

## Where We Are — The Responsibilities of Exhibitions

By Xi Chuan

Behind the formulation of a certain exhibition order, there must be the support and involvement of a complete system of evaluation, a system of honor, a market mechanism, a mechanism for hearing public opinion and a power policy — even if these systems and policies are imperfect or even disgusting. And these various kinds of systems and policies must inevitably reflect the values of the era and their historical origin and current situation. If we have to express our opinions on all kinds of innumerable but unremarkable, varied but almost machine—manufactured exhibitions and shows, we are actually discussing the values of our era. This is no small thing and it is very difficult for us to discuss them, but it seems that we have to give them at least some consideration because we are constantly receiving countless notifications of art shows on our cell phones and in our mail boxes and email inboxes. If you were to view all the art exhibitions in Beijing, without leaving any of them out, it would be like running a marathon.

Chinese modern visual artists have had extraordinary success on the international art market. Today in China, the profit margin of profit in the art profession is so vast that it is said it is next only to the real estate industry. The word “flourishing”, an old term for socialism, seems to describe the situation well. The situation has aroused jealousy and doubt in other parts of the world. But it has also brought delusion, self—confidence and sense of status to the artists who have already “succeeded”; it has driven artists following in their wake to take the plunge into a breathless struggle to adjust and keep pace with aesthetics and money in this era for the sake of “effectiveness”; and it has driven the gallery industry to adopt a gambling attitude and to succumb to art fashion. But is this “flourishing” situation commensurable with the expectations of our era for creativity and the expressive force of art? To what extent has the Chinese visual culture become involved in promotion of the culture as a whole in our era? What is its relationship with urbanization and urban consumption culture? What is its relationship with the society of agriculture not far away from us and the moral status, aesthetic mode and small farmers’ utopia in such society? And what is its relationship with the way the entertainment media produces celebrities?

Before we find answers to these questions, let us look back on the “success” of Chinese modern artists. I have no intention of questioning their success, but rather, I hope to find a way to further justify their “success”. So I have another question: have the market and the money overshadowed the deeper—level achievements of Chinese modern art or not? That is, if such deeper—level achievements do exist.

Success on the market does not represent the fundamental grace of an artist. The more successful the artist, the more necessary it is for them to establish a deep relationship of dialogue with existing artistic achievements, other artists, life in the past, the current era and “me” in this era, difficult current issues and so on. If, rather than just one or two artists, the entire community of artists could convey their relationship of dialogue with the above issues, the value and achievements of Chinese modern art could certainly be discussed at a higher level. However, the exhibition paradox or irony that the artists meet with is the coexistence of revealing and hiding. If to reveal is “to give”, to hide is “not to give”. The worse an exhibition is, the more it is hidden; and this may very possibly be come as a surprise to artists and curators. Many meanings and connotations in Chinese modern art are being consciously or unconsciously dimmed by the market, capital and the popular gallery system and by methods of curating. However, no attempt to prevent such dimming of meaning has yet been seen.

Has the ambition inspired in artists by the scarce, shackled, spirit-depressed and backward system of art education been replaced so easily by capital (whether it is socialist or capitalist capital)? Have the artists themselves admitted being incapable in the face of social change? Our living circumstances and cultural patterns are shaking off all the old definitions, even our desire has turned into super desire and our consumption has become sign consumption; but at the same time, the China of former times, the Republic of China and the China of the Qing and Ming Dynasties, doesn't seem too far away from us. What a strange reality! From ideology-based realism to super-realistic realism and from absurd realism to surrealism, we have everything we expect to find. How strange and interesting! Where are we? Where have we been? Where are we going? The profundity of the changes in Chinese contemporary life cannot possibly be expressed fully through a few transformed images of Chairman Mao, a few women nudes and a few dramatic imitations of the ancient Chinese classical paintings. Such profound change cannot be at all inferior to the two great bottom-up adjustments of social relations and structure in China in the 20th century (one being the collapse of the Manchu Government in 1911 and the other being the Communist Party taking over the regime in 1949). The complexity of the current transformation, full of oxymorons, has meant everyone, including the artists, is involved. In the early 1990s, British writer Doris Lessing said: In Europe, the styling changes of art had ended in the late 1980s because we began to be faced with true problems. Similarly, the Chinese people are also faced with true problems.

The true problems are, of course, only displayed to the people with aspirations. The artists are just such people. As far as the art world is concerned, the true problems are an urgent need for creativity and awareness of issues, as well as artistic means thereof. For the galleries, if they don't regard

commercial gain as their first priority, they need to effectively exhibit such problems with awareness and creativity. If we say the artists cherish ambition, the ambitions of the exhibition institutions can never be dispensable; even if the artists cover up or forget their ambitions, the exhibition institutions should sort them out. But as far as the current situation in exhibition circles is concerned, it seems that an exhibition order that fits with the Chinese reality and is full of a sense of depth hasn't been established yet. This is also the main reason for launching an exhibition such as 'Where Are We?' The questions that such an exhibition has to face and answer include: How does art respond to the times? How does art narrate civilization? Where are the possibilities of art creation and the justification of art production? Is the mainstream voice of life the same as that of art? Where does the problem lie when art events become fashion and recreation news? Does there exist something that is related but also superior to exhibitions?

We must question closely what responsibilities exhibitions have, because the type of responsibility an exhibition has will prescribe the form of exhibition. This is not a question of being professional or unprofessional, nor is it even a question of having or not having taste. This is a question of art and exhibition ethics; it is a question of values and whether the values have been locked away. Furthermore, this is also a question of cultural vision as well as cultural depth and height. Perhaps all the current forms of exhibitions are needed, but we are still awaiting a more comprehensive form of exhibition — one which breaks through the key elements, relaxes the muscles and stimulates circulation so that it can incorporate the spiritual and scientific achievements of this era, create challenges for the culture, and dig ditches for human spirit.

I am lucky to have viewed some good exhibitions at home and abroad. Two exhibitions I saw in Berlin were unforgettable: In 2000, an exhibition named 7 Hills was held by Martin Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin and its main planners were Bodo-Micheal Baumunk and Gereon Sievernich. The "7 hills" are the seven aspects of our world. The exhibition is in seven parts like seven chapters of a book: nuclear, jungle, universe, civilization, confidence, knowledge and dreams. Each aspect was masterminded by different experts. At this exhibition, I saw a mechanical calculator made of sheet copper. Its inventor was Pascal, the French philosopher and author of Thoughts. Man's long yearning for invention and discovery is reflected in this small machine. 7 Hills isn't an exhibition of visual art, but the exhibits first satisfy the visual senses and then the thought. We can feel the values and even the view of universe contained in this exhibition.

The other exhibition was Melancholie, which I visited in Berlin in 2006. The curator was Jean

Clair, the head of the Picasso Museum of Paris. It is said that Mr. Clair spent five years preparing for the exhibition. The exhibition was first held in the Grand Palais in Paris and then moved to the New National Gallery in Berlin. Through elaborate masterminding, the exhibition consisted in nine parts: origin of melancholy, between paradise and hell, images of melancholy, son of the God of Farming, melancholy terminated in thought, from the rational to the perceptual, genius and insanity, melancholy of modernism, and melancholy of the left wing. The last two parts enlightened my understanding of the close relationships between 20th-century Western modernism, left wing culture, the Russian revolution and melancholy. (Usually we understand 20th-century crankery and radicalness from the angle of carnival). At the end of the exhibition, I saw a sketch drawn by Antonin Artaud, the French exponent of cruel theatre, while in the asylum. Beginning with Aristotle's expounding of melancholy and ending with Artaud, the exhibition is deeply moving. What it explores is the secret at the very core of our inner being; the secret is that dim drive for creativity.

I am not sure whether art as a practice could be called writing or not, but I am sure that exhibitions are a form of writing. To compile a book is not simply to put together materials, to place sheets of paper on a desk and bind them together. A book must open to its readers and so must also be an exhibition of sorts. In the process, there must be an effort to present and probe problems. Exhibitions not only convey the artists themselves, but also sort out the big or small world and sort out, or perhaps criticize the desires and nightmares of our times. These can be considered the responsibilities of exhibitions.