

Alice Schmatzberger

Wen Fang: The Path of Art—From Observing to Getting Involved

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Beijing-based artist Wen Fang has become especially famous for her works with bricks and the technique she developed to combine photography with bricks. One of her best-known works is the *The Golden Brick*, a series of six installations from 2008 focusing on various aspects of the social conditions of contemporary China. Topics covered include the fate of migrant workers, values in contemporary urban China, rapid changes in Beijing and their side effects, and inequalities within society. All can be viewed as personal comment. The works that make up another multi-part piece, *Birth-day Present* (2009), explore events that affected China in 2008, for example, the Olympic Games, the earthquake in Sichuan province, and the scandal of tainted milk, as well as questions about climate change, environmental pollution, and globalization. This critical approach can be found throughout her oeuvre, but in a very subtle way. And she always refers to the culture she is rooted in.

Wen Fang has stated, “In my years studying photography abroad, I was always making surrealist photographs because I felt that what the eye sees is not necessarily what is real. I think that the truth is something that must be seen with the heart. Upon returning home, I would often see old ladies scavenging rotting vegetables in order to survive, and hear the sound of firecrackers set off by a real estate developer to clear out the bad air from a worker who had fallen to his death. That’s when I stopped taking surrealist photographs. I came to believe that nothing is more surreal than reality.”¹

The work *To Keep on Living*, part of the above-mentioned series, *Birth-day Present*, can be understood as a bridge to her latest project. *To Keep on Living* consists of thirty small classroom desks, each with a photographic portrait of a child printed on it. Revenues from the sale of these desks are being donated to an association supporting orphans in northwest China. This artwork was made especially for the purpose of supporting this particular association.

In her most recent, very ambitious project, *Poverty Alleviation Through Art*, Wen Fang moves one step further with her art, relinquishing the perspective of an outsider who only observes and comments on situations and circumstances of daily life; instead, she gets directly involved with the life of people concerned.

Alice Schmatzberger: After graduating from the University of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1996, you worked as a Web site designer for six years. In 2002, you went to Paris for two years to study photography at the Ecole National

Supérieure Louis-Lumière. How did this interest in photography as a medium for art emerge?

Wen Fang: I started to learn about calligraphy when I was six years old. After I graduated, I decided to transfer my interest to photography as I had liked it from a very young age.

Alice Schmatzberger: Why photography? What do you see as the special quality of photography? What can you express with photography that you cannot with, for example, oil painting or other materials?

Wen Fang: When I was a Web site designer, I became connected with a lot of photographic material—all this network stuff, both Chinese and foreign. That work had a great impact upon me because I constantly was confronted with a lot of pictorial material. Much of it shocked me because of its spirit. Back then I didn't have many chances to know other materials, other mediums of art, like painting. So I was content with photography at that time.

Alice Schmatzberger: What you are doing is not in the conventional format of art photography. You are using photography in a highly individual way, working your photographs into sculptures, into installations. How did this very personal style develop?

Wen Fang: When I was in France studying photography, I didn't much like ordinary photo paper and all the conventional materials. I think as a pure photographer you print the photographs on paper, frame them, and hang them on the wall. This is very limiting of what a photo can be; it is more like a grave for the photograph. And because of these limits, I decided to combine my photography with something else, with people's daily life, with everyday objects and other images, and show that these objects can exist together in an artwork.

Alice Schmatzberger: With this integration of objects and materials from everyday life, like bricks, knives, protection masks, packaging material or whatever—do you want to express something on a social level or is it just artistic expression? Do they represent just materials for your artworks?

Wen Fang: At first I used bricks as a medium because for me a brick reflects the lives of the migrant workers of China; the life of a brick is not unlike the life of a migrant worker. The migrant worker comes to the big city and lives in a very poor residential area. A brick is made of cement, and cement is derived from stones then combined to make a very condensed material. It is like the migrant workers from the countryside; many come to the big city, and many live together crammed into small homes, in a bad environment, so, like the bricks, they have been put together in a very condensed living situation. Moreover, in Chinese society there is a spirit of community; I mean, Chinese people don't really admire freedom of the spirit. The government always tells you to contribute to something larger, like, for example, a brick contributes to the strength of a wall. So each individual is



a small part of something bigger. That is another interconnection between bricks and the migrant workers.

Alice Schmatzberger: Let's talk about some particular works, for example, *The Golden Brick*. This work consists of six different installations. Moreover, "golden brick" has a special meaning as far as I know.

Wen Fang: Yes, it comes from the imperial times. The bricks used for constructing the palaces and buildings of the emperor were made in a special way and of special material. It was said that the sound of such a brick should resemble that of gold. And the worker who produced a brick had to print his name and date on it. So if anything was wrong with it, one would know who actually modelled that particular brick.

Alice Schmatzberger: What was the overall concept of this work? Within it, there are, for example, various parts such as *Terracotta Figures of Civilian Workers*, *Mahjong*, and *The Six Realms of Existence in Beijing*. What is the idea of combining these different works under the heading of *The Golden Brick*?

Top: Wen Fang, *Terracotta Figures of Civilian Workers in the Republic of China*, from the series *The Golden Brick* (detail), 2008, installation of photographs printed on 300 cement bricks. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.

Bottom: Wen Fang, *Terracotta Figures of Civilian Workers in the Republic of China*, from the series *The Golden Brick*, 2008, installation of photographs printed on 300 cement bricks. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.



Wen Fang: I was using bricks to generate different series because I was considering all these social problems as an outsider; you know, I positioned myself at a critical distance in order to observe the many social issues around me. I thought that bricks not only reflect the problems of migrant workers, like in the *Terracotta Figures*, but also some other social problems like in *The Six Realms* which reflects the situation of poor people and their housing problems—people who come to Beijing and have no real

Wen Fang, *The Six Realms of Existence in Beijing*, from the series *The Golden Brick*, 2008, photographs printed on 70 cement bricks. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.

place to live, the homeless. So I photographed them directly in their daily life setting. *Mahjong* is more about discussing the relationship between individual people and dealing with the notions of wealth, food, and lust, whereas *The Six Realms* is concerned with general social problems. *The Stairs of Our Generation* is a stair made of bricks with pictures of people's feet. Each step looks the same, but there is still no equality among them. So this becomes another point in discussing the relationship between each person and society. I think using a brick is most realistic as a medium, it can be easily found anywhere, and it is a very ordinary material, like the ordinary situations and problems that society faces.

Alice Schmatzberger: So you draw your inspiration for your artworks from your personal experience, your feelings, and from what you observe on the streets?

Wen Fang: I am Buddhist, so I now want to use art to change something, and art was always with me when I was growing up. At the beginning I wasn't very interested in contemporary art because I thought contemporary artists were rather selfish and self-centred. I found that much of this art was not very mature, so I started trying to use art as a medium to reflect myself, my perspective on the world, and maybe to change something if I can. My inspiration just comes from my daily life, from what I see on the streets, and what touches me somehow.

Most of the time the concept comes first, then I have to think a lot about how to make a specific artwork, how to complete a piece. But now, with my most recent project, I plan to use many different kinds of materials to create an art piece, and in this case the concept comes afterwards.

Alice Schmatzberger: Is there already something you can tell us about your new project?

Wen Fang: I went to Ningxia province. The economy there is not very advanced; this region is poor and people are living under difficult conditions. Ningxia province was designated by the Food Programme of

Wen Fang, *Mahjong*, from the series *The Golden Brick* (detail), 2008, installation of photographs printed on 136 cement bricks. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.



Wen Fang, *Mahjong*, from the series *The Golden Brick*, 2008, installation of photographs printed on 136 cement bricks. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.



Wen Fang, *The Stairs of Our Generation*, from the series *The Golden Brick*, 2008, photographs printed on 200 cement bricks. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.





the United Nations as one of the most uninhabitable places of the world, and it is the third poorest rural region of China. It is a very dry land with unproductive agriculture; people there have to collect water from rain, and there is almost no local industry. There are many housewives who live alone in this

The artist and the women of Ningxia. Courtesy of the artist.

province because their husbands have gone to big cities or somewhere else to work, and the women, children, and elderly are left behind. The women are economically totally dependent on their husbands, and there are also many cases of abuse of these women by their husbands.

I went many times to help these Ningxia women. I am working together with them to create some artworks because there is a strong tradition in handiwork; especially in embroidery, they do very beautiful craftwork. So I am planning to use their talent to help them, to make some artwork together—I supported them in developing an artisanal collective called The Hundred Flowers—and thereby also help them to make some profit for themselves and be able to afford medical care, better food, or an education.



Village in Ningxia province, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

Alice Schmatzberger: So there is a continuing strong social aspect within this new art project?

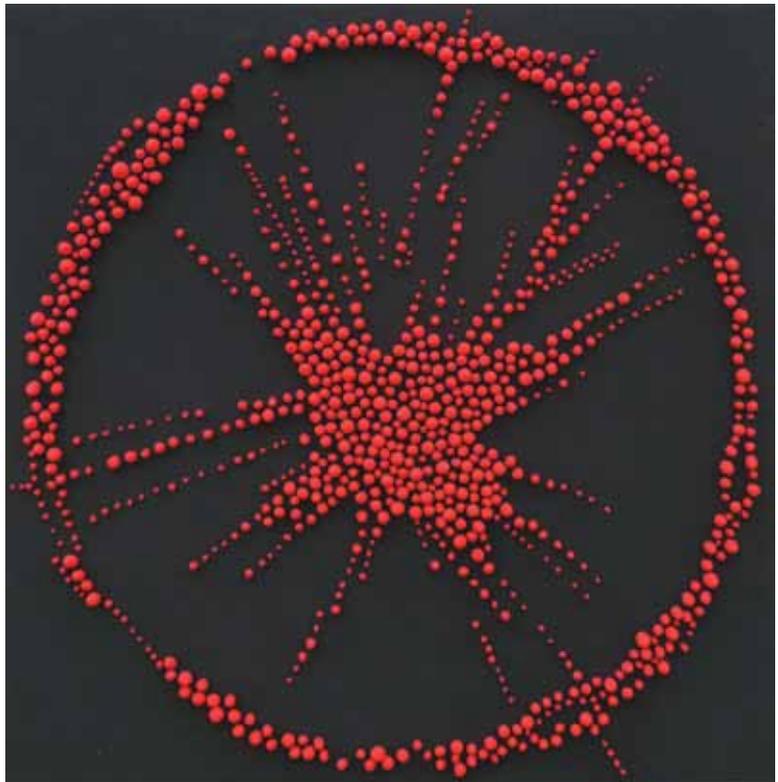
Wen Fang: The overall title is *Poverty Alleviation Through Art*. This is a huge project that will go on for quite some time, and within it I will be working on many sub-projects. It will take two to three years to work out the details of the project.

This project brings together the creativity of modern art and design with traditional handicraft from remote regions. Far from the needs of modern societies, I want to create with these local artisans a series of original products and artworks adapted for the high-end market. The project as a whole aims at maintaining traditions of embroidery, of working with fabric through new developments. We are also carrying out this long-term artistic project with the aim of alleviating poverty among local artisans. Besides the salary, the women get fifty percent of the profit from sales of the artworks, which will go towards a fund to support the medical welfare and training programmes for these local women.

The Hundred Flowers, *Mother and Baby Artemisia Santonica*, 2010, cotton. Courtesy of the artist.



The Hundred Flowers, *Pregnant*, 2010, cotton. Courtesy of the artist.



I am looking for a group of artists and designers who share the same ideal and who want to participate in this project. I also want to seek support from the government, and maybe from corporations. This project should turn into a true movement of artists who are involved in society and fighting against its problems. Artists committed to social progress are able not only to address problems indirectly through their artwork, but also to deal with them directly—they can contribute to the solution. Or, as the Chinese saying goes: Bring coal when it snows. I think this would improve the image of contemporary artists.

Alice Schmatzberger: Can you tell a little more about the intent of this art project against poverty?

Wen Fang: What is very important is the way I treat art. In the beginning, with my early works, I just wanted to question unfair societal conditions, just to criticize. But now, with my more recent works, like the schoolroom tables in *To Keep On Living* and my new ongoing project, I am trying to actually change something, not only to criticize or to point out problems, but to offer something, to offer help. For me, art is creation, to create something useful.

With *To Keep on Living*, for example, 20,000 euros have been donated to an association supporting orphans, offering them housing, clothing, and education. This is how art can really help. I will continue to work along this route.

Alice Schmatzberger: What are you planning to do next within this big project?

Wen Fang: I will go to Ningxia again in September 2010, and then again later for several weeks—in total up to two months before spring 2011—to prepare the next step of this project, which will be called *Paradise*. This second act of the overall project will be financed with, among other sources, proceeds from selling the pieces from *Textile Dreams*.²

For *Paradise*, I am working together with the women of an artisanal cooperative in Ningxia on very special embroidery pieces. These women from the countryside will create an installation that will be a kind of paradise for us. And an exhibition of these works will take place in Beijing, likely during 2011. The pieces in this voluminous installation will hang from the ceiling. They will create a sensational space, a utopian three-dimensional space between heaven and earth made of embroidery works. And these women will attend the opening of the exhibition. They will not be presented as “poor women”; they will be presented as artists.

That is what I think real art should be.

Notes

¹ Wen Fang, *Birthday Present*, exhibition catalogue (Beijing: Paris-Beijing Photo Gallery, 2009).

² A first exhibition of works from Wen Fang in collaboration with the women of Ningxia, *Textile Dreams*, took place between May and June 2010 at the Gallery Yishu 8 in Beijing. This was act one of the overall project, which is positioned between Chinese traditional handicraft and contemporary art. Fifty percent of the revenues from selling these artworks (twenty pieces in total) will go to the women and/or to developing new art projects.