



578,700 Holes. Handpaper, 116 x 72cm. Courtesy the artist.

NÜHUA—KHÔRA—MINIMALISM

INTERSECTING NOTES ON THE WORK OF FU XIAO TONG
PAUL GLADSTON WITH LYNNE HOWARTH-GLADSTON

The best of man [sic] is like water,
Which benefits all things, and does not contend
with them

The *Daodejing*

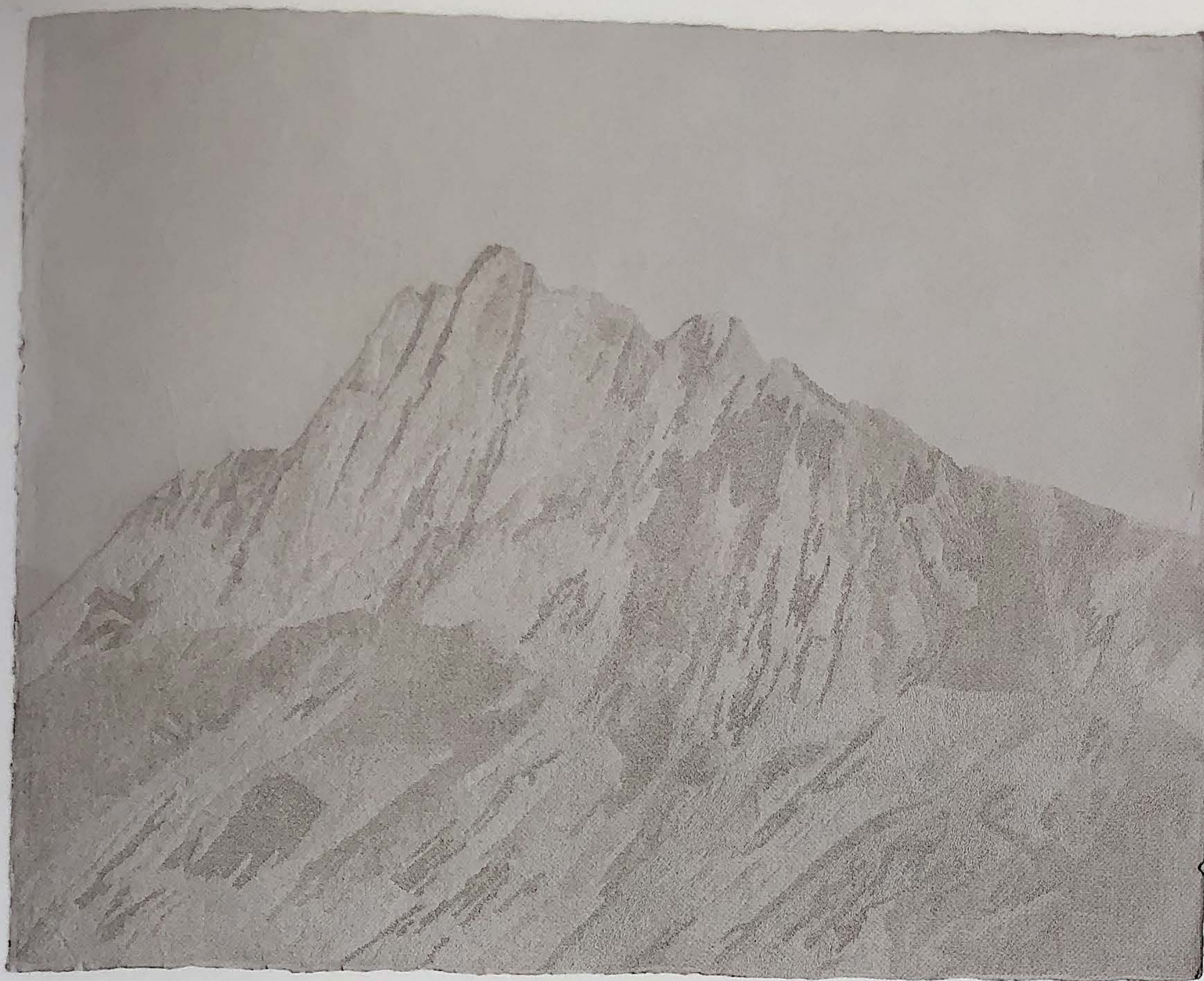
I

In front of us on a table-top are photographic representations of works by the artist Fu Xiao Tong. Most represent sheets of paper that have been pierced multiple times in such a way that the resulting interventions upon the paper's surface give rise to depictions of mountain landscapes, flowing water (both subjects traditional to Chinese ink and brush painting) and abstracted natural forms. One of the works depicts the Jokhang Temple in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. A statement by Fu accompanying the reproductions of her

work informs us that the material employed in their making is *Xuanzhi*—a handmade paper used traditionally in China as a support for painting and writing with ink and brush, whose main constituent is pulped elm tree bark sometimes supplemented by pulped rice, bamboo and mulberry—and that the paper was pierced by needles more usually employed by Chinese women in the production of textiles and needlepoint.

II

Xuanzhi, or Xuan paper, was first manufactured in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) in Jing County under the Xuan Prefecture (Xuanzhou), from where its name derives. Among the first documented references to Xuan paper are those included in the *New Book of Tang (Xin Tang Shu)*, an official ten-volume history of the Tang Dynasty written during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). There are three grades of Xuan paper: *shengxuan* (literally 'raw Xuan'), which has a relatively unrefined highly absorbent surface that blurs the edges of water-based paint or ink marks applied to it; *shuxuan* (literally 'ripe Xuan'), which is processed using potassium alum resulting in greater stiffness, smoothness of surface, reduced absorption and greater ease of tearing; and *banshuxuan* (literally 'half-ripe Xuan'), with properties somewhere between the first two. Because of its relatively high absorbency, *shengxuan* is used traditionally in China as a support for looser *xieyi* ('sketching thoughts', otherwise known as *shuimo*) ink and brush painting, while *shuxuan* is used for more detailed and meticulous *gongbi* painting. Xuan paper is extremely durable. Many of the paintings and



720,500 Holes, 2015. Handpaper, 116 x 88cm. Courtesy the artist.

documents that have survived in China since antiquity were produced using Xuan paper. The addition of mulberry to Xuan paper deters destructive infestation by insects and beetles.

III

China's traditionally all-male scholar-gentry class (*wenren*)—including the sub-set of that class known as the Literati (*shidafu*), who acted as imperial civil servants from the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD) until the founding of Republican China in 1911-12—were trained, as a matter of convention, in the 'four arts': playing of and composing for the stringed musical instrument known as the *qin*; playing of the strategy board game *qi* (now referred to in China as *weiqi* and in Japan and the west as *go*); *shu*, calligraphy involving the use of ink and brush on paper or silk; and *hua*, painting also using ink and brush on paper or silk. The four arts are associated historically with an adherence to Confucian ethics and filial piety, which in principle underpinned the scholar-gentry's moral-critical commitment to the stability and continuity of the Chinese Imperial state. *Wenrenhua*—painting produced by China's (in principle, though by no means always in practice, strictly amateur) scholar-gentry class—is synonymous with the technique known as *xieyi* or *shuimo*. *Shanshui* (literally 'mountains and water') landscape painting produced using *xieyi* began to emerge as the highest form of *wenrenhua* during the Song Dynasty.

IV

Wenrenhua is not only understood to embody worldly Confucian values, but, in addition, traces of the non-rationalist cosmological outlook of Daoism—as signified by the well-known *taijitu* or *yin-yang* symbol—aspects of which were co-opted as formative constituents of Confucianism and Chinese Chan Buddhism. The development of elite literati culture in the so-called Jiangnan region south of the Yangtze River, from the Song Dynasty onwards, has been contrasted with supposedly more formal cultural attitudes dominant historically in the north of China, especially in and around Beijing, China's principal capital since the fifteenth century. This perceived regional difference is strongly informed by a shift in aesthetic outlook among the scholar-gentry at the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) following their ejection from the imperial court by invading Mongolian forces. The ejection of the scholar-gentry from the imperial court resulted in the development of a distinctively abstracted and subjective style of *xieyi wenrenhua* in contrast to the formally harmonious and meticulous *gongbi* painting favoured by professional artisan and court painters. From the thirteenth century onwards *wenrenhua* came to be seen as the principle means of individualistic expression among China's scholar-gentry. Practised though spontaneous application of line, *wenrenhua* became not only a sign of scholarly refinement and Confucian-moral rectitude, but also—in accordance with the Daoist pre-

cepts of *wuwei* (action through non-action) and *ziran* (naturalness)—of an elevated separation of self as a cultured individual from others; a seemingly paradoxical combination of individualism and subservience to rigid social order redolent of Confucianism's somewhat contradictory appropriation of non-rationalist Daoist thinking.

V

As Fu's statement indicates, she first began to produce artworks using needles to pierce Xuan paper in 2010 during her studies as a masters' student in the Department of Experimental Art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. Fu's use of needles to pierce Xuan paper developed as a result of an exercise in which students were asked to explore the intrinsic properties of differing materials. Piercing rather than painterly or graphic mark-making enabled Fu to exploit the specific durability and elasticity of Xuan paper as a means of depicting form. Carefully considered repeated piercings of Xuan paper with needles used traditionally in China as part of the production of textiles and needlepoint produced graduated material disruptions of surface, giving the illusion of light reflected by forms in space. Fu believes that 'covering' Xuan paper with ink or paint 'will undermine its distinguishing characteristics'. Her intention is to 'illuminate these characteristics in a different way'; choosing needles as tools because they do not 'add any colour', allowing 'the paper to breath freely'.

VI

Qi (literally 'breath') is upheld by pre-Daoist and Daoist texts as the cosmological condition of the possibility of all being (the structure of 'myriad things'). As such, *qi*, which manifests itself through potentially harmonious interaction between cosmic opposites signified by the pairing *yin-yang*—respectively, that which turns away from the light (female principle) and that which turns towards the light (male principle)—is understood as having no definitive ontology. As Zhang Dainian makes clear

In popular parlance *qi* is applied to the air we breathe, steam, smoke and all gaseous substances. The philosophical use of the term underlines the movement of *qi*. *Qi* is both what really exists and what has the ability to become. To stress one at the expense of the other would be to misunderstand *qi*. *Qi* is the life principle but is also the stuff of inanimate objects. As a philosophical category *qi* originally referred to the existence of whatever is of a nature to change. This meaning is then expanded to encompass all phenomena, both physical and spiritual. It is energy that has the capacity to become material objects while remaining what it is. It thus combines 'potentiality' with 'matter'. To understand it solely as 'potentiality' would be wrong, just as it cannot be translated simply as 'matter'.¹

In short, *qi* is both 'being' and 'beingless'. With regard to the cosmological pairing of *yin-yang*, 'beingless' is conventionally aligned with the female principle of *yin*

as a matter of darkened 'being less', or more precisely, in the context of an historically intensely patriarchal Chinese society, no-thing at all.

VII

We sit here at our table making virtual marks on paper in pursuit of an always-already fugitive meaning. The result is an accumulation of glosses: textual fragments falling short of any definitive interpretation that bestow passing lustre but are ultimately misleading.

VIII

In her statement Fu asserts that her use of traditional tools and materials carries with it traces of multiple localised cultural references: a reverence for nature and the elusiveness and fragility of life traditionally embodied by Xuan paper (as something produced from the transformation of natural resources—appropriated to social uses—while remaining 'easily torn apart'). Fu also asserts that the needle tip penetrates both sides of the paper 'over and over, as if casting a spell, indicating the nothingness of images'. No suturing thread is drawn through in the wake of puncturing. Representation is made possible by multiple combinatory absences: repeated *punctum delens*, if you will. As Zhang Dainian reminds us, in traditional Chinese thought 'what given objects lack, for example, a hole, can be termed beingless'.² The holes pierced by Fu arise conditionally in relation to the materially enlightened 'being' of Xuan paper, thereby invoking a latent potentiality—spectral images made present through a persistent play of presence and absence of reflected light. The potentiality of interaction between being and beingless, as well as between that which turns away from and towards the light (*yin-yang*), may be understood to have been set in motion by the puncturing of surface. It is elision as both omission and conjoining. Is this, perhaps, the 'breathing' (*qi*) of the paper to which Fu refers? Fu uses the number of needle holes to name each work; hoping, by doing so, to 'dissolve' her individuality—protesting 'despair and solitude' hidden behind 'an extreme approach and artistic vocabulary'.

IX

Fu's piercing of Xuan paper is in many respects a reversal of techniques associated traditionally with *wenrenhua*. Instead of applying ink to paper she intervenes negatively, disrupting its very fabric. In place of veiling additions through assured application of line, multiple absences are formed by an obsessively measured accumulation of piercings whose meticulousness is more redolent of *gongbi* than *xieyi* painting. Spontaneity and individuality give way to a resolutely non-expressive interruption of the integrity of the paper's surface. Depiction arises not as a setting out of additive signifiers but as an effect of material disruption. Repetitive piercing by needles—traditionally women's work—is used to displace (to subtract from and exceed) the additive covering of paper by ink associated with the masculinist Confucianism of China's historical scholarship. Representation, while consonant with traditional *shanshui* subject matter, is revenant. Its appearance is immaterial, at once replete with significance and void ('the nothingness of images'). Rather than



604,800 Holes, 2015. Handpaper, 100 x 76cm. Courtesy the artist.

simply appropriating and contending with an historically male-dominated painterly practice, Fu has taken (abstracted) from it, reducing it to its fundamental supporting constituent; thereby remotivating culturally gendered tradition against itself. Where traditional *wenrenhua* combines (ink on paper), Fu reduces (empties out) through a sustained needle-pricking pastiche of phallogentric plenitude (an excess of significance) resulting in the negation of the latter's perceived authority. The process, as well as aesthetic affect, is both meditative (a loss of the desiring self through sustained repetition) and empty of settled meaning/feeling; to borrow from Georges Bataille, it moves 'like water in water'.³ It is an interruption that problematises what was thought of, in the context of China's patriarchal-Confucian traditions, as the very impossibility of women's *wenrenhua*; an aberrant/mistaken category whose potential has now been set in motion by the accession of women into modern/contemporary artistic production as part of the development of republican post-imperial Chinese society. It is also one that manifests itself in historical relation to the prior existence of *nüshu*⁴—a form of writing/calligraphy used exclusively by women since the Song Dynasty in Jiangyong county of Hunan province—and that may therefore be referred to speculatively as *nühua*. Meaning in this instance is indissociably enmeshed, not only with shifting historical context, but also the performativity of a distinctly interruptive gendered technique.

X

Fu's technique is also the antithesis of pouncing, used traditionally by painters to transfer images from one surface to another; first by tracing an image using semi-transparent paper, then by pricking the resulting outlines using a needle or multi-pointed wheel, laying the pricked paper over a new surface and forcing graphite or chalk through the resulting holes to repeat the outlines of the original image. While pouncing uses piercing of paper as a vehicle for the (phallogentric) addition of marks to a surface, Fu's penetrative technique remains persistently subtractive (while at the same time in excess of settled meaning).

XI

Writing in the *Timaeus*, Plato uses the term '*khôra*'—in ancient Greece the territory immediately outside the *polis* or city proper—to metaphorically signify a womb-like interval, that is neither being nor non-being, and therefore both, in which ideal 'forms' were originally held. Martin Heidegger uses the same term in his philosophical writings to signify the 'clearing' in which being takes place. Julia Kristeva appropriates the notion of the '*chora*' [sic] and its maternal connotations to posit a semiotic state of pre-signification (prior to the



The wind 1-4, 2015. Handpaper, 250 x 640cm. Courtesy the artist.

symbolic) that is both the conditional substratum of a supposedly phallogocentric linguistic symbolism and at the same time the latter's radical other.⁵ In his short essay *Khôra*,⁶ Jacques Derrida uses the term to identify the site of the differentiation between being and non-being, which comprehends the possibility of that differentiation while simultaneously resisting identification simply as one or the other. For Derrida, *khôra* can thus be understood to defy the binary logic of linguistic naming. As such, its own naming may be taken as a supplement to Derrida's coining of the term *différance*, which he uses to performatively signify a persistently deconstructive movement of differing-deferring between signs upon which the very possibility of linguistic meaning is conditional.⁷

XII

There is an evident conceptual affinity between notions of *khôra* posited by Kristeva and Derrida and *qi*. Both signify an ultimately ineffable semiotic ground or opening that constitutes conditions of the separation of being and non-being while at the same time escaping settled definition as one or the other. The identification of *khôra* with *qi* is by no means absolute, however. Where the poststructuralist naming of *khôra* is intended as indicative of an ultimately unresolvable field of signification—one in which the openness of language to unfolding disjuncture results in persistent deconstructive negation of authoritative meaning through shifting multiplications of significance—*qi* through its supposed manifestation as *yin-yang* points conversely towards the metaphysical possibility of a desired cosmic harmony between opposites. Whether we view Fu's disruptive intervention into the integrity of surface simply as deconstructive of phallogocentric authority or a gesture towards harmonious reciprocation between male being and female beingless is a matter of cultural parallax—that is to say, one's cultural-discursive positioning in relation to Fu's work. Commensurate with the potentiality of the interaction between being and beingless which Fu may be understood to have set in motion, the two positions (one deconstructive, the other ultimately metaphysical) either remain irreducible to one another or subject to possible reciprocity.

XIII

The subtractive simplicity and non-expressiveness of Fu's work suggest an affinity with ideas and practices associated with Minimalism. As Adam Geczy and Jaqueline Millner have argued, minimalism is now one of the signature styles of internationalised contemporary art that bridges differing localised contexts of cultural production, dissemination and consumption. In their book *Fashionable Art* (2015),⁸ Geczy and Millner identify various aspects of internationally dominant artistic discourse and practice, which, they argue, condition prevailing views of what is considered 'progressively' fashionable (in both senses of the word) and therefore commercial within the international art world. The aspects of artistic discourse and practice identified by Geczy and Millner in this regard include the 'artist-impresario', 'identity politics', 'exoticism', 'formlessness', 'relational aesthetics' (and its detractors), 'video art', 'minimalism' and 'outsider art'—all of them upheld as established signifiers of the supposed line separating fashionably cool and outwardly-oriented contemporary art from its rather more stick-in-the-mud self-regarding pre-Warholian modernist forbear. It should be remembered, however, that the significance of the term 'minimalism' was previously something other than that of a signature stylistic coolness. As Gregory Battock makes clear in the introduction to *Minimal Art: a Critical anthology* (1968)

Minimal art is not a negation of past art, or a nihilistic gesture. Indeed it must be understood that by *not* doing something one can instead make a fully affirmative gesture, that the Minimal artist is engaged in an appraisal of past and present, and that he [sic] frequently finds present aesthetic and

sociological behaviour both hypocritical and empty. One could object that this attitude is merely a rationalization of an art form involved with nothing, but this is not the case. Minimal style is extremely complex. The artist has to create new notions of scale, space, containment, shape and object. He must reconstruct the relationship between art as object and between object and man.⁹

Here a case is made for Minimalism, not merely as a style negatively signifying modishness, but as a site of, or opening for, the setting into motion of critical-interruptive artistic potentiality. Moreover, one that, in spite of Minimalism's ostensible withdrawal into reductive formalism, is conceived of as ushering in the possibility of a far-reaching critical reworking of the relationship between 'art as object' and society. To describe Fu's Xuan paper-based works as 'minimalist' is potentially misleading insofar as it is suggestive of the cultural-commercial conditioning now attached to the term. Fu's work does though share in something of the vision set out previously for a minimalist art by Battock. Fu's subtractive interruption into the very fabric of traditional scholar-gentry painting in China extends beyond that of a simply negative reworking of technical means. It makes disjunctively manifest the fundamental conditions of such painting (by subtracting from it) as a means of projecting the critical prospect of a renewed, less assuredly gender-exclusive relationship between artistic production and society. ✱

Notes

1. Zhang Dainian, Edmund Ryden trans., *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, pp.45-46.
2. *Ibid.*, p.161.
3. Georges Bataille, Robert Hurley trans., *Theory of Religion*, Zone Books, New York, 1992, p.23.
4. For a discussion of *nüshu*, see Luise Guest, 'Secrets, sorrow and the feminine subjective: *Nüshu* references in the work of contemporary Chinese artists Ma Yanling', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2:1, 2015.
5. Julia Kristeva, Toril Moi ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp.89-136.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Khôra*, Galilée, Paris, 1993.
7. Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass trans., *Margins of Philosophy*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1982, pp.1-27.
8. Adam Geczy and Jacqueline Millner, *Fashionable Art*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015.
9. Gregory Battock ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, E.P. Dutton, New York, 1968, p.26.

Paul Gladston is Professor of Contemporary Visual Cultures and Critical Theory at the University of Nottingham. His book *Contemporary Chinese Art: a Critical History* was awarded 'best publication' at the Art Awards China, 2015. Lynne Howarth-Gladston is an artist, curator and independent scholar. She has exhibited her painting internationally and was co-curator with Paul Gladston of the exhibition *New China/New Art Contemporary Video* from Shanghai to Hangzhou, which was staged at the University of Nottingham's Djanogly Gallery in 2015.