

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART
NEW NETWORKS
新网络

AI WEIWEI
CHEN HAIYAN
HE XIANGYU
HUANG YAN
JENNIFER WEN MA
JIN JIANGBO
LIN TIANMIAO
LIU CHUANG
LIU JIANHUA
SONG DONG
WANG GONGXIN
WANG QINGSONG
XU BING
XU ZHEN
YANG FUDONG
YIN XIUZHEN

New Networks: Contemporary Chinese Art
Dunedin Public Art Gallery
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Curated by Lucy Hammonds and Lauren Gutsell

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Since the late 1970s the contemporary art movement in mainland China has undergone a rapid transformation, emerging as a highly significant presence within the world of international contemporary art. *New Networks* explores aspects of this remarkable period in China's art history, by considering significant works held in publicly accessible art collections in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The exhibition includes works by sixteen artists, who together present a spectrum of new Chinese art produced over the past four decades. In doing so, *New Networks* begins to explore how the narratives surrounding contemporary Chinese art are emerging within significant art collections across New Zealand and Australia.

Art historian Wu Hung has discussed the complexity of defining precisely what 'contemporary Chinese art' might mean. *New Networks* takes its lead from Wu's general description of this term as one that encompasses all forms of new Chinese art that have emerged since the late 1970s. He notes specifically how the term has been used by artists and critics in China since the early 1990s to mark an historic transition in Chinese art characterised by rapid globalisation.¹ The works in *New Networks* speak strongly to this most recent period, looking at a selection of artists directly connected to the contemporary art movement in mainland China, who are operating within a global network of exchange.

As these networks have developed internationally, works by contemporary artists associated with the mainland Chinese art movement have increasingly made their way into art collections in New Zealand and Australia. Major exhibitions, including the Asia Pacific Triennial and the Sydney Biennale, have introduced many viewers to the complexities of this art movement and seen significant works acquired for institutional collections. In Australia, major state and federal art collections have demonstrated a commitment to acquiring works by contemporary Chinese artists, within broader collections of contemporary Asian art. In 2009, the independently owned White Rabbit Collection opened a public gallery space in Sydney, presenting one of the world's largest private collections of contemporary Chinese art.²

In New Zealand, the scale of institutional collecting is far smaller. While major art collections throughout this country represent works by contemporary artists connected to the Chinese community here in Aotearoa, there are relatively few examples of works by artists associated with the contemporary art movement of mainland China. Some collections, including Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Te Papa Tongarewa, have acquired works through international collecting programmes, while others, such as the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, have acquired works as a result of artist residencies.

Rather than an historical survey or overview of the contemporary Chinese art movement, *New Networks* began as an enquiry into how this international story was becoming woven into the collections of major art institutions closer to home. What became apparent was that these collections offered a dual opportunity: to present significant works relating to the recent history of Chinese art, while casting light across the ever-expanding networks of knowledge and encounter that are created through the collecting and exhibiting of contemporary art.

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ARTISTS IN NEW NETWORKS

Contemporary art in China has been closely connected to that nation's rapid social, political and economic transformation over recent decades. The sixteen artists in *New Networks* represent different generations and creative approaches that have emerged out of these decades of change; their works reflecting ways in which artists navigate and respond to their environment and experiences.

Although the artists in this exhibition all practice within the context of contemporary Chinese art, many have spent time living and working in other countries. For some, working outside China has offered a platform to express dissent, or explore a counter-narrative to that of Chinese officialdom. In other cases, operating transnationally reflects strengthening connections between China and global art communities. These international relationships are important, reflecting the shift from isolation to globalisation that characterises recent Chinese art. Context impacts upon how artworks operate, with the decontextualization and recontextualization of contemporary Chinese art affecting how works are understood.

The works in *New Networks* present overlapping approaches, both formally and conceptually. Many artists in this exhibition are actively negotiating connections to tradition. Xu Bing, whose work represents the earliest among this selection, is a major figure in China's contemporary art movement, and well known for his works that utilise aspects of traditional ink painting, calligraphy and printmaking within his own conceptual framework. Other works in this exhibition, such as paintings by Chen Haiyan, the photographic works of Huang Yan, or Jennifer Wen Ma's *Brain Storm* video, also reflect these influences; translating traditions of ink and wash into new, individualistic forms. In *Night Revels of Lao Li*, a breakthrough photographic work by Wang Qingsong, the references to the past are direct, with the artist presenting a 21st century version of the historic painting *Night Revels of Han Xizai* (10th century) by Gu Hongzhong. Wang's composition reflects the way in which appropriating or reinterpreting historic artworks rose in popularity amongst contemporary Chinese artists in the early 1990s, as well as his enduring interest in the figure and its position in art history.

The early 1990s saw the rise of experimental art forms, including performance, installation, photography and video, which sat outside of what was taught in art academies in China or exhibited in state museums. Over this decade, the creation and exhibition of contemporary art in China was subject to a period of closer control and scrutiny from official circles. One response was the staging of ephemeral or transient art works and performances. Song Dong was among those artists who saw the potential in alternative sites for art making, temporarily inhabiting spaces in the urban environment for works such as *A Pot of Boiling Water* (1995).

Non-conventional exhibition spaces and site-specific projects played a role in experimental art. Xu Zhen was a key figure who explored the conceptual potential of site, and the connection between commercial culture and contemporary art. His involvement in the important 1990 exhibition *Art for Sale* anticipates the interests he expands upon in *ShanghART Supermarket (Australia)* (2007-08), exhibited in *New Networks*. The prevalence of installation art works, particularly exploring scale, location and material, also become a characteristic approach. Ai Weiwei, who rose to international prominence after leaving China in the 1980s, is well known for his monumental installations

and political activism. *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), shown at London's Tate Modern in 2010, and presented here as a smaller-scale version, uses porcelain production and hand-painting to layer aspects of China's craft histories with the artist's social and political narratives. Similarly, *Container Series* (2009), by the Shanghai-based artist Liu Jianhua, operates on the intersection between historic and contemporary porcelain. Liu's delicate celadon containers brim with an apparently liquid langyao hong, or oxblood, glaze; their materiality and process connecting to tradition, while the artist's contemporary position is evidenced through the form, installation and conceptual implications of the work.

The nature of experimental art has also been recognised for the space it created for women artists. Lin Tianmiao and Yin Xiuzhen both became prominent figures as they established their practices in the early 1990s.³ Both artists studied painting, but soon diverted into experimental, installation-based practices after graduating university. They also shared an interest in working with textile-based materials and processes. Lin's breakthrough installations involved elements of binding domestic objects in delicate white thread, or rolling, coiling and braiding large volumes of this commonplace sewing material. Yin's practice has paid close attention to personal identity and experience, employing materials such as clothing and footwear in her sculptures and performances. Many of her works have also addressed ideas of travel, portability and globalisation, as reflected in *Black Hole* (2010), which was created while on residency in Taranaki and is represented here by the artist's model.

The rise of experimental art in the 1990s also provided a platform for video artists and filmmakers. Initially trained in oil painting, Wang Gongxin moved into experimental film in the early 1990s, seeing the potential of this medium to offer certain freedoms and expanded possibilities. Wang's videos explore society, politics, history and tradition, his subtle humour also evident in works such as *Dinner Table* (2006). Wang and his contemporaries working in video and moving image paved the way for younger artists to expand the field. Yang Fudong, who attended the Beijing Film Academy in the mid-1990s, achieved significant international recognition in the 2000s. Recently, Yang's exhibition *Yang Fudong: Filmscapes* saw a major work co-commissioned by the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, offering New Zealand audiences a view into the artist's carefully constructed vision.

The artists in *New Networks* represent several generations. Those born after 1980 are of a generation shaped by a 'transition from one reality to another, from the China of isolation to the China of globalization'.⁴ He Xiangyu's *Tank Project* (2011-13) is one of a number of large-scale conceptual projects addressing ideas of consumption, labour and capitalism that propelled the artist to prominence in the late 2000s. A soft, collapsed military tank hand-made from Italian leather has been described as highlighting 'the ambiguous relationship between China's recent political history and the growing materialism and hunger for luxury of its consumerist society'.⁵ Liu Chuang uses his art interventions to explore the realities of every-day life in contemporary China. In *Love Story* (2014) Liu uses handwritten notes, thoughts and doodles found in obsolete romance novels to present a portrait of an anonymous group of migrant workers, whose labour contributes to China's manufacturing capabilities. This most recent generation of contemporary Chinese artists move fluidly between a range of contexts and social networks, bringing different political perspectives, creative approaches and technical advances to their work.

THE LENDING INSTITUTIONS

By the mid-1990s the inclusion of contemporary Chinese art in international exhibitions was increasing, as was the number of Chinese artists establishing their practices beyond China. Both factors contributed to the rising awareness of contemporary Chinese art in mainstream Western art communities.⁶ This impact filtered through to Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, where there was a growing engagement with contemporary Chinese art from the early 90s through exhibitions, residencies, the establishment of a flagship art series in Brisbane and focused collecting strategies.

In 1992 the Art Gallery of New South Wales developed a large exhibition, *New Art from China: Post-Mao Product*, which toured throughout Australia from 1992-1993. At the same time the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, first shown in Hong Kong in 1993, embarked on a successful international tour. This was a pivotal moment, as it was the first major survey exhibition to present Chinese contemporary art to international audiences.⁷ Importantly in relation to *New Networks*, this exhibition was reconfigured for tour and titled *Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989*, touring to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the Melbourne Arts Festival in the mid-90s.

In 1993 Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) established the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT), bringing significant works from the Asia Pacific region to Brisbane. The first of its kind in the world, APT1 featured 200 works by 76 artists from across South-East Asia, East Asia and the South Pacific. Over its subsequent iterations, the APT series has fostered the opportunity for QAGOMA to build a significant collection of contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region, including China. Beyond the APT, QAGOMA has made a significant commitment to exhibiting contemporary Chinese art, including *Three Decades: The Contemporary Chinese Collection* (2009), which as part of their wider 'China Project', consisted of 150 works drawn from their collection. Among this institution's major commissions are Xu Zhen's continent specific *ShanghART Supermarket (Australia)* (2007-8).

The Biennale of Sydney, as the first in the Asia Pacific region, played an important role in surveying global contemporary art, and has impacted on the collections of Australian institutions. The 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010) included Liu Jianhua's 37-piece porcelain *Container Series* (2009), which is also included in *New Networks*. For the Biennale, Liu's work was on display at Art Gallery of New South Wales and subsequently acquired for their permanent collection.

Turning to New Zealand, *New Networks* has looked to the international exhibition and collecting programme of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, and the residency programme offered through the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in Taranaki – two institutions which have both shown a commitment to exhibiting, commissioning and acquiring works by contemporary artists from mainland China. In 2014, Auckland Art Gallery and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image commissioned *The Coloured Sky: New Women II*, a five-channel work by Shanghai-based artist Yang Fudong, as part of the exhibition *Yang Fudong: Filmscapes*. Auckland Art Gallery subsequently acquired three photographic works by Yang that are included in *New Networks*.

In 2009-10 the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's *China in Four Seasons* series brought five contemporary Chinese artists to work in New Zealand. Yin Xiuzhen spent three weeks in New Plymouth on residency, alongside husband and artist Song Dong. Yin's sculpture

Black Hole was positioned along New Plymouth's coastal walkway, with the gallery collecting the maquette, *Model for Black Hole*, which is exhibited here. Other artists in *New Networks*, including Jin Jiangbo, Song Dong, Lin Tianmiao, Wang Gongxin and Jennifer Wen Ma, have also exhibited in New Zealand in recent years, contributing to a growing visibility of their works in this country.

Beyond public institutional collections in New Zealand and Australia, *New Networks* also looks to the White Rabbit Collection, Sydney. The White Rabbit Gallery was established in 2009 and has become one of the most significant collections of contemporary Chinese art in the world. The White Rabbit Collection is owned, funded and steered by Judith Neilson, and now contains over 2500 works by over 500 artists.

Focusing on works made in the 21st century, the White Rabbit Collection is driven by independent collecting strategies, but is accessed through a public gallery. By operating outside of an institutional framework, the collection can be active and reactive in a unique and influential way. While White Rabbit is not the sole private collection of contemporary Chinese art in Australia or New Zealand, it is highly visible and accessible due to the public nature of the gallery space and has become an influential means of access to new art from China. The works from the White Rabbit Collection are diverse. The collection represents global superstars such as Ai Weiwei, alongside high-profile new generation figures such as He Xiangyu. White Rabbit also has the capacity to include more emergent artists within the collection, with works such as Liu Chuang's *Love Story* (2014) reflecting recent practices that are rarely seen in New Zealand galleries.

Looking specifically through the lens of collections in New Zealand and Australia, *New Networks* provides a sense of how publicly accessible art collections in this region have been acquiring and presenting contemporary Chinese art over recent decades. By doing so, this exhibition explores some of China's transnational networks that support the production and display of art, and considers how this development in modern art history is being included into the collections of art institutions in New Zealand and Australia.

Lucy Hammonds and Lauren Gutsell

1. Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art*, Thames & Hudson (London: 2014), pp10-11.

2. <http://www.whiterabbitcollection.org/the-gallery/about/>

3. Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art*, Thames & Hudson (London: 2014), p225.

4. Decrop, Jean-Marc and Jerome Sans. *CHINA: The New Generation*. Skira (Italy: 2014), p7.

5. *China The New Generation*, p11.

6. Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art*, Thames & Hudson (London: 2014), p129.

7. Paul Gladston. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*, Reaktion Books Ltd (London: 2014), p194.