal illness appears and conventional treatments are proven useless, that's when people start to seek alternative ways—it's also when a shift of custom takes place.

Xu: This is why culture is heterogeneous. There would not be a periphery if there were not anything problematic developing within the West. They wouldn't emphasize immigration issues if there were not something wrong with their system.

Ai: So many issues these days can't be solved with conventional cues and methods. Your position and decision dictate the way you see the world. Whatever is visible from this particular perspective makes up your world. Recent artists mostly adopt a Western vantage point to see the landscape. What does this world look like? We first see Western philosophy, science, and culture, which inevitably creates biases.

Xu: This is to say that we are all playing this game. Humans have created the scope of this game and artists must play under the rules. Because humans think that this game is highly important, there are so many museums, galleries, professional artists and cultural workers. Everyone is having fun in this game. But ultimately, there has been no clarity as to why we have to play this game. But some people need to keep playing in a formal way, despite the fact that others no longer care for these "unprofitable" players.

Ai: The only way out is to solve your own problems. Even if no one gets out of bed, you must get up for yourself. This does not depend on others. Self-satisfaction is the original impulse of this game.

Xu: That impulse is still quite passive, though; it belongs to the concerns of older literati. There are too many things going on in this epoch; the epoch has contracted HIV. One should not, and does not have the time, to play useless games. One must think of new ways, and do new experiments, instead of closing off.

Hsieh: While we emphasize social engagement, art's social impact, and art's use value to humanity, we must also consider what and how to engage. Modern art has lost its supposed effect on human thinking and development; instead, it's become a reactionary force.

Xu: [Modern art] is looking a lot like a *sadambi*¹²⁸— it cannot heal terminal illness but appears mysteriously alluring. It is irrelevant to [the treatment] of terminal illness and to society.

Hsieh: Sometimes this sort of thinking relegates art to a very inappropriate place. You mentioned the social nature of art. Sociability won't have any power if it ceased being artistic. This kind of sociability wouldn't be reliable. Beuys emphasizes the social nature of art. He planted trees and is concerned with the environment. But if we talk strictly in terms of conservation, he could not compare to a full-time environmentalist. This humanist value and environmental consciousness merely propagate his art; this is so-called "sociability" in art. But I don't think it is necessary to reach an equilibrium between art and society. Art is by nature a reluctant act. Humans will survive without art; art exists after humans have satisfied their material needs. We create for spiritual, generative, and

¹²⁸ A shamanistic masked ritual that requires two people, and has healing, fortune-telling functions.

super-substantial reasons. For example, does the Soviet Union currently need art? Many places do not need art.

Xu: All times and places need art. The issue is that what we now perceive art as no longer important. In fact, this “art” has transferred to other forms. For example, to rock & roll music, television, advertisements etc. But we are still doing old-fashioned things.

Ai: This is the case of a “soul that attaches to no body.”

Xu: Art should reconsider the role and responsibility of an artist.

Hsieh: What I am trying to say is that if you choose to be an artist, then you must be clear on the artistic impulse. If you cannot preserve artistry, then you are less worthy than a social worker. You are unclear about your fundamental task. It is correct if you fix an issue within art. If we separate [social issues] and [art], then you will not be successful. You must solve all sorts of issues through artistic creation.

Xu: The reason why modern artists no longer have power in their art is due to the key reason that art itself has become empty. Art has disconnected from society, and from human issues. This disconnection renders art’s inherent exploration energy-less. This grinding disc continues to rotate because it grinds flour. But if dough is no longer needed, then its rotation is meaningless.

Xu: This happens when an entire era is in decline. Why is the commercial aspect of art so pronounced these days? This is because the United States is currently in a commercialized era, an ideology-less era. Commerce is the reigning feature of this era. Art is then enslaved to commerce. This time needs more ideologists— be it artist, or any other fields and sectors.

Hsieh: We always need a standard.

Xu: You can’t say that this era does not have an ideology.

Ai: We cannot say that there it doesn’t, but it went through a huge change. Due to materialistic pursuit, modern technology, and the alienation of the human body through science, one feels increasingly insignificant in society. This presents an unprecedented threat to the pursuit of spirituality. Because of the anxiety induced by the incessant emergence of new materials, we have fewer and fewer opportunities to contemplate our spirituality. But humanity cannot abandon the pursuit of spiritual values. This pursuit could simple forms, or a form of religion; they will always reflect a new era and new values. We never worry that earth will lose gravity and that everything will float in the air. Old values clearly no longer suit the new time but are still hindering the emergence of new values. If one aspires to make something interesting, then one must deny past protocol.

Xu: I think the idea of a “decline” is a subjective standard. The world may continue to be in “decline,” meaning it will have fewer and fewer aspirations and find more footing in materials. This could be the ultimate outcome for human beings. You cannot control it; you can only adjust to it. If you don’t comply then you will be abandoned; your work will be a work of the past.

Hsieh: This is not the case. Even terrible artists reflect their time. It is not the case that “only good artists are reflecting their time.” But we are talking about set rules and a representative question. Artists of any era cannot escape the spirit of the era (*zeitgeist*), or a dimension of time.

Xu: There is an evaluation of good and bad here.

Hsieh: This good and bad returns to my question with regards to essence.

Xu: Do we tend to think that a good artist like Andy Warhol is going against his time? Or is he someone that goes along with time? Let's say that he is going against current art history, but is still compliant with his time.

Hsieh: His criticality is what makes him great. He is loyal to the masters of his society and time. But he also brought up other issues. Many of his followers want to be on the same path as him but do a terrible job. He is not a good example. Artists cannot leave behind the question of ethics; he cannot be separated from a judgment of ethical values. This applies to Andy and others. If it is considered ethical to not mourn for one's death, it would be because death is natural. To cry and to mourn is useless. A seemingly unethical act could in fact be the most ethical, due to a new definition of ethics. Artists always propose new meanings [for ethics].

Xu: Humans always face the issue of raising new ethical standards. You [Hsieh] think that Nietzsche's greatness is due to the fact he criticized the old and established the new. However, people after him must carry the responsibility to criticize Nietzsche's outdated ethical views and raise new ethical concepts. This is the mission of a new artist, instead of using Nietzsche's outdated ethical viewpoint to accomplish what we do now.

Ai: The belief in simple logic is always present.

Xu: This very basic ethos is something that artists of all times must participate in and pay attention to. But responsibility differs between artists of today and artists from one hundred years ago. Otherwise, there would not be a need to be a *modern* artist.

Hsieh: Every past era has its past realities; we cannot measure their [artists'] approaches as divorced from that reality. It is only possible to understand artists' situations and why they did what they did after understanding the time they were in. Of course, we tend to think that we have improved from past times. But on a factual level, we have not progressed and remain primitive and ephemeral. Many philosophers from the past have a more accurate picture of life than we do. We are merely part of their calculations, we are inferior to them.

Xu: This is yet another question about responsibility. Some people enjoy confronting basic moral questions. I prefer to confront current issues.

Hsieh: If a moral issue is worth discussing, then there comes the matter of "being involved" and "not being involved." I will examine my own ability. We all have many limitations. If something affects your creative process, then you will also be threatened. This is what I have been talking about. My morals are simple: I do not want to try to survive while trying to strangle myself. If I say I will do something, then I will stay true to that matter and create something accordingly. I want to be a creative person. If anything clashes with my personality, then my system will be affected and will be stuck. Then, I must rule out the defects in my mechanism. This is a very personalized standard. I do not have to explain anything as this is set by myself. Andy Warhol also has a side of him where he stays true to himself. This is a matter of rigor.

Xu: People of our generation seem to be very fixed on this matter.

Ai: It could be a burden and an obstacle.

Hsieh: We are the last generation of people who create things in this way.

Ai: Times have changed. This is not a simple question of negation. We must have a clear understanding of history and the future in order to carry out effective adjustments and ruptures.

Xu: That is a possibility. Criticism in its real sense is essentially self-criticism.

Ai: Human consciousness progresses due to the negation and critique of the past. Neither art nor artists would need to exist, or would be possible, if one just goes with the flow.

Xu: People like us are special in that we can express ourselves well via various means. Whatever the mandate of our time, we can do a good job to satisfy it.

Ai: Historically, adjustment and adaptation is an essential human skill. It is just that the speed has increased nowadays, to a point where only those who have such ability can survive. This has come to define a modern man.

Xu: Our energy comes from adjustment.

Hsieh: I am not very rational in my work, which probably shows many flaws. I only carry a blurry thought.

Xu: Several works you made were built upon criticism you have made in the past. During that time your mind had been adjusted to a more advanced degree than conventional thinking—and your previous understandings. This is how you were able to gain the “idea.” This idea might seem accidental, but was in fact a certainty.

Hsieh: It was an accident within the range of my rationality.

Ai: You often make the best choice when you abandon your old approach and feel helpless and directionless. This is pure instinct. The feeling of necessity and urgency is the most intense in Tehching’s work. Most people have a choice and could either do one or another, which compromises the inevitability of the work.

Hsieh: What you meant is that this was not my choice.

Ai: This was what you had to choose.

Xu: You wouldn’t have been able to continue living if you did not make your choice. This, in fact, was a way of problem solving. It is worth doing. Many artworks feel powerless because you get the sense they could either be done or not be done; it does not reach the level of “one must do it.” Therefore, there are too many boring things.

Hsieh: A main reason for me to create is because I feel impatient living alone. I have to do something. I hope to discover new things, which gives me choice, in the sense of being an artist and doing what I “want” to do. You get moved by things. The emotional impact causes you to spare no energy to accomplish what you wished for. It also gives you the desire to create a force to communicate with others. There are things that I no longer wanted to do. But I am not complacent and am still seeking new aspirations. And I do not treat personal gains and losses heavily. I might lose, but I am still in control of my destiny. There are still things that amuse me within the infinite exploration of creation.

Within my range of control, I have chosen a healthy lifestyle—which enables me to take on infinite challenges and be a free individual. No matter how horrible the environment is, this form of criticality gives us power. We must be able to see through this path.

But if all is lost, it does not mean that you have reached a dead-end. Is your life over if you are imprisoned? You still have to answer to your own self, in your own way. In whatever forms or ways, this question needs to be answered in essence. Otherwise, we could only talk about very limited things, such as whether we can be accepted by the West and etc.

Ai: Emphasizing ethics and morals, and using aesthetics to examine life's original value, then repeatedly emphasizing this value.

Hsieh: Answering questions posed by one's self will get us closer to answering the essential questions. (Conversation edited and compiled from voice recording)

APPENDIX III. Ai Weiwei, “Making a Choice”¹²⁹

Translated by Felix Ho Yuen Chan

In China, an extensive modernist movement has yet to form. The foundation of [any modernist movement] is the liberation of humanity and the triumph of humanism. Democratic government, material wealth, and universal education provide the soil for modernism; however, this is merely an idealistic pursuit for developing countries.

Modernism includes philosophy, cosmology, and ways of living. Its core is skepticism towards classical conceptions of the humanities, and critical thinking about the human condition. Any other non-modernist cultural and artistic act resides on a more superficial level—these activities lack spiritual value. Many creations resemble modernist aesthetics but in fact stray from modernism—they count as crass imitations.

Modernism does not need all sorts of masks and titles: it is the primal creative act of an awakened artist; it is the ultimate concern for existence’s meaning as well as its real circumstances; it is a sense of vigilance, non-compromise, and non-cooperation towards societal and humanitarian crisis.

This awakening comes from a process of self-understanding. This process is filled with an incessant yearning for and pursuit of the spiritual world, and a permanent sense of skepticism and confusion.

Due to this fearless truth, we can observe unadorned authenticity, fear, emptiness and boredom from modernist works. This is not a cultural disposition—just like life itself is not a disposition. This all comes from a deliberateness of existence, which is fundamental to all spiritual activities. It is also the final destination of our consciousness.

A reflection on ways of living and spiritual values is the core issue of modern art. This reflection is proactive and faces a plain fact—birth and death are inevitable, and the process in between begins with a fearless original impulse and is followed by an empty, boring reality.

This all leads towards an inevitable end: To realize the solemnity and absurdity of living. We cannot avoid the occurrence of this cognition, just like we cannot avoid the realness of existence.

Life’s real limits and the urge to break these limits are what builds dreams. This urge, and the efforts being made to realize this urge, is the happiness of life.

Men are destined to be narrow empiricists. Only our reverence to god takes us out of this meager dilemma. Men betray nature. Among all paths, men choose the longest to self-discovery.

Making a choice is an artist’s self-reflection. This choice is relevant to men’s spiritual existence — the purpose being to regain a sense of self in pursuit of spiritual values, answering to the divine. This choice is evidently philosophical.

¹²⁹ *Grey Cover Book*, Edited by Ai Weiwei and Zeng Xiaojun, with Zhuang Hui, Privately Published, 9-11.

Nowadays, it is a painful fact to realize the introduction of scientific technology and new lifestyles fails to produce any spiritual awakening. It also fails to introduce controversy, power, or soul.

Modern Chinese history is a history that denies individual values, and silences humanity; it is soulless. Chinese intellectuals are often caught between two fires: the hegemony of Western culture alongside China's decayed feudalistic structure, placing Chinese intellectuals in an in-between dilemma.

Several reforms that occurred in the past century began with a dependence of external culture and eventually succumbed to traditional values. This simplistic mimicry, and ineffective struggle, time and time again, construct the narrative of modern contemporary Chinese culture. Under this cultural dictatorship, [Chinese intellectuals] forego conscience and sell one's soul in exchange for minimum survival.

Without a doubt, the current of history has docked an archaic ship on the shores of democracy. Communication, consensus, understanding, and tolerance are taking over compulsory and exclusionary approaches. New human beings deserve to live in a wiser and more satisfactory space.

People have realized that cultural and spiritual totalitarianism and exclusivism have caused spirituality to deteriorate, will to shrink, and vision to be myopic.

Any effort to conceal opinion or avoidance to confront the issue also denies the meaning of existence. It is a desecration of higher orders, a recognition of ignorance and backwardness, and support of hegemony and injustice.

Today's art and culture still lacks a most basic sense of attention — artists lack social responsibility and awareness. They also lack agency in criticism.

All sorts of linguistic explorations, borrowing myriad approaches and media, and copying of formats and content, cannot cover up an artist's lack of self-awareness, social criticism and autonomous creativity. It reveals pragmatism and opportunism. It also reflects a lowly, deprived state of spiritual engagement.

Art will not be enlightened until we transition from caring about "trends" to caring about individual practices and issues, from an exploration around formats to an exploration of existential concerns and spiritual values. This is a long path.

APPENDIX IV. Selected Writings on Beijing East Village from the *Black Cover Book*

Translated by Felix Ho Yuen Chan

Editors of *Black Cover Book* (attrib.), “Beijing East Village: A Settlement for ‘Stray’ Artists”¹³⁰

Since Beijing’s “Yuan Mingyuan Painters’ Village,” a settlement for “stray” artists’ has formed. It is located at Beijing East Village, approximately one kilometer east of the Great Wall hotel in a farming village named *Dashanzhuang* and *Siliju*.

Two years ago, a majority of residents were painters who attended the Central Academy of Fine Art’s advanced courses in oil painting. Then, nonlocal artists started to seek shelter here, too. Currently, some twenty artists have settled here and take part in creative and artistic activities. They are Zhang Huan from Henan province; Zhang Yang from Shandong province; Ma Liuming from Hubei province; Gao Yang, Wang Shihua, Kong Bu, Yu Guoming, Cang Xin, Duan Yingmei (female) from Heilongjiang province; Xu San, Xiang Weiguang, and Zhu Wen from Hunan province. Residents also include an underground rock & roll band formed in 1993 named NO, consisting of the lead singer Curse *Zuzhou*, instrumentalists Ye Qian, Bianping Bacuo, Lu Qi, etc.

According to verbal accounts from Beijing East Village artists, which were compiled by Kong Bu and his article “*Nuclear Polymerization: A Conceptual Portrait of Beijing East Village artists*,” artists who live in the Beijing East Village emphasize lived experience and the current cultural climate. They emphasize the specific context and inevitability of their works. They idealize the reversal of a medium-specific understanding of artistic concepts and embodiment of lived experience. In doing so, they strive to create a system that is conducive to conceptual transformation and open possibilities. They are not hopeless about the future of Chinese art, not ashamed of their situation in the current historical climate, and also not fearful of the glaring glow of Western art. They endeavor to dissolve the “opposition” between “nationalism” and “globalization” through their artistic activity. They desire to create universalist works called forth by human civilization as a collective whole. They do not fantasize about the advantages of Western masters and create within the framework of their given conditions. Unlike those who accept commissions and depend on wages, they do not want to confine art to assignments. At the same time, they are not opportunists and oppose the method of “excluding all that do not fit populist standards.” They are concerned with the shifts of society, political reality, and culture; they want to compile colossal existential experiences, using a total art medium to convert such experiences into art. In doing so, they hope to realize the true value and function of art.

Another news update: It has been confirmed that by the deadline of this book’s printing, the “Beijing East Village” no longer exists.

¹³⁰ *Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company), 154

Zhang Huan, Artist Statement on *12 Square Meters*¹³¹

My creative inspiration comes from the most mundane and negligible things in life. For example, how we eat, work, rest, and defecate every day. Through my very banal everyday existence, I experience the most essential matters of humanity, and also experience the paradoxical relations between that which belongs to humans and elements that belong to built environments. This is how *12 Square Meters* was born.

At noontime one day, I visited a public toilet by the village. I realized I could not even step foot in it; I still could not bear it even after I switched stalls. I had to then bike to the public toilet of the village police squad. When I entered, an infinite number of flies instantly flew towards me — it gave me the idea to create a work.

I go out of my way to experience this real feeling in the process of my work. I truly understand what I did, and what I expressed after I finished the work. I am disgusted by the performative aspects of this work.

1994. 6

Ma Liuming, “Four Notes from My Journal”¹³²

Joseph Heller once wrote in *Something Happened* that in all types of company nowadays, at least one person is slowly going mad.

In a society where nothing can be shocking to people, artistic expressions have reached a limit: self-mutilation, self-hurt, and even suicide have been done as performance. Nevertheless, I do not think that art, especially conceptual art, has reached its end as people have predicted. The way forward for conceptual art should be based in sincerity, conceptual maturity, and a refinement of the reference and realization of the work.

The concept of “neutrality” aims to reveal the following predicament: people judge a person based on cultural characteristics such as clothing, but not based on the person. The way we treat materials often reveals the way we treat our psyche.

A person who is situated in a specific scenario—whether mind or body—is in itself a great piece of work. The reason why I chose this form of expression or medium is because this is the only type of existence that I perceive.

When I perform a role, I drown myself in the role.

Therefore, a performance artwork, to an artist, feels like two familiar yet estranged people of opposite sexes who examine each other.

Art and artist should take a relationship of “lovers.” Art should be an important component that artists depend on spiritually.

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¹³¹ *Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company), 71.

¹³² *Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Taitei Publishing Company), 35.

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