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Exhibition Culture and the Art Market

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Song Dong, *Art Travel Agency*, 1999, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

When contemporary Chinese art entered the global market during the 1980s and 1990s, it crossed previously well-defined boundaries of artistic practice. Prior to this, art creation in China was (in theory) only for the purpose of self-cultivation and self-expression, and any mention of market value would be met with disdain. Starting in the 1980s, Chinese artists began to exhibit their works in various exhibitions throughout the world, and their art has become increasingly visible, desirable, and, consequently, marketable as a cultural commodity both inside and outside of China. This crossing of boundaries also brought about changes in ideas and discourses pertaining to art in China, ranging from the artist's identity and

ways of producing art, to questions of audience, and to definitions of art itself. An example of such changes is the various ways artwork is exhibited—more specifically, how one image can take on different interpretations within different exhibition contexts—and how it has become a point of contention in contemporary Chinese art.

Commodification was one of the most conspicuous changes in contemporary Chinese art once it became available to the art market. Within the complex system of the art market, an exhibition can build a crucial link between the artist and a potential collector. Exhibitions bring not only visibility, but also credentials to an artist or to an artwork—perhaps two equally crucial factors that directly influence the market value of that artwork and thus make it more collectible. As exhibitions increasingly play a role in mediating the relationship between artist and audience, they also delineate a different context in which art can be presented and viewed.

In order to survive and excel in the highly competitive art market, artists working within its system must face the issue of negotiation and compliance. In the 1990s, there was a noticeable unease among Chinese artists who were entering the art market. Whether welcoming it and striving within it, or being ambivalent, and even criticizing it, many chose to use art creation as an opportunity to comment on the status of art as a fast growing commodity, something that was unprecedented within the history of art in China. In a 1999 performance, for example, Song Dong solicited a reconsideration of artists and their artworks within a commercial context. In *Art Travel Agency*, he personified an imaginary art travel agent who would lead a tour for interested audiences of artworks exhibited at an opening of a modern mall. In a self-promotional poster that has become the record of the work, Song Dong stood in front of the high-rise building of a commercial mall and shouted out through a speaker, “Here you’ll find contemporary art for sale!” The sarcastic role he played was staged to attest to the reality that art has increasingly become part of the larger market system and commercial consumption. Moreover, by exhibiting his work in a commercial arena, Song Dong also raised the question as to whether artists themselves often perpetuate the system for art consumption.

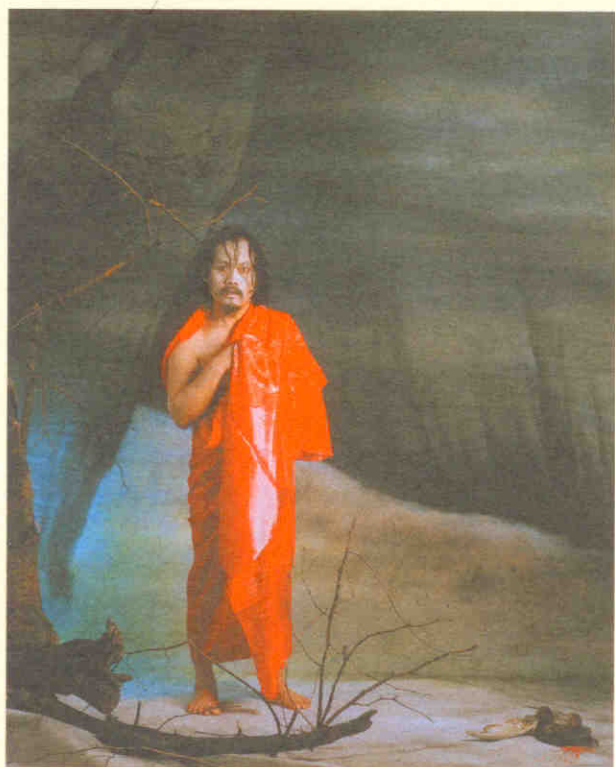
This work points to the issue of how contemporary Chinese artists react to the market system with different forms of presentation of their artwork. It is true that more conventional modes of art making such as painting and sculpture have been considered by many artists as less sufficient mediums for responding to the complexity of current Chinese society, and that digital imaging technology, for instance, has become an appropriate means to facilitate the varied ways of art making. But it is also true that even previously unsaleable artwork such as performance or textual material can now be recorded through photography, exhibited, and then sold as “documentation” of the original work. It is a conscious choice of the artist in terms of finding ways to present artwork, but this choice also involves consideration of how this work can be re-presented at different kinds of exhibitions and to different kinds of audiences. In fact, examining the ways that artwork is exhibited reveals an aspect of contemporary Chinese art where the relations and tensions among artist, exhibition, and audience in the operation of the art market can be best observed.

To make this point more explicit, there is the example of Li Keran (1907–1989), a traditional Chinese painter who started his career in the early twentieth century, when the idea of the art exhibitions began to flourish in China.¹ With the advent of this newly established venue, the exhibition, for artists to showcase their work in public, Li Keran and many other painters of his generation, although still using the tradition of ink, paper, and silk, began to make large-scale

paintings that were different from traditional hand-scroll or album paintings. What is striking about this shift is the fundamental change in the relationship between the artwork and its viewer, and the way the painting is viewed within a public space—hung on the wall, framed by the building interior, juxtaposed, and thus “competing” with other paintings. Instead of being enjoyed by a few people in a private, intimate space as in pre-modern China, paintings at this burgeoning period of the art exhibition were made to cater to a new public, that is, to an emerging audience for the art exhibition. The change of presentation, for example, to large-scale painting, is not only a liberating choice, but a decision that restructured the relationship among artist, artwork, exhibition space, and audience.

Compared with the artwork produced in the early history of art exhibitions in China, contemporary art is much more diversified in its forms of presentation. What also distinguishes contemporary art from that of the earlier period is that the way in which an artwork is exhibited has gradually become inseparable from the artwork itself as part of the artist’s creation. As an integral part of the marketable art product, an art exhibition thus obtains a role in determining the marketability of a given work. One way to address this issue is to consider contemporary photography, for the reproducibility of the medium provides different possibilities of altering its presentation. Hai Bo, for example, during 1999 and 2000, made a photo series in which he re-created pre-Cultural Revolution family snapshots with the surviving members of the families in the original photos, and then juxtaposed the re-creation with the original as the artwork. Initially, the work was displayed as paired photos in an enlarged scale, and separate frames hung side by side on the wall. Later, this presentation was reconceived using the same pair of photos, but this time in their original (and thus much smaller) size and placed inside a single picture frame.² These two kinds of visual presentation tease out different relations between the viewer and the artwork, and, indeed, prompt different ways of perceiving the work. Both works—or, more precisely, the same work presented in two different ways—were on the market at different times and sold for different prices. This relative liberty of contemporary Chinese artists to exhibit artwork in diverse ways—in comparison with their predecessors of an earlier period—is not completely uncontested or met with unconcern by the market system. Indeed, the question for contemporary Chinese artists today is one less of where to exhibit than of how to exhibit. Since the second half of the 1990s, in particular, different types of exhibition venues have multiplied in China’s major cities, and opportunities to be shown in international exhibitions have increased. More than ever, the art exhibition is crucial in carving out a “space” for Chinese art and artists. How art is to be exhibited in this space, however, is not completely under the control of artists, but, rather, is negotiated through consideration of several curatorial issues. By and large, these issues relate to ways of presenting each individual work within the overarching conceptual framework of a given exhibition. Furthermore, although most exhibition spaces are flexible and accommodating, the design of individual exhibitions often calls for particular spatial arrangements that are related to a given curatorial theme and to the need to draw the attention of the audience. The questions an artist faces are often further complicated by problems of how to exhibit “effectively” within different exhibition concepts and their corresponding spaces. Here again, photography and video, as media that are easily reproduced and flexible in scale, are particularly relevant examples. Anyone who frequents exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art can recount experiences of seeing the same photograph or video exhibited in different sizes at different venues.

An interesting example is Hong Lei’s 1998 work *An Imitation of Song Dynasty Painter Liang Kai’s Painting of Sakyamuni Coming out of Retirement*. In this photographic work, Hong restaged a classical ink painting by Liang Kai in which Sakyamuni appears on a mountain path after coming



Hong Lei, *An Imitation of Song Dynasty Painter Liang Kai's Painting of Sakyamuni Coming out of Retirement*, 1998, C-print. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art, New York.

out of a period of spiritual austerity. To depict the serenity the Sage acquired through this spiritual attainment, Liang Kai, in the original ink-on-silk painting, skilfully portrayed him with soft touches of the brush, focusing on his step as if he were still in meditation. In Hong Lei's photographic recreation, however, the artist himself plays the unlikely role of Sakyamuni, unkempt in appearance, staring at the viewer in surprise, as if caught off guard. Also, Hong Lei's Sakyamuni is proportionally larger and more dominant in the composition of the photograph than Sakyamuni is in Liang Kai's work, reinforcing the sense of displacement of the classical painting as well as the religious and cultural implications

behind it. This photograph has been exhibited at various venues as an autonomous work—that is, without its historical reference. Occasionally, in exhibition catalogues, the original Song dynasty painting is reproduced, but often on a much smaller scale, and placed in an introductory essay that is separate from the reproduction of Hong Lei's modern photograph.

In 2006, Hong Lei's work was included in the Gwangju Biennale, held in Gwangju, Korea. Featuring artworks by seventy-two artists and organized under the theme *Fever Variations*, the Biennale aimed at illuminating an Asian vision of the contemporary art world today. Hong Lei's photograph was included in a section with a sub-theme that traced the roots of Asian cultures, *Myth and Fantasy*. *An Imitation of Song Dynasty Painter Liang Kai's Painting of Sakyamuni Coming out of Retirement* was enlarged and printed on a transparency that was divided into nine square pieces in a mosaic assemblage and lit from behind. In order to inform the audience of the source of the work, an image of Liang Kai's hanging scroll painting was digitally projected on the floor in front of the new recreation placed on the facing wall. Never before had the photograph been exhibited side-by-side with its reference. The direct juxtaposition of the reference and the recreation may have helped the audience to read the work in a new way in comparison with only exhibiting the recreation alone. Also, when compared with the original version of Hong Lei's photograph, the Gwangju Biennale version was evidently different. The earlier one focused on the facial expression of the artist in disguise as Sakyamuni, but this version was divided into two parts in two squares. Indeed, the Gwangju Biennale version was presented in such a different way that it has become a work that is distinctive and localized to that particular exhibition space. It is still a work by Hong Lei, but this presentation represents, or visualizes, a process of consideration that took into account the specifics of the artwork, exhibition, and audience.

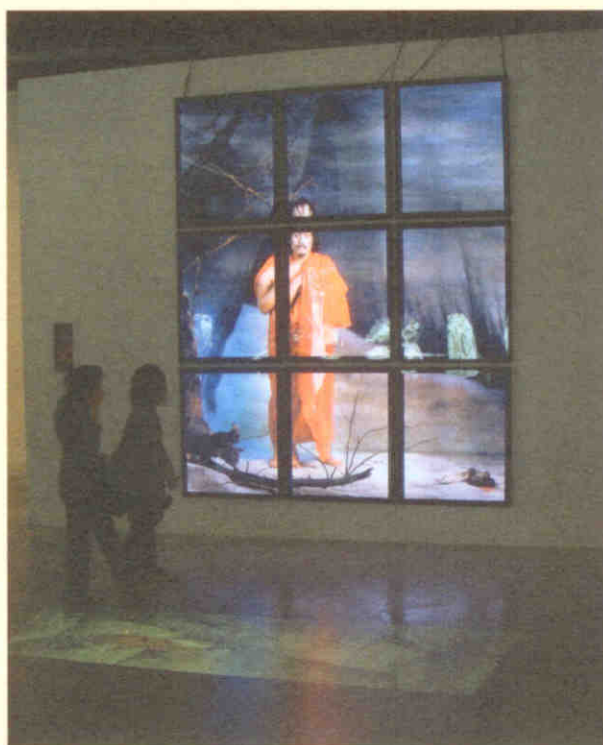
The strategies used in the context of contemporary art exhibitions are probably familiar to most artists today. It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that in recent years this practice has given rise

to a distinctive exhibition culture. The extent to which this exhibition culture may have specific bearing on contemporary Chinese artwork and its consequences in the art market, however, still awaits a careful evaluation. Here, I want to consider works by another artist, Yu Hong, to offer some suggestions.

Starting in 1999, in a manner close to autobiographical narrative, Yu Hong produced a series of oil paintings entitled *Witness to Growth Series*. Corresponding to each year of her life, Yu Hong recreated a one metre by one metre oil painting based on old photographs. Each of these oil paintings is paired with a blown-up documentary

photograph taken from newspapers of the same year. All oil paintings in the series are of the same size and shape, but the size and shape of the blown-up photographs are determined by the originals found in the newspaper. Although paintings and photographs are grouped as pairs, each individual image, whether photograph or oil painting, can also be viewed separately, since the juxtaposed images are not only framed separately but also differ in size and medium. How the two narratives—Yu Hong's life and the historical context—should be interpreted and associated with one another is therefore open to the viewer.

Continuing to explore her interest in representing life stories through art, Yu Hong created the *She Series* between 2002 and 2006. Some strategies of presentation seen in the *Witness to Growth Series* are applied in these works, but with subtle changes that articulate a different theme. The *She Series* is about the artist's own investigation of women who come from different social backgrounds but share the cultural identity of Chinese women. To establish dialogues with the different women in her art, Yu Hong created oil paintings of these women from photographic images and then exhibited each painting side-by-side with a photograph picked by the woman the artist painted. Unlike the *Witness to Growth Series*, however, the paired images in this series are of the same height and adjacent to each other, and the same sitter appears in both the oil painting and blown-up photograph, thus establishing an intrinsic relationship between the two images. Also unlike the *Witness to Growth Series*, where a consistent story is represented, in the *She Series* there lies within each pairing of painting and photograph, and with each revisiting and representing of the sitter's past, two sides of a visual dialogue: the selected woman herself and the artist. Although these two series created by Yu Hong are considerably different in their content from the previously discussed case of Hong Lei, they do at the same time share certain qualities. The visual effectiveness of both lies in the attention paid to methods of presentation, in the exhibition space, as well as in the interaction of the artwork with viewers.



Hong Lei, Installation view of *An Imitation of Song Dynasty Painter Liang Kai's Painting of Sakyamuni Coming out of Retirement*, Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

Changing ways of presenting artwork is not unique to contemporary Chinese art but, as suggested here, has become one feature that characterizes it in the growing market system. They also collectively demonstrate an invigorated relationship of artists, artworks, and market in the contemporary context. In the West, an interesting point of comparison can be traced back to eighteenth-century France, when the display of artwork was one of the critical concerns in the development of the *cabinet de tableaux* and salon exhibitions.³ Under a guiding principle of visual symmetry and balance of the art assembled in a display room, individual works might be commissioned for specific locations in the room or as pendants for other works in private collections or exhibitions. Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), for instance, once exhibited *The Death of Socrates* and *Oath of the Horatii* as a pair, one above the other, at the Salon du Louvre of 1785. Indeed, as the early market system and the related salon culture emerged in France, artists, collectors, and exhibitions were bound in a new relationship and context that did not exist previously.



Yu Hong, installation view of *Witness to Growth Series*, 2003, Hubei Art Institute, Wuhan, China. Courtesy of the artist.



Yu Hong, installation view, *She Series*, 2003, Hubei Art Institute, Wuhan, China. Courtesy of the artist.

It seems that Chinese contemporary art has similarly entered an unprecedented, new context, only in a much more vigorous market and a postmodern circumstance. Without established conventions of displaying art and exhibition practices in pre-modern China, contemporary Chinese artists, as neophytes in the global market, seem to have been able to react in more diversified ways and open themselves to different possibilities. They learn and internalize the norms and languages of exhibition culture in order to create their own positions. As has been argued by scholars, in the postmodern context, the artwork and its meaning are open to more fluid associations, re-significations, and localizations. In this way, the global market in the contemporary art world presents challenges for Chinese artists but also brings forth opportunities for new ways of exhibiting their works.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion of Li Keran and his role in exhibition culture in early twentieth-century China, see Wan Qingli, "Li Keran and His Exhibition Paintings," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, eds. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 183–211.
- ² For a discussion of the different exhibition versions of the series, see Wu Hung, "From Junk to Art and Commodity: How a Discarded Family Photo Entered the Venice Biennale and Was Later Auctioned for 48,336 Yuan as a Print at Sotheby's," unpublished paper presented at the conference *Art and Commerce: Circulating Cultures of East Asia*, held at the University of Chicago, May 13–14, 2005.
- ³ For a discussion of this issue, see Colin B. Bailey, "Conventions of the Eighteenth-Century Cabinet de tableaux: Blondel d'Azincourt's La première idée de la curiosité," *Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (Sept 1987), 431–47.