

Eight and a Half Things You Should Know About Three New Books on Chinese Contemporary Art

In 1942, Chairman Mao told an audience of Chinese artists and writers at the revolutionary base in Yan'an that art must serve the working people. Today, some 65 years later, a growing number of writers in the West have taken up the same cause: to serve contemporary Chinese art to the people—but not the people Mao was talking about.

In radically different formats, three recent publications attempt to explain the development of avant-garde, or Western-influenced, artistic practices in China—oil painting, sculpture, installation, performance, photography and video. Two of the books include digits in their titles, a reflection of the authors' attempts to serve the people by reducing an unwieldy subject to lists that can be counted on the fingers of two hands.

Karen Smith's updated edition of *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Timezone 8, Beijing), originally released in 2006 by the now defunct Swiss art book publisher Scalo, is an opportunity missed. The new version inflates the first edition's volubility, bombast and relentless repetitiveness—as well as the page size—without significantly improving the contents.

And while some of the facts misstated in the first edition have been corrected, in Wikipedia perhaps, the spell-check function remains disabled—"disdan" for disdain, "principal" for principle. In the preface, Smith merely restates her commitment to her Gang of Nine—Wang Guangyi, Geng Jianyi, Fang Lijun, Gu Dexin, Li Shan, Zhang Xiaogang, Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, Wang Jianwei—whose personal and professional lives she chronicles, as "founding fathers," "innovators, leaders," "creative pioneers, impetuous performers and fly-by-night philosophers who changed the face of art in China." The author also apologizes for her omission of female artists, explaining, "the great majority of art events in where [sic] women came into their own took place in the 1990s."

Regretfully, the amateur, noirish psychobabble Smith employs to fill out her portraits remains intact:

...Zhang Xiaogang possessed a highly sensitive nature. His interest in art distinguished him from the run-of-the-mill Kunming inhabitants... Creativity, the escape route into the imagination was not a door open to the general public.... Boredom, frustration and the claustrophobic ambience of his isolated circumstances...toyed with his mind. It made him feel that the naturally non-mainstream nature of his character was abnormal.

And Smith's *People's Daily*-brand of Sinology remains less than acute:

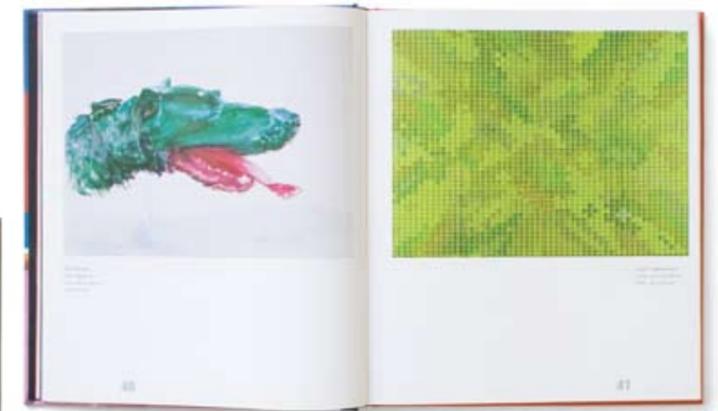
Shanghai was once the most industrial city in China, thickly populated with a working class that far outnumbered the rich [has any society ever gotten it right the other way?]. Its exposure to international cultures, albeit where Shanghai was carved up and governed by *invading imperialists* [emphasis added] from the late nineteenth century right up to 1949 [the Japanese were defeated in 1945; the foreign concessions ended in 1946], imbued its inhabitants with a sense of individual rights [which distinguish homo sapiens from other living creatures], even if for most people they remained beyond reach [who were the lucky exceptions?].

And in an absurd footnote:

Hence there was little communication between China and the West and no commercial relationship until US-Sino diplomatic relations were re-established on January 1, 1979. [China never ceased trade with "the West" during the period 1949–79. US-China trade was halted from 1950 to 1970 only.]

And incidentally, the term *guoyu* (national language) in Taiwan is not "used in reference to the accented Taiwanese dialect," but is rather synonymous with standard Mandarin, or *putonghua*.

While the "updated" information seems fresh up to early 2008, is there any reason, then, to have avoided mentioning Cai Guo-Qiang, not one of Smith's stable of nine stalwarts, whose Guggenheim Museum solo



retrospective in February of that year and commission to design the fireworks for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing (confirmed as early as 2005) is certainly more interesting than the fact that four of her artists (Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun and Zhang Peili) and four others she doesn't name were promised personal museums in Dujiangyan, Sichuan, in mid-2007, a year before the devastating earthquake there in May 2008. Other flaws persist to confound the reader—the title itself, with its misplaced feline metaphor; "Qin" dynasty for Qing (an 18-century difference); "Wade-Gilles" for Wade-Giles, the system of Romanization every serious foreign student of Chinese learns; and with no running chapter heads, it is difficult to know who created the works illustrated, since the captions only give title and date (and not the medium or the dimensions).

Melissa Chiu, museum director at Asia Society in New York, and the author/editor

CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART: 7 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

By Melissa Chiu
Published by AW Asia, New York, 2008
Hardcover with color illustrations, 140 pages

NEW CHINA NEW ART

By Richard Vine
Published by Prestel USA, New York, 2008
Hardcover with color illustrations, 240 pages

NINE LIVES: THE BIRTH OF AVANT-GARDE ART IN NEW CHINA

By Karen Smith
The Updated Edition
Published by Timezone 8, Beijing, 2008
Softcover with color illustrations, 473 pages

of several catalogs for exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art (herein Chicona, AAP's, not Chiu's neologism), has written a brief, intimidatingly titled book that offers an elementary "paint by the numbers" introduction to a complex subject with a few dozen striking illustrations that go mostly unreferenced in the brief text. According to Chiu's *Chinese Contemporary Art: 7 Things You Should Know* (AW Asia, New York), the 7 things you should know are: 1. Chicona began decades ago; 2. Chicona "is more diverse than you might think"; 3. Museums and galleries in China and abroad have promoted Chicona since the 1990s; 4. Government censorship influences Chinese artists; 5. The Chinese artist diaspora has returned home; 6. Chicona museums in China are on the rise; 7. The world is collecting Chicona.

And here, courtesy of *ArtAsiaPacific*, are 7 things you don't want to know about Chicona:

1. Much Chicona is overpriced by any standards;
2. Chinese culture tolerates emulation, appropriation and imitation in the arts to a degree unacceptable in the West;
3. It is unacknowledged that most Chicona is indebted to 20th-century Western art (Duchamp, Kaprow, Cage, Paik, Acconci, Beuys, Nauman);
4. Some major Chinese artists are burnt out and copy themselves to meet market demand;
5. Chicona (by artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, Zhu Yu, Liu Jin)

incorporating human fetal corpses and cruelty to animals does not demonstrate freedom of expression in China but rather a barbaric and unscrupulous legal system; 6. China's arts infrastructure remains immature, arbitrary, bureaucratic, venal; 7. Much of Chicona is 21st-century chinoiserie, valued by buyer and seller alike as an "exotic" Asian culture imitating a "higher" Western civilization.

These critical issues, skirted entirely in *7 Things* and highly diluted somewhere in the prolixity of *Nine Lives*, are discussed in Richard Vine's *New China, New Art* (Prestel, New York), a superb, controlled survey of a vast, writhing subject. Vine honed his expertise on China at *Art in America* in dozens of articles over the last decade. With admirable detachment, his new book weaves the work of 125 Chinese artists, divided by genre, into a conceptually manageable whole, and concludes with critical essays on "The Scene Now" and "History Lessons" (read these first), where he reveals the depth of his understanding. *New China* is the finest introduction to Chinese avant-garde art since the 1970s, a textbook and guidebook for students and collectors, as well as Mao's working people. Its only apparent flaw is a lack of footnotes, less due to the dubiousness of certain statements than to the way they whet the appetite to learn more. ● **Don J. Cohn**

