

An Excerpt from Recent Academic Paper: “The 2014 Armory Focus: China”

Introduction

The 2014 Armory Show features China for the Armory Focus unit. It brings in Chinese contemporary art represented by 16 commercial galleries and 3 non-profit organizations.

Carrying the legend of the historical 1913 Armory Show, the new Armory show, in its 16 years of operation, has become one of the most influential international art fairs. The Armory Focus is a special unit that emphasizes one region in the fair each year. Since 2009, the Focus has chosen Berlin, Latin America, Nordic countries, and America. The Focus' selection of China makes a strong statement on the importance of Chinese contemporary art in the international art scene. The event attracted global attention from the general public, the media, the art market, as well as museum professionals and scholars which makes it a great opportunity for me to observe and analyze the various perspectives of Chinese contemporary art's participation in the international art community.

My research indicates that the 2014 Armory Focus shows a new stage of Chinese contemporary art's international participation in which the Chinese art community holds a much more open, confident and autonomous attitude. Yet, the international

audiences are still at the stage of showing curiosity and financial interests to this emerging force instead of having an in-depth understanding of its context and meaning. My paper will analyze 6 elements to support this argument: the historical issues, the works, the curator, the artists and galleries, the media and critics, and the audiences.

The History of Chinese Contemporary Art's International Participation and Controversial Issues

Chinese contemporary art is usually considered to start around the late 1970's after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the announcement of the Open Door Policy in 1978.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, also known simply as the Cultural Revolution, forbade all the regular cultural activities in China including the standard forms of education. In the ten year period, from 1966 to 1976, artists were not allowed to practice art, art schools were shut down, some artists were forced to work on farms during the Down to the Countryside Movement and some even suffered physical punishments. Mao's death marked the end of the revolution and the cultural dictatorship. Artists regained their freedom.

Chinese artists at this time were seeking artistic means to express their anger, their demand for change and their views for the future. They adopted the name and the “framework”¹ of contemporary art as originated in a western world. Not only because “contemporary” is the internationally dominant term used to categorize art created at the present time, but the avant-garde and cynical characteristics of contemporary art matched Chinese artists’ attitude towards this critical moment of Chinese history.

The early movements like the Stars Group or the later more internationally recognized movements like Cynical Realism and Political Pop all use parts of the western contemporary art language to address issues in Chinese society.

The reform after the Cultural Revolution was led by Deng Xiaoping who in his leadership from 1978 to 1992 transformed China from socialist planned economy to socialist market economy. Deng’s Open Door Policy opened up China’s domestic market for foreign investment and at the same time allowed China to participate in international political, economic and cultural events.

In the early 1990s, the western art world started to discover contemporary Chinese art, and brought some of the works to exhibit overseas. Some of the most important events include the world tour of *China’s New Art*, the 1999 Venice Biennale’s invitation of twenty artists to present their works, and solo exhibitions of Cai Guoqiang

¹ Ning Lu, “How Chinese Art Became Contemporary,” *artnet*, March 11, 2014, <http://www.artnet.com/insights/art-market-trends/how-chinese-art-became-contemporary.asp#.U2bhFneRLTq>

held in both America and Europe in 1997². From then on, more and more international art fairs included Chinese artists and galleries in their shows.

Given the five thousand years of China's history, which is longer than most western countries, Chinese culture and art were used to growing independently, so the idea of western influences, international participation or being criticized by westerners is a big deal³. The Chinese art community has been struggling with identifying authority and authenticity.

The Chinese art community, at first, was excited about exhibiting overseas, but after a while, it started to complain that the selection of the work was highly controlled by western curators using their privileged western standard and their stereotype of Asian art. The Chinese contemporary art community was concerned about losing its authorship over to westerners in deciding what to present to the world as Chinese contemporary art.

Although it has been attracting international attention, not until the past five years, the Chinese contemporary art market experiences a dramatic growth in both its domestic market and overseas market. Auction prices have skyrocketed. The list of Chinese contemporary exhibitions opening in overseas galleries and museums has

² Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese art Primary Document*, (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 356

³ Ning Lu, "How Chinese Art Became Contemporary," *artnet*, March 11, 2014, <http://www.artnet.com/insights/art-market-trends/how-chinese-art-became-contemporary.asp#.U2bhFneRLTq>

become so long that only a few major ones will attract broad attentions. The most recent examples are: China as guest of honor for the 2014 Art Paris, “Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China” exhibited in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and “Ai Weiwei: According to What?” in Brooklyn Museum.

In the cluster of Chinese exhibitions, the Armory Show appointed Philip Tirani, an American curator who has worked and lived in China for more than ten years, to curate the 2014 Armory Focus: China. Tirani decided that “it’s time to showcase a new generation,”⁴ and he intended to select works showing the latest innovations and trends in the real-time Chinese art scene, instead of the typical works museums or biennales have often shown⁵.

Some might question whether this is only a rare occurrence that an international art fair is willing to show something different, rather than a promising trend suggesting the departure from the typical style of contemporary Chinese art shown. However, I believe the international art market and public attention will shift to the “new generation”⁶ because, first of all, the Armory Show is a commercial art fair that would

⁴ Stefanie Rubin, “an Identity Crisis: the Post-1949 Influence of International Art on Chinese Art and Society”, 2008 Edition, Emory University, <http://history.emory.edu/home/assets/documents/endeavors/volume2/StefanieRubin.pdf>

⁵ Philip Tirani, interviewed by Andrew M. “Goldstein Ullens Center Director Philip Tinari on China's Evolving Art Scene” March 2, 2014, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/phil_tinari_interview?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Master&utm_campaign=March_3_2014_Global_Spotlight_China

not risk showing something that does not have a strong potential to be popular in the market; secondly, the Chinese contemporary art community is confident and eager to show a variety of works that represents its current achievement; and thirdly, international audiences are curious to see what is happening in today's China through its art.

⁶ Philip Tirani, interviewed by Andrew M. "Goldstein Ullens Center Director Philip Tinari on China's Evolving Art Scene" March 2, 2014, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/phil_tinari_interview?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Master&utm_campaign=March_3_2014_Global_Spotlight_China