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JEROME SILBERGELD
INTRODUCTION

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In China, the word used to describe "contemporary" art is *dangdai*. But while *dangdai* means contemporary, it is not used for all art that is current or contemporaneous but rather refers only to a certain variety of contemporary art that has become popular internationally within the past decade. As an avant-garde, dissident, or experimental art, this *dangdai* art has challenged the status quo, and has also done so in the international marketplace, where money is the measure of achievement. Yet, in China's leading art academies, only about 20 percent of the faculty are teaching this kind of art. In China, most people don't recognize *dangdai* art as Chinese; in America, *dangdai* is now the *only* contemporary Chinese art most people have even seen. Brush-and-ink painting, although still essential in China, is scarcely to be seen in today's international marketplace, although of course it could stage a comeback.

The market for "contemporary" Chinese art has been shaped primarily by international taste in places and by audiences that are hardly aware of the other 80 percent of Chinese art education and production. In America, this shaping of taste might never have happened if not for Chinese artists and scholars living and working not in China but in our very own midst, holding green cards or full citizenship, working in their uptown studios, holding their exhibitions downtown, so that their art—whatever it may look like or however it is labeled—is also American art. In China, in cultural terms, the *dangdai* or "contemporary" artists have become influential beyond their limited numbers, former outsiders now insiders. In America, *all* of these artists, both "contemporary" and traditional, are a minority, and as an Asian minority this is sometimes not recognized as American at all; but here they are, and in a different way, ethnically, they too are former outsiders now inside. Our exhibition is structured around the intersection of these two outside/inside situations, stylistic and ethnic, and the way they have come together to make outside and inside more of a question of perceptions (or

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misperceptions) than a viable reality in today's mixed artistic economy. We exhibit *dangdai* art and a whole lot more.

What we see in a work of art is often a matter of what we bring to it. In the preface to the exhibition's catalogue, I quoted Mark Rothko, who wrote, "If people want sacred experiences, they will find them here. If they want profane experiences, they'll find those too. I take no sides." Our intent in this exhibition was to take no sides, to get beyond labels, to rise above partisanship and to demonstrate to our audience that there is more going on in the Chinese art world, more variety than most of us have been given the opportunity to see. Through a small but highly diversified selection of artists, we favor no one and no group; we favor only diversity itself. And aesthetic quality.

Many of us, I am sure, watched intently six weeks before this symposium when a new president was inaugurated on a day that was, as much as anything else, a celebration of diversity (FIG. 1). The most memorable words of the day, for me, were given at the conclusion of the ceremonies, in the benediction by the then-eighty-seven-year-old civil rights worker, the Reverend Joseph Lowery, a leader in the 1950s Montgomery bus boycott who brought up the issue of diversity in this fashion: "Lord," he prayed in a distinctive rhetorical voice, "in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get in back, when brown can stick around … when yellow will be mellow … when the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace what is right." That said in just a few words much of what *needs* to be said about the touchy subject of ethnic diversity and social justice in America. This exhibition, *Outside In: Chinese × American × Contemporary Art* (FIG. 2), and symposium, "ARTiculations" (FIG. 3), were also about diversity, like our national Red × White × Blue, about avoiding the narrow segregation that our art and artists

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FIG. 1 Obama campaign "Hope" poster.

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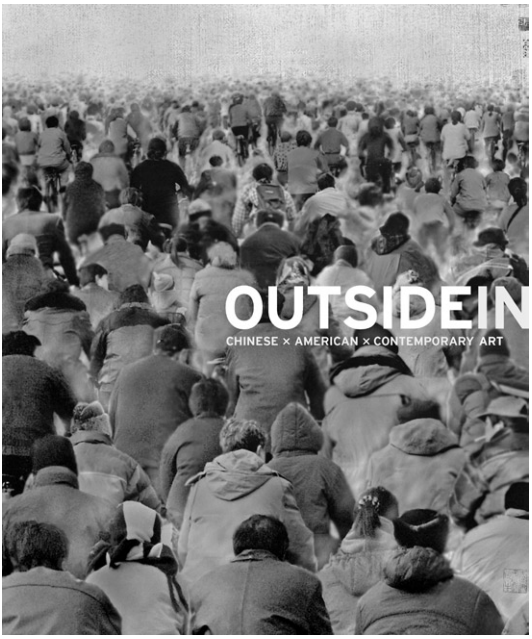

FIG. 2 Front cover of **Outside In: Chinese × American × Contemporary Art** (2009).

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FIG. 3 "ARTiculations" symposium flyer.

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are subjected to, about expanding acceptability and establishing respect, and I wish I could sum this up as well as Mr. Lowery managed to do. My back-up title for the *Outside In* exhibition was *Diversity*. But diversity, after all, is no simple matter. It has many moving parts. Included among these, for us, are questions of geography and ethnicity, style and media, nativism and hybridity, timeliness and belatedness, and above all, the interaction of all these. But I have tried a simple summation, invoked my own little prayer for this event, with a conspicuous debt to the Reverend Lowery:

> Authors, critics, and curators: in honor of all kinds of artists who from their labors get no easy rest, and in the midst of the very latest "new wave" of avant-gardism, we ask you to help us work for that day when painting with Chinese brush and ink need not sink … when the art of canvas and oil is not spoiled … when avant-garde won't be barred but traditional isn't dismissed outright, unconditional … when "contemporary" doesn't mean exclusionary … and when Chinese American isn't just contrarian. Amen.

In this same spirit, we may well recall the words of Thomas Jefferson at his first inauguration, in 1801: "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." Barack Obama must have remembered that famous line in composing the idealistic speech which first put him on the political map, back in 2004 when he spoke to his party's convention of there being no red states and no blue states, just the United States. It was in that spirit that this exhibition was designed, and it was in phrasing borrowed from Obama's own rousing address that I exclaim at this symposium:

> Now, even as *I* speak, there are those who would *divide* art—those artists, those historians, those negative critics who

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> embrace the belief "not every kind of art today is today's art." They have told us, "Not all art made in America is American." Well, I say to them right now, there is not a cool, hip art that is "contemporary" and a traditional art that is still practiced today but not really "contemporary" (FIGS. 4, 5), there are only contemporary *arts*. *All* of those arts practiced here and now are contemporary (FIGS. 6, 7). There are not two unrelated genres, an art deeply rooted in Chinese traditions and therefore "Chinese," and an art practiced in China but not *really* Chinese because it is too Western, too political, too derivative, and just a passing fad; there *is* a wide spectrum of practice, *all* of it legitimate, and *all* of it closely related, among artists who know each other, and have from the time of their art school training onward, and, whatever their differences, who continue to learn from each other (FIGS. 8, 9). There is not just Chinese art in China and American art in America, there is Chinese *and* American art, not one or the other but both, both Asian and Western, or as we put it in our exhibition title with a multiplier effect, Chinese *times* American art, something *more* than both. Like our black *and* white president, Kenyan and Kansan, educated in Jakarta and Honolulu, Los Angeles and New York City, in the halls of Harvard and the streets of Chicago—so too in art there is an endless number of blends and permutations. In the end, each artist and each work of art is polygenic and distinct. *E pluribus plures: Out of many, many.*

Now, of course, neither of my purloined statements can adequately sum up the complexity of this topic. So I hope readers of this volume will also read the essays in the exhibition catalogue, which comes closer to doing this, and there they will also find reproductions and discussions of all of the artworks displayed in the exhibition and see what they have to say about diversity and tolerance.

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FIG. 4 Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), **Quaker Oats Mao**, 1987.
Oil on cardboard cereal boxes, 2 boxes, each 24.0 × 13.0 cm.
Collection of the artist.

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FIG. 5 Arnold Chang (Zhang Hong, b. 1954), **Bridge to Heaven 2006.2**, 2006. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 142.0 × 74.0 cm. Promised gift of Arnold Chang and Jr-jye Chang to the Princeton University Art Museum in honor of Wen C. Fong, Class of 1951 and Graduate School Class of 1958, and Constance Tang Fong (L.2006.18).

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FIG. 6 Liu Dan (b. 1953), **Wangchuan Villa** (detail), 2000. Handscroll; ink on paper, 40.6 × 762.0 cm. Collection of Robert Rosenkranz and Alexandra Munroe.

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FIG. 7 Zhi Lin (b. 1959), **Rider No. 2, Study for "Drawing and Quartering,"** ca. 2000. Graphite on paper, 28.0 × 21.0 cm. Collection of Jerome Silbergeld, Michelle DeKlyen, and Family.

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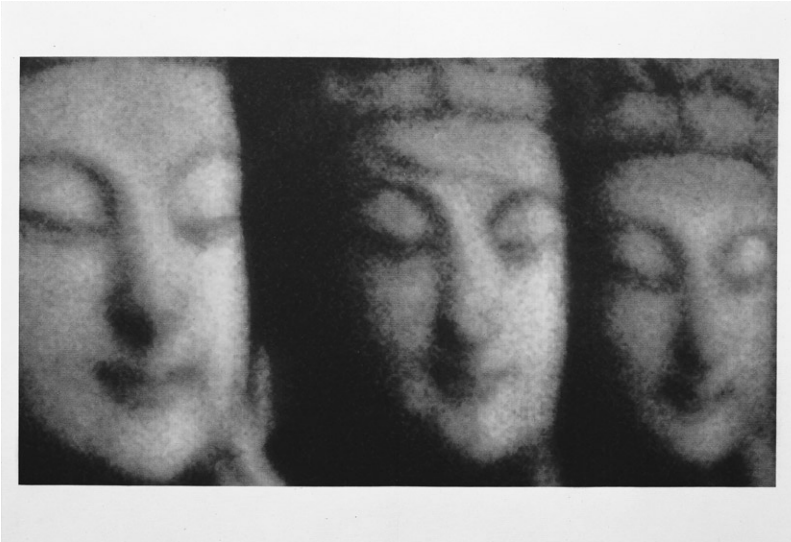

FIG. 8 Michael Cherney (Qiu Mai; b. 1969), Detail from **Untitled Album, H3 (Dazu)**, from the series **Bounded by Mountains**, 2004. Photographic album, 26.0 × 494.0 cm (fully open). Edition 2/9. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art (2008-55).

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FIG. 9 Vannessa Tran (b. 1975), Untitled, 2004. Oil on canvas, 26.7 × 15.2 cm. Collection of Jerome Silbergeld, Michelle DeKlyen, and Family.

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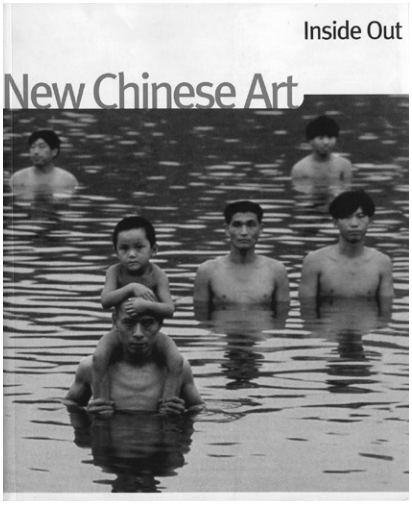

FIG. 10 Front cover **Inside Out: New Chinese Art** (1998).

FIG. 11 Gao Minglu, curator of the avant-garde exhibition **No U-Turn**, shows his protest letter to visitors before he reads it in front of a shuttered exhibition hall in Beijing, China, 5 February 2009. AP Photo/Andy Wong.

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There was one major change in our symposium program. Gao Minglu was scheduled to begin the afternoon session. This project was deeply indebted to him and to his exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, which opened in New York City in 1998 (FIG. 10). I referenced Gao Minglu's exhibition because of the tremendous momentum it gave to the contemporary Chinese art movement in America. But I turned *Inside Out* inside out, to produce *Outside In*, because of my long-standing disagreement with Gao Minglu about his privileging of *certain* contemporary arts, whereas *our* intent is to be more inclusive and more diverse. But rather than being at the "ARTiculations" symposium to represent his point of view, Gao Minglu was in Beijing, picking up the pieces from an exhibition of *dangdai* arts he had organized, an exhibition not *so* very different from ours in Princeton but which the Beijing police shut down the night before it was scheduled to open on 5 February (FIG. 11). We are reminded by this that the struggle for artistic freedom in China has not yet been won, that censorship there is still prevalent and acceptable to large sectors of the public. And we are reminded of why so many deeply committed Chinese artists came here in the first place. I am most grateful that when I turned to the only person I knew could substitute for Gao Minglu, Zheng Shengtian agreed on very short notice to do so. Gao Minglu sent his regrets for not being able to speak to us, and when I wrote him the good news that Zheng was able to take his place, he wrote back saying: "I think Zheng Shengtian is wonderful. Many people here in Beijing are talking about your symposium. Please send my warm wishes and regards to everyone." Gao Minglu did not tell us *what* they were saying about our symposium, but accompanied by his warm wishes and Zheng Shengtian's generosity, the following statements by six wonderful artists and seven scholars were presented to challenge and entertain us.