

Zheng Guogu, An Artist for the New China Betti-Sue Hertz

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While preparing the exhibition *Past in Reverse: Contemporary Art of East Asia* for the San Diego Museum of Art from 2001 to 2004, I had the opportunity to visit Zheng Guogu, an artist who is much revered in China and not very well known outside of the country. As a conceptual artist with no allegiance to a particular medium or style, this artist follows his instinct, moving from photography to architecture to calligraphy, which makes him hard to codify. Zheng Guogu is one among a growing number of Postmodern artists who have been reacting to the rapid shifts taking place in China over the past ten years by giving artistic shape to the phases of social and economic transformation. What distinguishes him is his commitment to the local culture of his hometown and his role in directing attention to it, while engaging with trends in global contemporary art. The international art world has fallen in love with contemporary Chinese art, and somehow Zheng Guogu, although often included in group exhibitions in Asia and Europe, has not been singled out often enough. He juggles fact with fiction or myth, while controlling the entry points to his community for visitors from the art world, who make the trek to visit him in the small town where he lives and works. I went to visit Zheng Guogu in the fall of 2003 on my second research trip to China. Luckily, Lydia Thompson, a colleague from San Diego, who has a Ph.D. in Chinese art history accompanied me, and since she speaks Mandarin, was pressed into the role of translator. Zheng Guogu came to pick us up from Guangzhou, China's largest city in the south, and brought us to his hometown of Yangjiang, two hours drive away.

Zheng Guogu was born in 1970 in Yangjiang, towards the southwest part of Guangdong province. Known for its knife and scissor factories, it is situated on the edge of the China South Sea. Yangjiang became a town in 1988 when farmers and others from the outlying rural areas were encouraged to move there to participate in a new economic enterprise zone. Zheng Guogu comes from an artistic family. His father is a traditional instrument maker and a singer, who has at times worked for the Hong Kong Opera, a five hour drive east from Yangjiang.

During the years that Zheng Guogu was growing up, things were already changing in China as the Maoist period receded into the past and the country opened up to the rest of the world. He and his generation had access to the West and Hong Kong through television, pirated CVDs of Hollywood films and computer games. So although he was physically isolated, he was accessing the West, albeit virtually, at a young enough age so as to take these new experiences and freedoms for granted. He attended the Guangdong Academy of Art in Guangzhou, China's third culture capital, with a focus on printmaking. While a student there, he was introduced to a slightly older group of artists that formed the Big Tail Elephant Group (Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Xu Tan and Liang Juhui) in 1991, and they encouraged the younger artist to experiment with performance and conceptual art.

Photography

In China before the mid-1990s, photography wasn't considered fine art, and was identified with photojournalism and other documentary forms. This may be one reason why, as one of the first artists there to work in conceptual photography, Zheng Guogu made works that looked like documentary photographs. Maybe, within the Chinese context, they would not have been of interest at all if they were collaged images or abstract forms, or in some other format with no resonance for local viewers. He first attracted attention in 1994 with his early series taken with a basic consumer camera titled *My Teacher*, and his subsequent series from 1995, *Ideal Bride*. These works, which appear to be of authentic events but are actually fictional, are a purposeful false expression of a probable reality. From 1995 to 1998 he produced a series of docu-drama photographs in which his younger brother and his friends acted out scenes of the reckless lives of youth gangs. The artist had been concerned about his brother who wasn't doing much of anything, so he created a project where the younger generation could play a part, and explore questions of

identity. In 2002 Zheng Guogu stopped making conceptual photography, after having completed a series of panels titled *Ten Thousand Customers*, each comprised of one hundred thumbnail-sized images of various random commodities and media images. The series included all kinds of items from tanks and motorcycles, to Barbie dolls and plastic animals. This archiving of consumer goods and commercial imagery became an exhaustive process of accumulation, and paralleled China's ascent to the position of factory for the world.

Architecture

In the medium of architecture Zheng Guogu collaborates with Sha Yeya, a furniture maker, artist and designer. They work together on art projects and as partners in a thriving architectural design and construction business, and have built three postmodernist buildings in Yangjiang. These buildings rely heavily on mid-twentieth century European Modernism, while inserting irreverent elements like windows on a diagonal, and tumbling, uncomfortable views from above to below from spatially compressed spiral stairways. There is nothing else in the town's built environment of dingy low-cost basic structures that compares with these buildings, all of which also signal progressive cultural activity in the town. Lydia and I visited Zheng Guogu's private residence, Sha Yeya's residence and the office for their Yimei Design Company, and the Luyi World Bookshop that features books on literature, politics and Postmodern theory, as well as poetry readings. When we visited Zheng Guogu's residence, I was surprised to see that in addition to his bold experimentation with modern materials and forms, he is also an avid collector of antiques. In his four-story home, we saw excellent examples of traditional antique furniture adorned with elaborate pictorial imagery of birds and flowers, or landscapes with an array of grasses, all depicted with inlaid abalone shell. The heavy dark wood furniture and other random antiques meant for large magisterial Chinese homes contrasted sharply with the sleek modern interior.

Calligraphy

Zheng Guogu's photographic and architectural projects are adaptations of Western art forms to the Chinese context, and represent the "alternative modernity" that China has been experiencing. Around the time Zheng Guogu stopped producing photography, the Yangjiang Calligraphy Group began to take shape, when four local artists (Zheng Guogu, Sha Yeya, Sun Quinlan and Chen Zaiyan), of which only one was traditionally trained, began experimenting with the limits of calligraphy. This represented a turnaround: Instead of adapting Western art to a local context, these artists were adapting traditional Asian art to postmodernity. This posed a fresh question: What things Chinese could be most useful within the new paradigms of its identity and global position? More specifically, how could calligraphy be resolutely valuable within the present context, as it had proven to be quite inflexible to the demands of the new society? These questions redirected Zheng Guogu's attention. Whereas calligraphy is normally made up of poems and private letters, these artists shaped newspaper and tabloid headlines into their own version of ink brush writing. Their pseudo-calligraphy resonated with the global trend in graYti, which created a tension often tackled by Postmodernism between high art and popular art forms. For example, the text for one of Sha Yeya's 2002 works is based on a report on national television that announced the first case of sexual harassment in China to be accepted by the courts.

The Yangjiang Calligraphy Group has a storefront, and when Lydia and I visited, it was filled with calligraphies and the tools of the trade: ink, ink blocks and brushes, and rolls of thin white paper. The site of production held out no special secrets, and could have been a studio for the art form's most traditional renditions. In this case, the new emerged from the old as if it were an unbroken line.

From the time Zheng Guogu first picked up Lydia and me in the city of Guangzhou, until he dropped us off at the bus station to head back, he had a wire attached from the cell phone to his ear, awaiting the next communication, and sometimes softly speaking into the microphone with artists and clients, family or friends. Clearly, his primary support system is Yangjiang and its cultural community. Zheng Guogu's eagerness to share that world with us is one indication of his ambition to seduce an international audience to look through his window at his world. He absorbs

and synthesizes societal change, and then incorporates it into a critical art that invigorates discussion while remaining pleasurable. His unique location gives him a point of view that not only reflects China's fast changes and its effects on areas outside the larger cities, but also provides him with a platform for a transformative avant-garde artistic practice. Whereas many artists have migrated to the large cities to be closer to the market of exchange between China and the rest of the world, Zheng Guogu has opened up another option: as with the work of the Yangjiang Calligraphy Group, he is attempting to reorder the codes of traditional art to adapt, not to the West, but to the pressures of contemporary life as it grows more distant from the past.

It is hard to know what will happen next with Zheng Guogu's art. Its constant changeability and the artist's enigmatic personality may be the reasons why it has been so difficult for the international art world to pin him down for easy consumption. In any case, Zheng Guogu continues to work on projects that encourage the small artistic community of Yangjiang, while creating outlets that bring that world into the view of a larger global audience.

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