

Alice Schmatzberger

On Chinese Art in Global Times:

A Conversation with Wang Chunchen

Wang Chunchen, Curator of the China Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2013. Photo: Hu Zhiheng. Courtesy of the China Pavilion.

Wang Chunchen, curator of the Chinese Pavilion at the Venice

Biennale 2013, studied English Literature at Hebei University and modern art history at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. He is now the head of the Department of Curatorial Research of CAFA Art Museum and deputy professor of modern art theory at CAFA. Currently, he is also adjunct curator at The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum of Michigan State University, responsible for a five-year exhibition series, *The History of the Mind in Contemporary Chinese Art*, which opens on October 4, 2013. He has published extensively on modern art history and its theories and has translated eleven books on these topics.



Alice Schmatzberger: To begin with, let us talk about the history of the Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale. When and how did the participation of China begin?

Wang Chunchen: China officially set up a national pavilion in 2003, but that year an epidemic disease (SARS) broke out in China. Therefore, the selected works were not exhibited in Venice but instead shown at the Guangdong Art Museum. Thus, the first China Pavilion in Venice was inaugurated in 2005 and was curated by Cai Guo-qiang with six participating artists—Yung Ho Chang, Liu Wei, Peng Yu and Sun Yuan, Wang Qiheng, and Xu Zhen.

Alice Schmatzberger: What were the reasons or the motivation behind the decision to establish a Chinese pavilion?

Wang Chunchen: From 1993 onward, the first year that Chinese artists were invited to participate at the Venice Biennale, artists, critics, curators, and other art professionals often asked why China did not have its own national pavilion. It was regarded as a very important opportunity to showcase contemporary Chinese art. But back then China's government didn't understand the significance of it. After 2000, following regular suggestions by art specialists as well as the influence of globalization on art, China's



Entrance to the China Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2013. Photo: Alice Schmatzberger. Courtesy of the China Pavilion.

government regarded the Venice Biennale as a good platform for exhibiting Chinese art, so, from then on, China joined in on many similar events as part of its efforts at internationalization.

Alice Schmatzberger: Who decides upon each respective curator?

Wang Chunchen: From the beginning until now, the Chinese pavilion has been organized by the China Art and Entertainment Group (CAEG), which is supported by the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture set up CAEG back in 1949, and it is responsible for organizing Chinese cultural activities and art exhibitions abroad. So when the government decided to join the Venice Biennale, CAEG received the responsibility to organize, select, and coordinate the operation of the Chinese pavilion. At the beginning, they appointed the curator, and then the curator selected and invited the artists. But starting this year, the selection of the curator followed a different approach: There was a public invitation to submit proposals, which then went through an evaluation and selection process by a special committee invited and organized by the Ministry of Culture.

Alice Schmatzberger: Could you please summarize your curatorial approach concerning the Venice Biennale? What is the curatorial concept underlying the title Transfiguration?¹

Wang Chunchen: When I developed my proposal for this year’s pavilion, I studied carefully the concept of The Encyclopedic Palace, which is the title of the main exhibition curated by Massimiliano Gioni at the Giardini and the Arsenale, as well as the concept of the “anthropology of images” advocated by Hans Belting, the German art historian. I understood from this about the inclusiveness of cultures in the world, from the traditional to the contemporary, and the expressions of the changing development within art—so I naturally thought about how to express changing China and its art. It occurred to me spontaneously that a term such as “transfiguration” was a good choice, since this term is used in art history to refer to the appearance of the images of Jesus Christ in front of his followers, and thus representing the metamorphosis of figures and images. Later, this term was used by Arthur C. Danto in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*² to denote the phenomena of the delineation of life to art and of non-art to art. I use it to show that China is, or has, transfigured during the past three decades, that art in China has been transfigured, and that even the process of transfiguration or changing is still on-going.

Alice Schmatzberger: Considering the term transfiguration, isn’t there a saying that goes something like: Someone who does not transfigure or change constantly cannot stay the same. You have to stay yourself but transfigure with time; you have to adapt to the changing circumstances so that you can stay true to yourself.

Wang Chunchen: This is a good explanation. This idea is similar to my own considerations. And I also refer to the way art has changed, the relationship of life to art has changed, our attitude to art has changed, so our life in China is constantly transfigured—economically, culturally, politically, with the Internet, Weibo, and so on.

Alice Schmatzberger: What criteria did you draw upon for the selection of the respective artists?

Wang Chunchen: In selecting these artists, I just want to express my idea that in China art is in fact in a state that consists of very diversified phenomena. For example, I chose very different media to symbolize this diversification. Another reason I chose digital videos and light box photography is the space of the Chinese pavilion itself. Initially, when I started to conceptualize this exhibition there were something like forty-two oil tanks placed inside, and now only one is left. It is a former warehouse located in the Arsenale—very dark, very dirty, and smelling very much of oil. That is why I wanted to use bright images to be projected on the dark walls, so when entering the pavilion the public can immediately become impressed. The middle section displays photography and also paintings highlighted with spotlights. And at the other end of that space you will find again an area with dynamic images, video, and digital art. I try to create an atmosphere of letting the public feel the rhythm of these images, but also to metaphorize the changing of art in China.



Left: Interior view of China Pavilion with works Tong Hongsheng. Left: *Kaimyo*, n.d., oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Centre left: *Karmapa*, n.d., oil on canvas, 40 x 60 cm. Right: *Incense Burner*, n. d., oil on canvas, 50 x 120 cm. Photo: Alice Schmatzberger. Courtesy of the artist and China Pavilion.

Right: Interior view of China Pavilion. Left: Wang Qingsong, *Temporary Ward*, 2008, light box print, 180 x 320 cm. Right: Miao Xiaochun, *Last Judgement in Cyberspace—The Front View*, 2005–06, C print, 418 x 360 cm. Photo: Alice Schmatzberger. Courtesy of the artists and China Pavilion.



Interior view of China Pavilion. Left: He Yunchang, *The Rock Tours Round Great Britain*, 2006–07, documentation of performance, 112 photographs, 35 x 45.5 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne/Beijing. Right: Wang Qingsong, *Follow You*, 2013, 180 x 300 cm, colour photograph. Photo: Alice Schmatzberger. Courtesy of the artists and China Pavilion.

Alice Schmatzberger: I imagine the selection was quite difficult or tricky. China as a country is bigger than the whole European Union, but the EU has almost thirty pavilions and China only one. So how can you choose from this vast diversity of artworks? How could you manage to restrict yourself?

Wang Chunchen: I have been asked these questions many, many times. As I said, my theme, Transfiguration, refers to the process of changing, and the process of changing means that anything can be possible. One thing can be transformed into something else. We perhaps have more contemporaneity, but, also, we can have more future—development is uncertain at the moment because there is no exact direction, there exists no one single way to evolve. Transfiguration means we can go here or we can go there: it reflects the real situation, the real phenomena of a diversified China. Following these reflections I then thought about what kind of artists I could look for. And of course I had to take into account the specific space of our pavilion. As I mentioned, I thought I would have had to cope with all these oil tanks that had been left in the pavilion, I considered it to be a headache, and I feared that I might not be able to show anything. Later, I heard that the oil tanks

were taken away, so I made some adjustments to my concept. I then came up very quickly with those seven artists for my proposal. At that time I knew them; I knew what they were doing at the moment. These works are kind of a symbolic representation. I wouldn't say they are just representative; I would say they are a symbol for any kind of contemporary Chinese art.

Alice Schmatzberger: The Venice Biennale is considered a site for showcasing contemporary art. Usually, what is considered “contemporary” are artworks that deal with today's economic, social, or political developments, which reflects upon social distortions or the consequences of globalization, artworks that cross boundaries of media, etc., and sometimes only *l'art pour l'art*. Under such presumptions, I would like to know your considerations for including oil paintings by Tong Hongsheng with Buddhist backgrounds by Tong Hongsheng and motifs and the wooden installation by Hu Yaolin consisting of elements taken from the slowly disappearing traditional Hui-style architecture and houses, respectively?

Wang Chunchen: I take these oil paintings as a proof of how this artist refers to a common phenomenon of daily life as a practice of his inner mind or as a kind of belief, if we don't use the term “religious.” China has changed a lot, especially economically, but, other than material changes and developments, we are more concerned with the state of belief. These works are just a method of asking such questions and not providing the answer. The wooden installation is another material testimony to China's dramatic social changes. As you know, many old houses have been demolished to make way for new buildings, highways, office towers, and development zones; thus the landscape of traditional towns and cities has changed totally, and many such Chinese-styled houses are gone. I use this model of a civilian house installation to ask the question of whether we feel pity or are merciless towards our heritage—if the thing itself is nothing—and how we can prove our own cultural identity with these newly erected buildings? Behind such a wooden installation, a mix of diverse feeling can be found among the audience, be it Chinese or international.

Alice Schmatzberger: Is it necessary from your point of view to take into account the international audience when choosing artworks?

Wang Chunchen: Not exactly. I know such works can be significant in their explanation of the situation with Chinese society and its cultural changes. I want to use these works to express the state of Chinese artistic changes, including the employment of new technologies or conceptual expressions. These works could help to elicit the interest of the international audience in the transformation of China, both culturally and socially.

Alice Schmatzberger: Chinese artists are represented at many sites and occasions in Venice. I did some research: besides the Chinese pavilion, Chinese artists can be found at four other pavilions and in the general exhibition The Encyclopaedic Palace. Furthermore, there are eight collateral events dealing solely with contemporary Chinese art, and there are two



further collateral events where Chinese artists are exhibited *inter alia*. Moreover, there are at least eight so-called “Not Just Biennial” events featuring Chinese art. What do you think about this phenomenon?

Zhang Xiaotao, *The Adventure of Liangliang No. 1*, 2013, animation, 7 mins., 23 secs. Courtesy of the artist and China Pavilion.



Wang Chunchen: In fact, in this first half year before the opening of the Venice Biennale, many Chinese art media, magazines, Web sites, or micro blogs discussed this phenomenon. Some comments were very harsh and critical—even cursing—and some were mild,

Miao Xiaochun, *Neocubism*, digital video, 2012. Photo: Alice Schmatzberger. Courtesy of the artist and China Pavilion.

some neutral. My point of view is that no matter what kind of exhibitions or events show these artworks, they are made in China and from China; they are all labelled Chinese art. But the key point is how such exhibitions are curated and displayed. So the themes and topics of such exhibitions and events become most important, and how artworks are chosen is important. This does not mean that every artwork from China can be labelled significant or meaningful. But this applies to other exhibitions as well; it is not only a matter of Chinese art in Venice. Another reason for the presence of so many Chinese artworks in Venice is perhaps that the organizers and artists take the Venice Biennale as an important venue to display their works, making the audience know them better.

The other side of this question is why in China we could not have or create such an international, influential art biennial or exhibition to attract a more international audience. From such a phenomenon we ought to reflect upon how open a cultural policy should be and how a tolerant attitude is important when organizing cultural platforms in a contemporary world.



Alice Schmatzberger: During the 1990s, and then at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were a lot of exhibitions with Chinese art in Europe, but all these exhibitions had a label—like Art from China, China Now, China Facing Reality—so all these artworks were somehow labelled “Chinese.”

Wang Chunchen: Ah, I want to get rid of that!

Alice Schmatzberger: But do you think that there is finally a point where artists from non-Western regions are being primarily perceived as contemporary artists and not as “Asian,” “African,” etc.?

Wang Chunchen: For the moment, these artists are still called Asian or African. Subconsciously, we want to know where they are from. But in recent years some critics and theorists propose a concept of “global art,” which may imply that the distinctions between different cultures are becoming indistinguishable. But in China, many artworks have implicit or more explicit Chinese characteristics, especially concerning their content and meaning. How Chinese art is made today has a kind of universal value artistically. How Chinese artists respond to their cultural metamorphosis at this special unique moment of history of China is a special challenge. So the role and function of art become critical and controversial, yet, it seems that there are no serious criteria now on how to judge art. But for an art historian or critic or theorist, these criteria ought to be seriously academic, responsible, and sensitive. I would say this is a global issue for artists to think about.

Alice Schmatzberger: Contemporary art is getting more and more global, so one point is that art from regions like China, India, or Korea is now becoming more and more known to people internationally. If one takes a



closer look at the predominant structures of the art market or big exhibitions, still, most of the international curators appear to be Westerners. This seems to be relevant when thinking about the “curatoriat,” a term coined

Outdoor view of China Pavilion. Left: He Yunchang, *The Seawater of Venice*, 2013, 2,013 glass bottles, table, water. Centre: Hu Yaolin, *Thing-in-Itself*, installation, wood, 2013. Right: Shu Yong, *Guge Brick*, 1500 resin and rice paper bricks, 39 x 15 x 9 cm each. Photo: Alice Schmatzberger. Courtesy of the artists and China Pavilion.

by John Clark, describing the power of curators in selecting contemporary artworks and thus determining access and establishing international canons.

Do you think that an artist from China has to fulfill certain aesthetic criteria in order to take part in that game? Could globalization have an impact upon the aesthetics or the iconography of artworks, like a mainstreaming in art production?

Wang Chunchen: Actually that’s a good point, a good question. In China, we also discuss this, but until now we haven’t had agreement on whether there might be such consequences. Yes, globalization has already had such an impact when it comes to media and methods that artists use. Some people argue that this is a sort of postcolonialism, or they take it as the dominance of Western influence, so they don’t take it as a part of their own real typical cultural identity. Therefore, they suggest that artists should have their own tactics to fight against Western influences, that art should be taken as weaponry to fight against Western culture. These people also regard globalization as Westernization or Americanization. But I don’t hold such a view. Instead, I think that globalization is an inescapable tendency. The key issue is how we responsibly deal in a humanist way with our global issues, even if we live in different cultural areas or countries. The paradoxical knots here are that we have to choose something to rely on. When you stress universal values, you will be labelled as a Western postcolonialist. When you advocate for localized values, you will be coloured as a nationalist. In this field, art becomes more and more a controversial issue.



But globalization also means that people are moving around more and more, and the possibility to get to know each other is greater, so from communication, from talking, we can share different ideas, even conceptions—of

Wang Qingsong, *Follow You*, 2013, 180 x 300 cm, colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist and China Pavilion.

course we can understand why somebody is doing something in this or that way. And under such a horizon we cannot say that only one single art criterion is acceptable or possible; we have more choices now. This does not imply that everything is good. I just want to emphasize that some artists still are very significant, some not; some are rather trivial, some just for decoration, some just for commercial purposes. But if we know that an artist commits a lifetime of energy for his or her work, then we want to know: why does he or she do that, why are these images so special, why could that be art? More and more Chinese artists make something particular. If you just look at the artworks you often cannot figure out what

it is about—even I myself cannot—so you need background information, you need a conversation to understand. We are becoming more tolerant of different kinds of art.

Alice Schmatzberger: But artists work in a local context while at the same time longing for international reputation. To be outstanding within the global art world you may need to take recourse to the regional culture, to the local iconography as a space of authenticity. Could the visibility of Chinese (or any non-Western) art depend upon the artist's ability to speak a visual language that is easily understood in the international art world?

Wang Chunchen: The uniqueness of any artistic expressions is very important. I think that the Western art world, if they want to be universal and show equal respect to the most different forms of art, should increasingly notice, observe, and study the unpopular, non-market-oriented artists, not vice versa. In fact, it is necessary that we develop a new definition for the function and significance of art—this is a common issue for all artists, Western or non-Western. To be universal and independent is a hard choice. To be Chinese artists does not mean that they have to follow the traditional modalities, but when they encounter the globalized world, they have to face the fissure and loss of cultural traditions together with the emergence of an ambiguous uncertainty about a cultural future and social orientation.

And after all the conceptualizing, the preparation, and the opening days in Venice, I have the strong feeling that we have to reflect upon what our exhibition at the pavilion is lacking, what we ought to do more of, and to what extent we still have the room to improve our performance and operation. I have especially more ideas and plans on researching and writing on Chinese art, also vis-à-vis global art. The real critic and curator is not a fixed anchor; he is only singing a lonely song, a real traveller to wander amid seas and winds to experience the real fresh air and sunshine and moon-set and hurricane. The more you observe the art made in China, the more you could discover that there are many hidden dynamics and unspoken secrets inside: an unavoidable tendency that occurs among the real Chinese artists who pursue such spiritual practice in their life, such as He Yunchang, in this pavilion. But there many more such artists, for example, Jizi, who is not known well outside of China, or even inside China. He is a real and pure artist spending all his life for one thing, that is, to make his own art a testimony of his life existence. Such an attitude is pervasive among many unfashionable artists in China—why do they have such attitudes? It is due to their surviving struggles in a special environment, and it is only such obstacles that make them unique and distinctive and historically significant.

Notes

¹ The exhibition at the China pavilion is entitled *Transfiguration*. A comprehensive catalogue accompanies it: *Transfiguration—The Presence of Chinese Artistic Methods in Venice* (San Marino: Maretti Editore, 2013). The following artists are exhibited in the China pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale: He Yunchang, Hu Yaolin, Miao Xiaochun, Shu Yong, Tong Hongsheng, Wang Qingsong, Zhang Xiaotao.

² Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).