

## About Gu Dexin —Interview with Weng Ling

Date: Afternoon, Feb.24th, 2009

Place: Beijing Center for the Arts at Legation Quarter

1. When did you start to seriously track Xiao Gu's art practice?

WL: My earliest encounter with his artworks was in the 1989 "Chinese Modern Art Exhibition". At that time, his works were already quite mature. In the following decades, he has been involved with several significant Chinese contemporary art exhibitions nationally and internationally. From 1996 to 2000, my off-and-on cooperation with conceptual artists was based only on my interest in art creation, which was sort of blind, as I didn't truly understand conceptual art and artists, like Gu. This was confined by the isolation of conceptual art during the 80's, even the 90's from the public. In those days, I treated him more as a friend than an artist, which led me to get deeper into his normal life and personal charms. It was not until the year 2000 that I was able to grasp the meaning and significance of his artworks.

We launched our first collaboration in the opening exhibition "Beyond Boundaries" at the Shanghai Gallery of Art at the Three on the Bund in 2004. In May of the same year, SGA hosted the "Dialogues... Group Exhibition with Gu Dexin, Wang Gongxin and Zhang Peili". Since then Gu has presented two solo shows with us, the "Gu Dexin 2005.03.05" and "April 14th, 2007". At the end of 2007, when preparing for the Beijing Center for the Arts at Legation Quarter, we were invited by the Miami Basel to curate a special exhibition about Chinese contemporary art, and I selected Gu's work to be part of it. You can see that Gu is the artist who I have most closely collaborated with in recent years.

2. How do you see his art creation in recent years?

WL: Gu's works have truly conveyed the essential power of contemporary art. He dares to confront social reality in a direct, simple, and clear manner to unveil the substantial problems inside human beings and our society. After years of cooperation, especially 2005 and 2007, I am still impressed by his unparalleled capability of spatial arrangement and control.

3. Would you like to talk more about your cooperation with Gu over the last several years?

WL: "Beyond Boundaries" 2004 marked the key direction of my later artistic direction; firstly, in exploring how to cross the restrictions of conventional artistic materials and conception, secondly, in delving into how to establish an interdisciplinary platform between art and other social sectors. As we deal with these issues, we are demanded to do whatever possible to unveil in a comprehensive way the real situation facing contemporary art creation and to fully expose the academic diversities represented by artists concerning different forms and themes of art. Participating artists were encouraged to open their mind and display creativity: Zhang Xiaogang tracked our past experiences, Zhou Chunya and Liu Wei explored the contemporary expressions of Chinese tradition, and Xu Bing researched on issues of cultural collision and interaction... and among them stood one who was considered a model for artists directly facing the social reality. That was, no doubt, Gu Dexin.

Our second collaboration took place in "Dialogues". Gu playfully presented a combination of 10,000

ceramic toy vehicles—military vehicles, tanks, fire engines, ambulances and police cars—to question our attitude toward impulses of desire and power.

4. His works were closely connected with the space?

WL: Yes. In 2005, we invited him to hold a solo show. As I believe, Gu initially intended to adopt some of the elements which were later presented in his 2007 solo, but held back, considering the possible difficulties and problematic reactions we may have encountered. However, I've never changed my support of whatever decisions he made. After a full-scale measuring of the SGA space, he created a single project that included a series of different artworks comprised of various elements such as frozen pig brains, apples, bananas, cartoons, a plinth, a red frame, 'kneaded meat', and a flag pole that appeared for the first time in his works. Viewers of these site-specific installations encountered, and were confronted with, the certain spectacle of this scene. Everyone got 'busy' to unconsciously integrate the artwork: running kids were everywhere playing with the apples, some people ate bananas, and some even climbed up the flagpole... Not long after the opening, apples and bananas began to decay, rotting with a disgusting smell, which unexpectedly seeped into the exclusive restaurants in Three on the Bund.

5. Do you think the idea of 'misunderstanding' is also a sort of communication?

WL: The year before last, Gu displayed an outdoor installation at the entrance of the "Shanghai Art Fair". When ten tons of apples smashed by a bulldozer moved over the space, spectators were irritated. This is Gu, sticking to his own choices and never compromising. From an artist's viewpoint, he has seriously shown us the problems inside human society and the process of socialization.

To use contemporary art as a way of exploring and reflecting society is still not generally accepted by the public today. However, this is the reality that we have to face and this is a process that we must go through.

6. Are you satisfied with the 2005 exhibition?

WL: It was a great show that was neatly integrated into and enriched by his artistic practice applied previously in exhibitions at home and abroad.

7. So how about the 2007 solo show?

WL: Gu's selection of materials in "April 14th, 2007" was distinct from those of his previous works: old-fashioned sidewalk tiles which ran away from the door of the gallery at a 25-degree angle, 27 manhole covers which were made of cast iron or cement implying the feeling of walking outside on a sidewalk, 60,000 milky-white, life-size, imitation maggots that were immersed in a blood-red, viscous silica gel, and a black mass of 100,000 imitation houseflies floating on top of a lake-blue-colored water surface...

I still remembered how Xu Jiang commented on the show after lingering around the space for over half an hour to carefully appreciate it, "This is the best show I've ever seen in Shanghai in recent years. Please send my regards and respect to Gu Dexin". Xu Jiang was the president of CAFA at the time.

For me, this was a perfect show; a show that made you feel so great that you couldn't hope for more. By

fully-applying his artistic language in a concise and dignified manner, Gu delved right into the urgent issues of social reality. I was deeply moved by his artistic expression.

Since then, whenever I'm suffering with grief, I'll remember this artwork. What Gu displayed was something that we are not supposed to normally conceive.

8. Another two years has passed, what do you expect from Gu's fresh new works of 2009?

WL: I think the 2009 project will focus on the core of Chinese culture and power, and as with all of his works, it will keep on interacting with the space.

When the Legation Quarter was still under construction, I invited Gu to visit the 'unborn' BCA. It is not at all an exaggeration to define BCA as an alien space: with its historical and cultural significances as the former US Legation Quarter during the Qing dynasty now preserved by the Beijing municipal government, its interior has been largely reconstructed—we reformed the four-floor building into two floors, opening up an atrium to visually extend the space; the orderly structured columns and beams have enabled deliberate changes in spatial arrangement to meet with specific curatorial demands. Although Gu suggested we keep the space in its original rough image, we've since decided to cover the columns with plaster and paint the walls white.

9. Has he already planned to create an artwork for the space?

WL: I have no idea. He is an especially spatially sensitive person whose projects fit not only into a space, but also concentrate on its particular cultural significance. He is dedicated to explore the essence of life, human nature, power, and ideology through artistic creation and it is believed that the 2009 project at Tiananmen Square—the symbol of the center of culture and power, will be his most powerful and comprehensive art presentation.

10. Are you confident in the show?

WL: There is normally a lot of work to do before cooperating with an artist: researching his/her works, visiting studios, discussing relevant issues, and so on. A final decision to join hands together should be based upon apt understanding of the artwork and effective communications with the artist. Once the artist has put forth his/her proposal for the exhibition, I'll do my best to assist and collaborate to see its fruition. I have 100% faith in Gu, because his artworks will always inspire popular confidence and meet with the greatest expectations of art.

11. What kind of man is he?

WL: He is a man who is able to assume whatever role necessary in life. Not interested in fame and wealth, he considers himself a common person in daily life rather than an artist. Despite or perhaps because of this, he receives great respect and prestige in the art scene. A New York couple, who are collectors and friends of mine regard him as "one of the best artists in the present world".

12. After your many years of cooperation, what do you think is the career juncture for Gu and yourself?

WL: He is an artist, while I am the one who serves and supports the artist. For me, it is a wonderful

opportunity to give a hand to an artist who I respect as much as Gu. His willingness to work together evokes the strongest confidence and advocacy in me.

I've met, even cooperated with hundreds of artists in my years of curatorial work. However, Gu is for me a forerunner who has had great insight as to be able to grasp the essence of art earlier than most of us, in terms of artistic expression and the artistic systems of east and west. He makes me feel more confident in art.

It is my earnest belief that contemporary art is a way of thinking and an attitude that directly points to the social reality and Gu represents the most typical, profound and influential artist in the whole circle. Many artists have very strong social and cultural relevance, but seem rather obtruse in comparison with Gu who strips off the veiled truths to expose them under the most frank but fierce criticism.

Striving on a course chosen by myself, I am all the time in pursuit of idealism. The last several decades have witnessed contemporary art emerging from its suffering winter to a prosperous spring. In a circle interwoven with arrogance, the positive spirit of openness and the energetic impulse for advancement are forever struggling in a chaotic swamp of viciousness, excitement, fame and wealth... This is an absolute purgatory that few people could survive and keep himself/herself clear of corruption. Being cool and rational when viewing the Vanity Fair, Gu never surrenders to give up his life-long choices, criteria, and stance. He is a man with true love who is in his element anywhere. Several years ago, I was addicted to speculating about the meaning of my career. It was Gu who relieved me from this.

13. Gu once said, "Artists may not exist in the future contemporary art scene, what will remain are artworks only." What do think about this?

WL: I always believe that the everlasting attraction and value of art lies in the balancing between the personal charm of an artist and the power of his/ her works. Gu Dexin is one of a few artists who is both highly dignified and excellent in art creation. It is Gu who makes me believe in artists, to be devout about the power of art, and to faithfully bear in mind the significance of our careers.