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# Chinese Contemporary Art: The Challenges of Urbanization and Globalization

Curtis L. Carter

## Abstract

Artists working in China today face many challenges resulting from the robust transitions internally that contemporary Chinese society is currently undergoing. The two principal sources underlying these challenges derive from the forces of urbanization and globalization. Urbanization is the central internal issue internally, while globalization focuses on China's interrelations with the external world. A profound psychological shift with respect to the attitudes toward art in Chinese society and the approaches that artists choose to pursue is currently in process. Among the notable shifts observed by art historian Michael Sullivan is the questioning or abandonment by contemporary artists of the view that "the purposes of art were to express the ideal of harmony between man and nature, to uphold tradition, and to give pleasure." Not all Chinese artists or theorists agree that abandonment of traditional aims of Chinese art is a positive development. Nor is there agreement on what changes might best serve Chinese society, or the artists themselves for that matter. Among the existing choices are these: to participate in official art aimed at state sponsorship, academic art focusing on technical and aesthetic achievements, art directed to a popular urban taste, art aimed at the global international art market, art aimed at social change, or independently experimental art that seeks to advance the development of art and ideas analogous to pure research in the sciences irrespective of their broader social or commercial implications.

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A profound psychological shift with respect to the attitudes toward art in Chinese society and the approaches that artists choose to pursue is currently in process. These changes result in conflicting thoughts and actions. Among the notable shifts observed by art historian Michael Sullivan is the questioning or abandonment by contemporary artists of the view that "the purposes of art were to express the ideal of harmony between man and nature, to uphold tradition,

and to give pleasure.”<sup>①</sup> Not all Chinese artists or theorists agree that abandonment of traditional aims of Chinese art is a positive development. Nor is there agreement on what changes might best serve Chinese society, or the artists themselves for that matter.

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### I. Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art

None of these developments in art can be understood apart from the urbanization processes taking place in the current Chinese society as a whole. At this time, for example, artists in Beijing and urban centers elsewhere in China face a major threat from the push for economic expansion of real estate markets in the areas where art zones have developed over the past few years. The situation for the development of urban art zones, especially in Beijing, once perceived as favorable to the advancement of Chinese contemporary artists, both in terms of economic and artistic development, has changed rapidly even during the past two seasons. For example, during my visit to Chinese art zones and studios little more than two years ago, the art zone 798 as well as in Songzuhang Village and elsewhere across Beijing appeared to be thriving centers for galleries and individual artists' studios. Recent observations of over-commercialization in art zone 798 is but one symptom of the changes taking place in the art zones located in the villages where artists' studios are under threat of demolition.

It is worth noting, however, that what is happening to artists' spaces is not addressed particularly to artists alone. The story of a Chinese worker, Sheng Jianhua, cited in the book, *Learning from Hangzhou*, will serve to illustrate the problem that is also facing artists.<sup>④</sup> Born in 1962, Sheng lived with his parents in a 30 square meter concrete government controlled lane housing unit linked to a government organized work group. The first of Sheng's six homes, where he lived with family, was demolished and replaced by a six-story apartment building resulting in the eviction of friends and neighbors. His move to the new building in a 40 square

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① Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1966), 26.

② For further thoughts on the notion of Chinese experimental art see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art and the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: David Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 13–16.

③ This aim toward collaboration is echoed in the remarks of artist Xu Bing, who recently returned to China as Vice President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. See Jérôme Sans, "Playing With Words: Xu Bing," *China Talks: Interviews with 32 Contemporary Artists*, Timezone Ltd., 2009), 124.

④ Borysevicz, *Learning from Hangzhou*, 11–13.

meter apartment was part of the economic and social modernizations instituted by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. A third move in 1993 to his in-law's 100 square meter farm house above a restaurant ended in when the house was again demolished as a part of the urbanization process, this time to widen a road, and without compensation to the family. In somewhat better economic circumstances by 2004, Sheng used his savings and borrowed monies to build a new four story house with 13 rooms, some of which could be used to rent out for a garment factory on the first floor and workers' quarters on the second, with his family occupying the upper floors. When this success was just in place, Hangzhou officials designated his site for the future central business district, resulting in the demolition of his property only four years later in 2007 to clear the way for the future. A 15 million RMB compensation will assure him a 50 square meter space in a new luxury high rise building whose construction will be completed in 2012. Meanwhile, he awaits the construction of his sixth, and hopefully final home, while his job in the local silk factory is replaced by a job as a free lance trucker, with additional compensation of 800 RMB per month during his wait for the new dwelling. His economic status has improved, but his neighborhood relations from the beginnings of his life are traded for a life of uncertainty where you do not even know your neighbor, and isolation replaces a close network of social trust.

What does this mean for the future of contemporary Chinese artists? What should artists be doing to address the changes? Or what is the role of art in social change? What older functions should artists retain? Or what new functions for art should be introduced to sustain the vitality of society in general and of art itself? Should the role of art be to engage in the political in support of the political agendas of the state as in the past? Should artists assume a role of protest against perceived injustices and in the interest of such values as freedom and justice? Should they try to engage society through intervention tactics that confront societal problems such as the pressing issue of land usage? The problem with intervention is that it tends to produce tensions that often detracts from real solutions to the problems under consideration.

With the challenges posed by urbanization comes the opportunity to rethink whether there are alternative strategies for artists in the new urbanization. For example, are there more constructive approaches than resistance to change, such as the "project art" as suggested by Wang Chenchen in his informative and insightful book, *Art Intervenes in Society: A New Artistic Relationship?* It is only possible to touch on the surface of such problems here, but they require serious thought as the future of Chinese contemporary art is being formed.

## II. Globalization and Contemporary Chinese Art

All of these internal developments affecting the state of Chinese contemporary art are taking place along side, or under the influences of worldwide globalization. Hence, apart from the challenges within China itself, another set of factors bear equally on the present and future states of Chinese art. In this respect, one can agree with art critic Wang Chunchen's observa-

tion that, “The greatest influence that 20<sup>th</sup> century cast upon Chinese culture is a change in the relationship between China and the world, raising the question of how China can complete its modernization and become a prosperous and powerful country.”<sup>①</sup> It goes without saying that the future of contemporary Chinese art in reference to globalization must be understood in this context. Hence, the remainder of this paper will focus on globalization and its implications for the present and future developments concerning Chinese art.

Taken in the broadest sense, the term global means worldwide, universal, all – inclusive, complete, or exhaustive.<sup>②</sup> Global art requires a narrower frame than this broad sense of global. Its network is worldwide, and it implies the possibility of some sense of universal art understanding, as it transcends particular national, regional or local cultures. Still, global art is neither all – inclusive nor complete because there are forms of art (for example amateur art, commercial art, local crafts, and art used solely in particular religious practices) that do not participate.

Other terms might qualify as candidates for describing the processes which we refer to as global art. For example, transnational art instead of global art, as has been proposed by the philosopher Noël Carroll.<sup>③</sup> Transnational means going beyond national boundaries or solely national interests. My own preference will be for the term global art over transnational art. Global is preferable for at least two important reasons. It is the language of the day for discussing the dynamics of worldwide issues in other important cultural domains such as economics and politics. Furthermore, global is more suited to the nature of art practices taking place in contemporary geopolitical divisions where national boundaries are more fluid, and where pluralistic nation – states such as China, India, or the United States embrace diverse cultural and artistic practices.

A highly visible aspect of the contemporary global art world is the art *biennale* of which there are currently some sixty offered throughout the world. A biennale is a major international showing of works by up and coming contemporary artists held in an important city every two years. A *biennale* is normally international and non – commercial. The artists are invited by the organizing institution and are able to show, but not to sell, their works. A *biennale* typically has a theme, and may spotlight artists of the host nation.<sup>④</sup> The Venice Biennale established in

① Wang Chunchen, *Art Intervenes in Society*, 22.

② Broadly understood, globalism in the contemporary art world takes place alongside increases in world commerce, and cultural exchange, world travel, advancements in communication and transport facilities, and the reawakening and the demand for inclusion of local cultures in the postcolonial era. Although globalization is not a new development in history, the term was seldom used before 1980 in academic literature or everyday speech, according to Anthony Giddens as noted in his 1999 Reith Lectures. See Nru Ratnam, “Art and Globalization,” in Gill Perry and Paul wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art* (Yale University Press, and the Open University, 2004), 281.

③ Noël Carroll, “Art and Globalization: Then and Now,” in Susan L. Feagin, ed., *Global theories of the Arts and Aesthetics*, 131–143.

④ Shelly Esaak, *Art History Guide*, internet, March, 17, 2010.

1895 in Venice, Italy is one of the oldest and most important.

Such venues have been important in the globalization of contemporary Chinese art. In 1999, Harold Zeeman included 19 Chinese artists in the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice *Biennale*. The Chinese Ministry of Culture created the first official Chinese pavilion in 2005 for the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice *Biennale* and presented an exhibition "Virgin Garden Emersion" organized by Yu Jiang. Since that time, Chinese contemporary artists have experienced increasingly strong participation in the Venice *Biennale*. The role of Chinese artists has gained prominence in each of the succeeding Biennales held in 2007 and 2009. A future *Biennale* Chair has proposed that China's pavilion move to one of the more conventional venues for the next Venice *Biennale* in 2011, thus affirming the recognition of Chinese contemporary art as a leading contender in the global art world.<sup>①</sup>

While the *biennale* circuit has contributed to the globalization process, it is also responsible for development of a nomad-like character to global art. Similarly, the transient character of the *biennale* circuit has impacted the shift from painting and sculpture as the preferred art media to photography, video art, and digital art. From a practical perspective, these media arts are more portable than paintings and sculptures and less susceptible to damage in transport.

Museums have also contributed to the development of global art, as they offer exhibitions drawing upon artistic works from across the world. Historically speaking, many museum collections include art from other cultures in their offerings. This factor is a part of the history of globalization with respect to art. Lately, museums have also offered exhibitions intended to reflect on the current state of global art. *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* (April 28, 1999 to November 6, 2000) opened at the Brooklyn Museum and traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Miami Art Museum. This exhibition identified four key themes common to the global conceptual artists selected from Asia, Europe and the Soviet Union, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, North America, Latin America. The themes were: (1) To show that conceptual art emerged from local circumstances instead of spreading from a single international source; (2) Prioritization of language over visuality; (3) Critique of the institutions of art; (4) Dematerialization of art to focus on conceptual ideas.

### III. Global Art in China

Global art in China embraces any type of art, including paintings, sculptures, photogra-

① "Asia Expands Biennial," *Art Radar Asia*, posted July 9, 2009. For the 2007 Biennale, four Chinese women artists: Cao Fei, Kan Xuan, Shen Yuan, and Xin Xiuzhen were presented. The seven contemporary Chinese artists on display in the Chinese Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale are: He Jianwei, Liu Ding, He Sen, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fhanzi, Qiu Zhijie, Zeng Hao. This year, along with the seven artists who are participating at the Chinese pavilion, Chen Zhen, Chu Yun, Huang Yong Ping, Tian Tian Wang and Xu Tan are showing their works in the main exhibition 'Making Words'. Source: *Art Pension Trust*, On Line, 10/01/2009.

phy, cinema, video art, digital internet art, as well as conceptual, installation, and performance arts, that participates in the international art world through cultural exchange or commerce. For the purposes of this discussion of contemporary Chinese art, global art essentially begins in China 1985 with Robert Rauschenberg's Overseas Culture Exchange project, which brought paintings, installations, and mixed media arts incorporating found objects to the China National Art Gallery. One result of this exposure to Western art was that young Chinese artists also began to exhibit installations following Rauschenberg's introduction to these new art processes. At about the same time, the Chinese government established art journals with a Western art agenda such as *85 New Space* produced by the Pool society and *Fine Arts News* published by the Arts Research Institute of the Ministry of Culture in Beijing, for the purpose of promoting innovation and presentation of world art to Chinese audiences.<sup>①</sup> Hence, support systems for globalization began to include art publications as well as institutions providing an introduction of western art to students.

The exchange generated by globalization is not limited to one-directional transfer. Rather, there exists a plurality of active sources contributing to the reciprocal flow, and mutually enhancing stream of art. Especially after 1989, globalization began to move from China to the West as artists from China as artists emigrated to the West and began showing their works in Europe and America as well as in Japan and other Asian locations. In fact it may have been preferred on the part of some Chinese artists who feared that Western art would undermine the place of traditional art, and by ideologically sensitive officials, that globalization be directed outward rather than its bringing in art from the West.

With respect to Chinese contemporary art, it is important to note that, despite the opening of China to western economic and artistic cultures through the processes of globalization, Chinese art did not succumb to hegemonic dominance from the West in its art. Rather, contemporary Chinese artists for the most part have been able to learn from western art practices in advancing their art without surrendering their Chinese artistic identities. The reasons for this development lies in part in the respect of Chinese artists for the long and highly developed tradition of Chinese art practices, and also in the shared inventions of an endless stream of new paradigms for creating art that are available world wide through travel and media communications.<sup>②</sup>

#### IV. Impact of Global Art: Issues and Problems

The recent focus on globalization in art follows heightened attention to global economic and political discourse. This development, together with urbanization in China's cities, raises a

① Andrews, "Black Cat White Cat," 24, 25.

② For further discussion of hegemony in contemporary Chinese art see Curtis L. Carter, "Globalization, Hegemony, and the Influences of Western Art in China," 2009.

series of issue of importance to the future understanding of art in China and across the world. By focusing on the whole of artistic production world wide, including the changes in local art, globalization draws attention to the diversity that exists in the arts as they function in different cultures and to the changes that are taking place. Recognition of diversity and change reinforces the need for an understanding of art that is broad and inclusive.

Intensified contact among the diverse traditions in the arts, as fostered by globalization, invites comparison and assessment, and makes available new ideas for possible modifications in existing art making practices. This process may involve appropriation of ideas found in other art cultures and results in change in existing practices, as well as innovation resulting in entirely new approaches to art.

Among the changes that have attracted attention today, is the emergence of increasingly nomadic artists from across the world who participate in the seemingly endless stream of art biennials and art fairs. This development has prompted Noël Carroll to propose that we are witnessing the emergence of a unified international art world, "...something like a single, integrated, cosmopolitan institution of art, organized trans - nationally in such a way that the participants...share converging or overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art in international coordinated venues."<sup>①</sup> Carroll finds in this development common themes such as "post - colonialism, feminism, gay liberation, globalization and global inequality, the suppression of free expression and other human rights, identity politics..." Accompanying these common themes are sense - making strategies that are shared by artists, presenters, and their audiences. According to Carroll, these strategies might include "a battery of formal devices for advancing those themes, including radical juxtaposition, de - familiarization, and the de - contextualization of objects and images from their customary milieus."<sup>②</sup>

This development represents one aspect of the overall globalization of art. But the themes and the strategies of the category of artists cited by Carroll offer a very narrow slice of art as it is being practiced in the current global world. The interests of these artists seem to be limited to a particular segment of the art world, and perhaps to an even narrower segment of art interests of the world population at large. Hence, we cannot gauge the impact of global art from this sampling alone. Furthermore, Carroll's suggestion that contemporary art is coalescing toward a unified transnational institution of art seems substantially at odds with the pluralism that has dominated contemporary art since the 1980s. Even the trend toward favoring the media arts is constantly challenged by the on going testing of the boundaries of art, as well as by the resurgence of painting, sculpture, and the resistance of local and regional art to global arts.

A related set of issues is addressed in a series of conferences and publications on global art

① Carroll, "Art and Globalization: Then and Now," 136—141.

② Carroll, "Art and Globalization: Then and Now," 140.



conducted by Hans Belting and others.<sup>①</sup> In these studies of the globalization of contemporary art in the twenty – first century, Belting raises important questions concerning the effects of global production and consumption of art. Given recent developments in global art, as Belting notes, it is necessary to ask the questions such as these: To what extent is the new globalization of art prompting a critical reevaluation of the notion of mainstream art And how will the outcome of these developments affect the future role of the art museum as a barometer of cultural identity?

Of particular importance is the impact of globalization for the future of the art museum. Local and national museums across the world presently provide a measure of cultural identity for the local and national communities in which they are located, as well as a measure of cultural achievements and a banner of civic pride. Museums, in the western tradition at least, are looked upon as a main source of public access to art. In the west especially, but not exclusively, museums have had an important role in bringing art from across the world to their local constituencies. As Belting notes, the perspectives of the global art market and international collectors are very different from the perspective of the museum. For instance, the global market and collectors act on a global scale, whereas the museums mainly operate within a local framework while serving diverse audiences and often representing diverse cultures. This claim remains true for most museums even in the face of recent shifts in contemporary art museums as they try to accommodate global art. The result may well turn out to be a situation where the taste for global art has no local meaning in the contexts where it is being presented.<sup>②</sup>

Global art takes the discussion of contemporary art and art institutions one more step beyond post – colonial discourses on art. As Belting has noted, globalization of art brings forth a tension between the forces of “an aggressive localism that makes use of culture as a mark of otherness and as defense, and a transnational art, indifferent to claims of geography, history and identity.”<sup>③</sup> With the latter claiming universality and the former holding onto local traditions, or seeking to embrace global art that is grounded in local or national traditions, the future of art world – wide remains in a state of transition. Thus it is not possible to predict the future of global art at this time.

It is not yet clear what sorts of problems will ensue from the globalism of contemporary art. But one area to watch will be the effects of the new developments on the museums and other cultural institutions charged with stewardship and preservation of culture for future generations. For the most part, global art is focused on contemporary art, as is indicated in the proliferation

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① Hans Belting, *Contemporary Art and the Museum* (Ostfildern: Hatje – Cantz, 2007). Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, Eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje – Cantz, 2009).

② Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, Eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje – Cantz, 2009), 54.

③ Hans Belting, Preface to Conference Program, *The Interplay of Art and Globalization: Consequences for Museums*, Research Center for Cultural Studies, Vienna, Austria, January 25–27, 2007.

of contemporary art museums in the East and the West and a relatively robust international contemporary art market. Another area of concern that is unresolved is the effect of the new globalization on the development of local art cultures. Whether recent efforts toward the advancement of global art will aid or hinder efforts to resolve long standing issues concerning the place of local art cultures remains to be seen.

What is clear, however, is that contemporary global art has given new life to the international art market and expands the opportunities for innovative collaboration worldwide among the artists and cultural institutions. On the positive side, global art increases the flow of ideas and art across cultural boundaries and invites collaboration in the efforts toward mutual understanding among the peoples of different cultures. It endows individual artist with greater resources to create, using ideas, visual forms, and materials, irrespective of their particular cultural or geographic origins. This means that the artists have available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic resources and also significantly greater opportunities for collaboration with artists from other cultures... Artists may then draw upon the cumulative traditions of their own cultures, as well as to seize upon innovations from other cultures in their creative undertakings. Similarly, audiences benefit increasingly from the rich variety of art that globalism continues to make available. The prospects for an increased interest in global art will continue to improve as the arts and culture take on a greater role in the global economy and are a greater concern for foreign policy.

It is certain that Chinese contemporary art will have an important role in the future globalization of contemporary art. How it resolves the problems posed by the other major factor, urbanization, will impact its place in global art as well.