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# Mis-Construction: Changes in Art and Aesthetics East/West

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# MIS-CONSTRUCTION: CHANGES IN THE ARTS AND AESTHETICS EAST AND WEST

*Curtis L. Carter*

In much of Western aesthetics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the separation of art and everyday life experience was grounded in a Kantian concept of beauty with the experience of art being valued for its ability to generate aesthetic experiences characterized by disinterestedness. Disinterested experience of art was founded in the free play of the mental powers of imagination, independently of desire or sensuous pleasure, and practical or other worldly consequences. Art thus was a creation of free imagination, and distinct from the world of nature and the practical activities and objects used in everyday life. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the thinking and practice in Western art has transitioned from what Thierry de Duve referred to as two distinct mental habits in our thinking concerning art: one follows the Kantian line and perhaps is focused on canonical masterpieces of the past, the other offers a habit of resistance grounded in the Avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> One question for us today concerns what changes have resulted from current reflections on these two polarities, and how are we to understand the outcome for contemporary practices in world art?

The relation of art to other aspects of living experiences in Chinese life appears to offer a different understanding than what exists in the West. Apropos of the differences, some Chinese scholars argue that the transition from everyday life to art in Chinese aesthetics does not suffer the rupture of these two domains, art and everyday life, that is apparent in Western approaches to art. This question is raised in the exhibition, *Pan Gongkai: Dispersion and Generation, 2013* at the Today Museum in Beijing, and in discussions on this topic with the artist.

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<sup>1</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996, paper edition, 1999), 20–24.

In this essay, I will first examine the problem of the relation of art to everyday life and its objects with a view of contributing to the understanding of how non-art such as found objects become art in reference to Western art. The focus will be mainly on the transformation of the non-aesthetic into resistance or Avant-garde art, as characterized by Thierry de Duve.<sup>2</sup>

As the situation concerning the relation of art and the aesthetic to everyday life in Chinese culture appears to differ from the practices in the West, I will also explore these differences with reference to the concept of Mis-construction found in the art and thought of Chinese artist and theorist Pan Gongkai.

## **I. Testing the boundaries in Western art**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question of boundaries for distinguishing what can properly be labelled art, versus what does not fit under this label is referenced in various contexts. Marcel Duchamp challenged the art practices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with his ready-mades, consisting of found objects, which he then presented as art. According to Duchamp's account Ready-mades chosen by Duchamp consisted of manufactured artefacts that he took from their usual places in the world of useful everyday objects, and positioned them in exhibitions or galleries normally reserved for such items as sculptures and paintings.

Among Duchamp's ready-mades were his famous "In Advance of a Broken Arm," 1915 and "Fountain," 1917. The work, "In Advance of a Broken Arm" came into the world as what is otherwise known in the USA as a snow shovel. In fact, Duchamp, being French, reportedly had not seen an American snow shovel, and hence may have been unfamiliar with its function. In the case of "Fountain," its usual function as a urinal in a public toilet, would not likely result in a case of mistaken identity, however many material properties of its form it might share with a work of sculpture. Duchamp simply acquired the urinal from the J. L. Mott iron works plumbing supply company in New York and attached the signature, R.

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<sup>2</sup> Thierry de Duve, "The Invention of Non-Art: A History," *Art Forum* (February, 2014): 13–23, and Thierry de Duve, "The Invention of Art: A Theory," *Art Forum* (March 2014): 24–33

Mott and the date of 1917. He then offered the piece for inclusion in an exhibition in the process of being organized by the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. In part, his aim was to challenge the democratic admission policy of the exhibition's organizing committee, of which he was a member. His fellow committee member, the painter Joseph Stella, was not amused, and the original piece was never actually shown.<sup>3</sup>

"Fountain's" continued presence, as arguably the most influential work in modern Western art history, has relied on a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, an American photographer and modern art promoter, and a series of replicas of the original. The original "Fountain" disappeared soon after its being photographed. In any event, we may be assured that Duchamp's interest was in the idea he intended to convey rather than any material properties that the urinal might possess. What was his idea? In this case, he meant to call into question traditional notions such as beauty that had served throughout Western history from ancient Greece as a feature attached to art.

The main point of Duchamp's ready-mades then was to challenge the prevailing notion that perceptual features of an object such as beauty provided a basis for identifying works of art. Instead, Duchamp proposed, a pre-version of Conceptual art where ideas, instead of perceptual features, are the key features of art works. Or, perhaps he meant to question whether the idea of art as a discrete category of experience served any useful purpose at all. That is, whether it is necessary to set apart art from the artefacts and experiences that we encounter in everyday life.

It is useful to note briefly the strategies that enabled Duchamp to challenge the view that art resided in a domain apart from other aspects of life experiences. What were the conditions necessary to transform these manufactured objects into works of art? Most importantly, Duchamp is already acknowledged as an artist of recognized credentials in the Western modern art world. Hence, his standing in the art world brought credibility, alongside controversy, to his experiments with ready-mades. Although he declined to be formally identified with Dadaism or Surrealism, the leading Western art movements of the time, he was well respected in both circles. Secondly, Duchamp was inclined to question established traditions by his

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Gayford, "Duchamp's Fountain: The Practical Joke that Launched an Artistic Revolution," *The Telegraph*, February 16, 2008, accessed May 24, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3671180/Duchamps-Fountain-The-practical-joke-that-launched-an-artistic-revolution.html>

very character. This is evident throughout his art, even when it concerned his earlier paintings such as “Nude Descending Stair Case No. 2,” 1912. (This work created a near sensation when it was shown at the New York Armory Show in 1913.) Further, Duchamp lived in an age where experimentation and the testing of new ideas and inventions invited changes in what was considered art. For example, photography and film increasingly challenged the assumptions concerning art based on painting and other forms of representation. New technologies in communication (the telephone and radio), industrial mass production, and the rise of sophisticated urban cultures in cities such as Paris and New York opened the way to new thin-king and interpretation of art.

Skipping ahead to the 1960s, we find another emerging paradigm shift concerning the question of the identity of works of art. Since Duchamp’s intervention into art of the 1920’s, the pantheon of art movements has expanded to embrace a variety of art styles including Dada and Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism (all continued to focus on art as a distinct entity separate from other aspects of human experience). With the rise of Pop Art, and in particular Andy Warhol’s “Brillo Box,” 1964, Conceptual art resurfaces. For example, perceptual differences between Warhol’s “Brill Box” and a visually similar box that contains Brillo pads in a commercial warehouse are found insufficient to distinguish art from non-art. And then, the field of art opens through the doors of Postmodernism to a sea of artistic pluralism. Western art embraces not only these prior movements but traditional Realism, Neo-Dadaist Fluxus art, Neo-Surrealism, Neo-Expressionism, and whatever variations an individual artist might choose to introduce.

One result of these changes is that the challenge to previously held distinctions between art and non-art, foretold in Duchamp’s championing of the ready-mades finds fertile ground in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century contemporary art. Consequently, the search for the aesthetic in Western art is increasingly open to “found art” and other forms of life not previously acknowledged in the Western art world. For example, consider the Turner Prize award winning British artist, Tracy Emin’s (b. 1963) conceptual art installation, “My Bed”, 1999. This work consists of “an unmade bed strewn with personal items, condoms, blood stained panties, bedroom slippers, bottles.<sup>4</sup> What

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<sup>4</sup> Tracy Emin, “My Bed, 1998” *Encyclopedia of Visual Arts*, Internet, 3/11/2014. Exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1999 and acquired by Charles Saatchi Gallery.

connects Tracy Emin's ensemble to art is a concept accepted by the contemporary art world, and the actions of appropriating found objects for creating art as initiated by the artist. Here, the artist is acting as an agent linking this particular set of objects assembled in a particular time-space module to the history of art. Emin's status as agent is validated by the art world: art school (London Royal Academy MA), museum exhibitions (Tate Gallery) and gallery exhibitions (Charles Saatchi), as well as the prestigious Turner Prize and the extensive media recognition accorded her work.

It is important to note here, that even when the form or material content of the art is drawn from found objects that had another form of existence outside of art, their status as art still depends on their being set apart from their prior life and being drawn into a separate space as developed by the art world and being given a new artistic identity. This process takes place through the found object's being transformed by subsumption under a concept or theory of art that originates and resides within the separate domain of art. There is the additional consideration that Emin's "My Bed" offers a narrative or a story coming out of the life experiences of the artist that contributes to other narratives in the history of art, not unlike other narratives that link contemporary art to art's history.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Aesthetics and art in Chinese culture

There are important differences in how ideas or objects get positioned in the art and aesthetic realms, respectively in Chinese and Western culture. To address this question, it is necessary first to cite briefly certain assumptions that are carried forth in Chinese understanding of this matter. Starting from the period of the Six Dynasties (226-589) there appears to be no particular term that would serve as beauty has in the West to embrace art practices, or to differentiate art practices from everyday life.

Here I must rely on the scholarship of Zong-qi Cai for an account of the various terms such as *mei*, *yixiang*, and *wen* that have been offered from time to time to serve as an organizing concept parallel to beauty in Western aesthetics. Zong concludes that all of these proposed counterparts for Western beauty in Chinese culture fall short and do not reach consensus. He

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<sup>5</sup> Noël Carroll, "Identifying Art," in *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London-New York: Routledge, 1999), 249-264.

nevertheless concludes that the serious practices of art and the presence of theories corresponding to these practices in Chinese society warrant the application of the term aesthetics, and offer prospects for a fruitful exploration of aesthetics broadly defined between Western and Chinese cultures.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons for the relative absence in Chinese culture of concepts such as the Western notion of beauty is that no sharp division setting apart art from the remainder of living in the broader sense exists in how Chinese have viewed art in reference to the whole of living. Nowhere is this more exemplified than in the Chinese garden. The garden represents an idealized space where the sensible (physical nature) and the super sensible (mind and spirit), the sacred and the ordinary, design and function, and intimations of the cosmic heaven merge with earthly life. Images of a garden understood in this context might include various kinds of images available for contemplation including physical objects such as “bamboo groves, fish ponds, pavilions, meandering brooks, winding paths”<sup>7</sup> as well as rocks transported from nature to exemplify mountains. To the extent that paintings, sculptures, calligraphy and poems music, architecture, and other arts enter into the experience of the garden, as Zong-qi Cai has noted, their presence is made part of, or blended into the ambience created by the physical environment. The garden, often located in the midst of an urban environment, offers a space for contemplating nature and one’s place in the complex of beliefs linking heaven and earthly life.

Moving beyond the garden experience, a central notion in Chinese aesthetics is this: the art of living, or life as art. This notion emphasizes the point that art is not something outside the boundaries of everyday life, but that art exists as an integral part of the forms of human life. This means that calligraphy, poetry, music, painting and the other arts are simply a part of everyday life and do not require a baptism into a realm of art, understood as something apart from other aspects of living, as seems to be required in Western art and aesthetics. Nature, with its mountains, streams, trees, and foliage, is an important source of inspiration and appreciation. Often the images from nature such as mountains and streams, as well as birds and flowers, are fed into life experiences through the forms of

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<sup>6</sup> Zong-qi Cai, “Prologue: A Historical Overview of Six Dynasties Aesthetics,” in *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties*, ed. Zong-qi Cai (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 20–24.

<sup>7</sup> Zong-qi Cai, *Chinese Aesthetics*, 8.

discourse made live in the on-going stream of the arts of calligraphy, poetry and painting, as well as through sounds in music. These arts thus filter back the spiritual inspiration initially drawn from nature into the everyday experiences of the people, informing and inspiring daily life.

### III. Mis-construction and the understanding of art East/West

The work of the artist and theorist Pan Gongkai, whose art was presented in the exhibition "Dispersion and Generation" at the Heijiang Province Museum (March, 2014) and previously in the Today Museum in Beijing (March 2013), invites further reflection as to how, or whether the views concerning the connectedness of art to everyday life might still hold in the actual practices of contemporary Chinese artists. Pan's art embraces a wide range of art practices ranging from contemporary calligraphy and ink paintings to design and modelling of architectural spaces. Each of these in its own way connects the art to the streams of everyday life. Calligraphy's forms and ink paintings both in their respective ways, "partake of worldly shapes and appearances" resembling "sitting and walking, flying and moving," ... "being sad and happy," ... "water and fire, clouds and mists, mountain or stream or sun and moon."<sup>8</sup> Proceeding without fixed rules of composition, the forms of calligraphy and painting take us beyond the literal with their infinite varieties of lines and shapes freely imagined as needed to convey an idea or a feeling. Neither the brushwork of calligraphy nor painting gives us literal pictures. Rather, they form in the mind of the receiver experiences that metaphorically connect the recipient with nature and the built environments of human culture, perhaps even merging the spiritual and the physical, heaven and earth.

Pan Gongkai's concept of mis-construction as it applies to everyday life in Chinese culture today requires a different approach from the prevailing practices of art and life in Western cultures. Mis-construction is one of the key themes in his exhibition "Dispersion and Generation." Pan's theory of mis-construction or "fault-structure" as it is called in his thesis book, *On the Boundary of Western Modern Art*, consists of an examination of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Egan, "Nature and Higher Ideals in Texts on Calligraphy, Music, and Painting," in *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties*, ed. Zong-qi Cai (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 285.



relation of art and the rest of human life in Western culture as compared to the aesthetic in Chinese life.<sup>9</sup> As Pan views the situation, life in Western culture operates on two roads, one of these represents the road to survival and the development of human beings based on basic life requirements that form social history. The other road, where art is positioned, represents a search for human freedom apart from the rest of life as documented in the history of art. These two “worlds” coexist, but do not become reconciled. The result is an obdurate mis-construction that leaves art in Western culture in an astatic condition, often having to struggle to justify its existence when placed in competition with basic other requirements of life.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, one aspect of mis-construction points to the problem of how everyday life experiences are to be understood in reference to art and aesthetics. Of course, today in China the environment is increasingly dominated by densely populated urban sites that are being transformed daily with new construction and the demolishing of the old. And the compartmentalization of the world into categories such as East and West is called into question by large-scale globalization, resulting in change and transformation of both East and West. These changes are motivated in part by the forces of *dispersion* and *generation* as suggested in the themes of Pan’s exhibition. Dispersion of ideas and practices across traditional national boundaries invites the collaboration of civilizations East and West. And experimental investigations along these lines offer new possibilities for rethinking the future including generation of new ideas and practices embracing the fullest scope of the human mind.

How these new conditions will alter the understanding of life as art is not clear at this point. Idea as expressed in calligraphy, spirit experienced in painting, and harmony in music will likely be recast with the changing environments as they have in the generations past, but will continue to be key links to the understanding of Chinese life as art.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pan Gongkai, *On The Boundary of the Western Modern Art*, originally conceived and drafted as a visiting scholar at the East Asian Studies Institute, University of California at Berkeley, 1992-1994.

<sup>10</sup> As reported in Sue Wang, “Pan Gongkai The Boundary and the End of Art,” referencing a lecture given by Pan Gongkai at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing November 19, 2013. The lecture was based in part on Pan Gongkai’s *On The Boundary of the Western Modern Art*, originally written 1992–1994.

<sup>11</sup> Egan, “Nature and Higher Ideals,” 304.

#### IV. Change and exceptions: Everyday life and art

While the discussion here has mainly emphasized differences in the understanding of art's relation to life in general as seen in Western and Chinese views, it is important to recognize that actual life experiences and artistic practices in both cultures are subject to exceptions and also to change. For example, Walter Benjamin, writing in 1925, gives an account of everyday life in Naples, a city in Italy known for its vibrant life style. For Benjamin at that time, it seemed that art functions as an essential part of daily street life:

The street decorations are loosely related to those of the theatre. Paper plays the main part. Strips of red, blue and yellow flypaper, altars of glossy coloured paper on the walls, paper rosettes on the raw chunks of meat. Then the virtuosity of the variety shows. Someone kneels on the asphalt, a little box beside him, and it is one of the busiest streets. With coloured chalk he draws the figure of Christ on the stone, below it perhaps the head of the Madonna. Meanwhile a circle has formed around him. The artist gets up, and while he waits beside his work (...) coins fall from the onlookers (...) onto his portrait. He gathers them up, every-one disperses, and in a few minutes the picture is erased by feet.<sup>12</sup>

In another account of street life in Naples, Benjamin continues:

Music parades about – not mournful music for the courtyards, but brilliant sounds for the street. A broad cart, a kind of xylophone, is colourfully hung with song texts (...) One of the musicians turns the organ while the other, beside it, appears with his collection cup before anyone who stops dreamily to listen. So everything joyful is mobile: music, toys, ice cream circulate through the streets. The music is both a residue of the last and a prelude to the next feast day.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at the situation in a more contemporary setting, the practices of street art and graffiti in Western cities represent forms of art that defy, or at least count as exceptions. They show that art in some forms emerges

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, with Asja Lacis, "Naples," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 1925. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. In *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926* edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael We. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 199), 417.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

directly out of everyday life experiences in the West. The same might be said for street musicians and even pop concerts where the musicians, often self-taught, bring their art to the public in both informal and formal performance spaces.

With respect to the question of art in the main stream of everyday life, there are issues to be noted on the Chinese side as well. Of particular interest in this respect are works in the category of experimental art such as Xu Bing's "Book from the Sky or Heavenly Book," 1987 and "Ghosts Pounding the Wall," 1990. "Book of the Sky," 1987, consists of a monumental tablet of markings with the appearance of calligraphy, which could not be understood, leading to confusion and frustration. The result was a work that challenged a some 3000 year old tradition of reliance on calligraphy as both aesthetic expression and practical means of recording the transactions of history. "Ghosts Pounding the Wall" consists of a series of rubbings on paper of a 30 metre section of the historic long wall, a signature monument in China's history. This symbolic reconstruction was orchestrated by Xu Bing over a period of 24 days and recorded and documented on video and film.<sup>14</sup> This work consisted of ink impressions on rice paper, a process used in the reproduction of fine calligraphy, in the shape of a large scroll of 1000 meters ending in a tomb-like pile of dirt. Although the performance creating the work took place in China, the paper rubbing was introduced in a Western museum after Xu Bing's departure to live in the USA in 1990.

The question is, how do experimental arts such as these works fit into the Chinese view of life as art? Both pieces address important national symbols (calligraphy and the long wall), but in ways that seem to position themselves outside the main flow of everyday life in China. What was the message of Xu Bing's and others' creations of unreadable calligraphy? Was it that calligraphy has become a form of conceptual abstract art, or perhaps it offers the political message that calligraphy, or language in general is not to be trusted uncritically as a vehicle for presenting truth?

In "Ghosts Pounding the Wall" the Long Wall's meaning for Chinese culture as a national symbol extending as far back as 221 B.C., is again subject to examination. On one level "Ghosts Pounding the Wall" reflects

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<sup>14</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 31–34.

the experimental interests in printmaking of the artist who was a professor of print-making at the time at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, while at the same time transmitting symbolically the traces of history left on the surfaces of the wall. On another level, Xu Bing's "Ghosts Pounding the Wall" perhaps exemplifies scepticism about the traditional memories embedded in the Long Wall, ostensibly intended to keep out strangers. By analogy, the extraordinary scale of manpower necessary to produce "Ghosts Pounding the Wall," raising doubts as to beneficial outcomes, perhaps suggests metaphorically a similar futility in the production of the wall at great expense of human labour and other costs.<sup>15</sup>

How are we to view these and other works of contemporary experimental art? Do they represent a departure from the Chinese tradition of viewing art as connected to everyday life? Put another way, what is the place of experimental arts in the evolving climate of contemporary Chinese society?

Initially one might be inclined to assume that such experimental art lies outside the mainstream of art and life in Chinese aesthetics. However, given that the issues raised by both Pan Gongkai's and Xu Bing's art concern pivotal questions relevant to the future of art and life in Chinese culture, I conclude that these developments are in fact raising issues of vital importance to the future of Chinese culture and arts. Hence, it is necessary that we find ways to incorporate these new forms of art into the on-going history of the aesthetics in life that has so far distinguished the main stream of Chinese life and art from that of the West. This does not mean, of course that Chinese artists and society can ignore the flow of ideas from the West that an increasingly globalized world offers. Only that Chinese society can selectively appropriate what enhances understanding and enriches the forms and content of its art present and future.

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<sup>15</sup> "Ghosts Pounding the Wall," *Bellebyrd* 25 October, 2005. <http://www.xubing.com>. Lucien van Valen, "Ghosts and Lovers on the Great Wall of China," *Bellebyrd* 25 October, 2005. [www.lucienvanvalen.nl/paginas/Ghosts%20Lovers.html](http://www.lucienvanvalen.nl/paginas/Ghosts%20Lovers.html).

## V. Conclusion

Based on the discussion offered here, the differences between Western and Chinese approaches have offered two different directions to understanding the place of art in reference to other aspects of life. For the Western views, the main stream has shown two tracks one focused on art as a different path of human experience from the other aspects of life. This division has led Pan Gongkai to view the division of life and art in the West as a cultural mis-construction or logical flaw. In contrast, the main trajectory of art and the aesthetic in Chinese culture finds art and aesthetics positioned as part of the mainstream of life.

Still, our investigation shows that the division is not always operative, as there are at least minor instances (Naples street life) when the aesthetic and art are integrated into the everyday life in the West. On another level, the emergence of experimental arts in China, poses challenges to the tradition wherein art and aesthetic remain conjoined.

The investigations begun by Pan Gongkai, especially in his architectural works, invites further reflection on the two modes of understanding for art and the aesthetic. Here, he ponders the bridges being shaped by evolving globalization, which draws closer Western and Chinese understandings of aesthetic and other aspects of culture. His investigations on the future of East-West connections are buoyed with scholarly investigations East and West. Directing attention to perceived differences between Chinese and Western understandings of art and aesthetics has drawn increasing attention from scholars East and West. Among the rapidly increasing number of books on this topic are the Chinese aesthetician Liu Yuedi's 1997 work, *Living Aesthetics and Art Experience: Aesthetics as Life, Art as Experience*, 1997; American author Zachary Simpson's, *Life as Art: Aesthetics and the Creation of Self*, 2012; and the collection of essays, *Aesthetics of Everyday Life East and West*, 2015, edited by Liu Yuedi and the author. The latter collection examines the subject from a variety of Eastern and Western scholars' perspectives.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Liu Yuedi, *Living Aesthetics and Art Experience: Aesthetics as Life, Art as Experience* (Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House, 2007). Zachary Simpson, *Life as Art: Aesthetics and the Creation of Self* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012). Liu Yuedi and Curtis L. Carter, (eds.), *Aesthetics of Everyday Life East and West* 2015).

These scholarly developments and the movements stirring among artists working today in China and the West represent points of convergence. Artists in the West who employ found objects are at least in step with the aim of moving beyond the stage when art resides outside the main avenues of everyday life. Thus, for better or worse, it would appear that the disjuncture between fine art and everyday life in Western culture mandated by the Kantian aesthetic of disinterestedness has given way. That is, the assumed division between actions and artefacts of everyday life in the world and art is slowly moving toward collapse. At the same time the spirit of invention and openness to new forms of art that has dominated art in the West is also contributing to changes in the art of China.