

STRANGER THAN PARADISE

YANG JIECHANG

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Exhibition

6 May - 5 June 2011

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Opening

Friday 6 May 2011, 6:30pm
at La Criée

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Meeting with Yang Jiechang

Saturday 7 May 2011, 3pm
at La Criée

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Guided tour

Friday 20 May 2011, 5pm
at La Criée

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« Gong... » Party at La Criée

Thursday 12 May 2011
from 9pm to 1am

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Curator

Larys Frogier

Partnership and co-production

Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris

Production of works

*Stranger than Paradise, Mountain
Top* (serie of 100 sculptures)

Gong...

La Criée centre for contemporary
arts, Rennes

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Press release

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From 6 May to 5 June 2011, artist Yang Jiechang will be at La Criée with a group of three works under the umbrella title of *Stranger than Paradise*. With this exhibition, the artist uses the figure of the animal, the landscape and the sound to create an allegory of a globalised world fluctuating between control and instability.

In Yang Jiechang's works – whether a painting, an ink drawing, a sculpture, a collage or a filmed performance – traditional Chinese aesthetics and thinking unite powerfully to contemporary creativity. Trained in calligraphy at the People's Art Institute in Foshan, and in traditional Chinese painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Canton, Yang Jiechang has also made a long and detailed study of Zen Buddhism and Taoism. In 1989 he took part in the acclaimed exhibition *Les Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and moved definitively to Europe. Until the early years of the new millennium he devoted himself to an introspective oeuvre drawing on Chinese artistic tradition and contemporary cultural change. This was followed by a period of creation in which Yang Jiechang has questioned both social and political events of today's societies and his own life as an artist working between Europe and Asia.

Stranger than Paradise continues this exploration and interrogation of our globalised world. The three works on show – two of them specially created for the exhibition – call into question the concepts of control and instability that govern our systems of collective living. Each piece, moreover, draws on traditional Chinese culture and aesthetics in its use of a specific medium – ceramics, painting on silk – or a distinctive object in the form of a bronze gong.

On show in the main exhibition space, the installation *Stranger than Paradise, Mountain Top* (2011) comprises 200 ceramic sculptures on stands of different heights which show animals having sexual intercourse.

Each pair involves different species – elephant and tiger, stork and puma, wolf and monkey – in a defying of physical singularities and incongruities. This sculptural landscape is associated with the video projection *Gong...* (2011), showing the artist striking a bronze gong with his head. Each impact produces a sound that spreads through the exhibition space, at the same time as it sets the image quivering. Pursued by these visual and sound vibrations, the visitor becomes the target of the blows to the gong. In another room the animal scenes already mentioned – metaphors of the differences, mutations, confusions and identities symptomatic of today's world – reappear on panels of ink-painted silk that make up the work *Stranger than Paradise 1* (2010–11).

On Thursday 12 May 2011, with the help of Yang Jiechang, La Criée will be organising the event « Gong... » Party. The evening will centre on the performance *Waving Basket: Eurasia Versus Paradise*, created by the artist: two teams of young people – Eurasia and Paradise – confronting each other in a basketball mini-match that will really put their stability and dexterity to the test.

Visuals for the press

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Yang Jiechang
Landscape Da Vinci, 2009
Video, 2'33
Courtesy Yang Jiechang



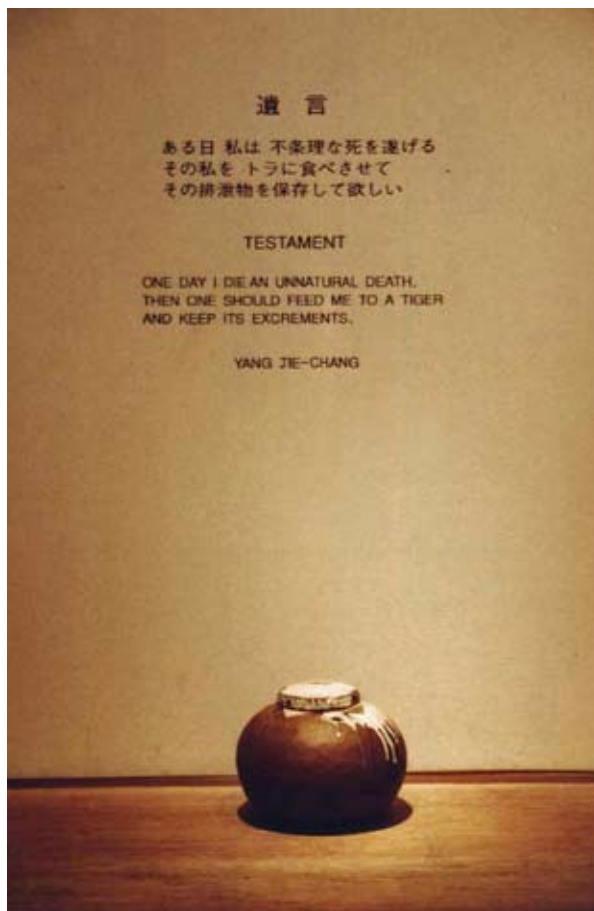
Yang Jiechang
On Ascension - Self-portrait,
2005-2008
Ink and mineral colours on silk,
257 x 145 cm
Courtesy Yang Jiechang

Visuals for the press

Please, respect captions and copyrights.



Eurasia vs Ullens, 2008
Performance, exhibition view at
Ullens Centre for Contemporary
Arts, Beijing 08.08.2008
Courtesy Yang Jiechang and
Santomatteo



Yang Jiechang
Testament, 1989-1991
Pottery, silkscreen-print on wall
Exhibition view *Fukuoka
Museum City Project*, 1991
Courtesy Yang Jiechang

Works exhibited

Stranger than Paradise, Mountain Top

2010-2011

200 ceramic sculptures, ca. 25 x 30 cm each

200 wooden bases, different heights between 40 x 40 x 40 cm and 170 x 40 x 40 cm

Production of a serie of 100 sculptures : La Criée centre for contemporary arts, Rennes

Gong...

2011

Vidéo

ca. 30 s

Production : La Criée centre for contemporary arts, Rennes

Stranger than Paradise 1

2010-2011

Ink and mineral colours on silk

10 panels, 250 x 90 cm each

Biography

Yang Jiechang

Born in 1956 in Foshan, Guangdong Province, PR China

Lives and works in Paris, France since 1988

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SOLO EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2010

Yang Jiechang, Galerie Conrads, Düsseldorf, Germany

2009

Yang Jiechang – On Ascension, Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris, France

Territoria, special project, Associazione Culturale Cantiere d'Arte Alberto Moretti - Galleria Schema, Prato, Italy

2008

Tibetan Pavilion, Edicola Notte, Roma, Italy

Yang Jiechang - No Shadow Kick, Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, PR China

2007

The Most Beautiful Country of China, Hanart Gallery, Hong Kong

2006

Tomorrow Cloudy Sky, HanArtTZ Gallery, Hong Kong

Idylls, Grace Li Gallery, Zürich, Switzerland

2005

Memorandums, Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris, France

Hei Ji Sheng Xiang, Shenzhen Painting Institute, PR China

Who Occupies the Space?, Isola d'arte, Milan, Italy

2003

Lookchat, Centre A, Vancouver, Canada

For Emily, 4A Gallery, Sydney, Australia

2001

French May, Hong Kong University Museum, Hong Kong

Enlightened Blackness, Alice King Gallery, Hong Kong

Double View, Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris, France

100 Layers of Ink, Cherng Piing Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan

2000

You – Double View, Project Room, ARCO 2000, Madrid, Spain

1999

Another Turn of the Screw, Gallery Central Academy of Fine Arts, Pékin, PR China

Rebuild Dong Cunrui, Cherng Piing Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan

1996

Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris, France

1995

Galerie Samuel Lallouze, Montréal, Canada

Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland

1993

Rencontres dans un couloir, appartement privé d'Hou Hanru, Paris, France

1992

Gallery Turbulences, New York, USA

Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris, France

1991

Works on Paper, Frith Street Gallery, London, UK

1990

Salon de Mars - Espace de la Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris, France

Voyage en Mexique, Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City, Mexico

1988

Milky Way Exhibition N°9, Gallery of the Central Park, Canton Artists4 Association, Canton, PR China

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GROUP EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2011

Tracing the Milky Way, Tang Contemporary, Pékin, PR China

2010

Le Jardin emprunté, Jardin du Palais Royal, Paris, France

Hareng Saur – Ensor and Contemporary Art, SMAK/MSK, Gand, Belgium

Grande Veillée d'Automne en Normandie, Rouen, France

New Ink Art, Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong

Thirty Years of Contemporary Chinese Art, Mingsheng Museum, Shanghai, PR China

2009

Against Exclusion – 3rd Moscow Biennial, Russia

Biography

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GROUP EXHIBITIONS...

2009

10th Lyon Biennial - The Spectacle of the Everyday, La Sucrière, Lyon, France

Qui a peur des artistes? Une sélection d'œuvres de la Fondation François Pinault, Musée de Dinard, France

time versus fashion, Kunstverein Nürtingen, Germany

Becoming Intense – Becoming Animal – Becoming, University and City of Heidelberg, Germany

2008

Onda Anomala – Manifesta 7, Trente, Italy

Our Future, Special project, UCCA, Beijing, PR China

Too Early For Vacation, ev&a 2008, Limerick, Irelande

3rd Canton Triennial, Museum of Art, Canton, PR China

Eurasia, SHcontemporary, special project, with santomatteo, Shanghai, PR China

2007

New Wave '85, UCCA, Ullens Foundation, Beijing, PR China

Istanbul Biennial, Turkey

Metamorphosis: The Generation of Transformation in Chinese Contemporary Art, Tampere Art Museum, Tampere, Finland

Made in China, Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark

Gu Dexin, Yan Pei-Ming, Yang Jiechang, Red Mansions Foundation, London, UK

2006

Laboratoires pour un avenir incertain - La Force de l'art, Grand Palais, Paris, France

La rivoluzione siamo noi, Isola Art Centre, Milano, Italy

Micro-Macro Politics, Macao Art Museum, Macao

Capolavoro, Palazzo di Primavera, Terni, Roma, Italy

Infiltration – Idylls and Visions, Guangdong Museum of Art, Canton, PR China

Surplus Value, Tang Contemporary Art Centre, Beijing, PR China

Accumulation, Tang Contemporary Art Centre, Beijing, PR China

Liverpool Biennial, UK

Taste - 5th International Ink Painting Biennial, Shenzhen, PR China

2005

Beyond, 2nd Canton Triennial, PR China

Layered Landscapes: Yan Lei & Yang Jjiechang, Stanford Art Gallery, USA

Biennial of Emergency, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France ; Grozny, Russia

Experimental Ink, Museum of the University of Science, Taipei and Taichung, Taiwan

2004

Stop Over Hong Kong, HanartTz Gallery, Hong Kong

Le Moine et le démon, Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon, France

À l'est du sud de l'ouest, Villa Arson, Nice ; Credac Sète, France

GAP, Heidelberger Kunstverein, Germany

Odyssey(s) 2004, Shanghai Gallery of Art, PR China

All Under Heaven, Muhka, Antwerp, Belgium

La Nuit Blanche, Paris, France

2003

Zone of Urgency, Venice Biennial, Italy

Shenzhen Ink Painting Biennial, Shenzhen Painting Institute, PR China

The Fifth System - 5th Shenzhen International Sculpture Exhibition, PR China

2002

Canton Triennial, PR China

Gwangju Biennial, South Korea

Variations of Ink, Chambers Fine Arts, New York, USA

1st Chengdu Biennial, PR China

2001

20 Main Chinese Painters, National Gallery Beijing; Shanghai Art Museum ; Chengdu Art Museum ; Canton Art Museum, PR China

China:20 Years of Ink Experiment, Guangdong Museum of Art, PR China

Centre de Refuge, Centre International de Poésie, Marseille, France

Biography

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GROUP EXHIBITIONS...

2000

Paris pour Escale, Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France

Continental Shift, Musée d'art Moderne et d'art Contemporain, Liege, Belgium

A Portrait, Gallery agnès b., New York, USA

1999

Art in March : Legend 99, Nantou, Taiwan

Asiart 99 - Biennale d'art contemporain, Museum of Contemporary Art, Genoa, Italy

1998

Les Magiciens de la terre, Anina Nosei Gallery, New York, USA

2nd Shanghai International Biennial 98, PR China

1997

In Between Limits, Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art, Kyongju, South Korea

Uncertain Pleasure, Art Beatus Gallery, Vancouver, Canada

1996

West-östliche Kontakte, Heidelberger Kunstverein, Germany

1995

Über Hölderlin, Hölderlin Museum Tübingen, Germany

1994

Out of the Centre, Museum of Modern Art, Pori, Finland

1993

Coalition, Centre for Contemporary Art Glasgow, Scotland

Silent Energy, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK

1992

Chinese Museum Project, The Artists' Museum, Lodz, Poland

1991

Exceptional Passage, City Museum Project, Fukuoka, Japan

1989

Les Magiciens de la Terre, Centre d'art moderne Georges Pompidou, Paris, France

China/Avantgarde, National Gallery, Beijing, PR China

Bibliography

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EXHIBITION CATALOGUES (selection)

Yang Jiechang - On Ascension, Paris : galerie Jaeger Bucher, 2009

Yang Jiechang - No Shadow Kick, Shanghai : Tang Contemporary, 2008

No yet time for Vacation, Limerick : EV&A, 2008

Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 2007

Ink - Life - Taste, 5th Shenzhen International Ink Painting Biennial, Shenzhen, 2006

Accumulation - Canton Express the Next Stop, Beijing : Tang Contemporary, 2006

Surplus Value, Beijing : Tang Contemporary, 2006

Infiltration: Idylls and Visions, Guangzhou : Guangdong Museum of Art, 2006

International 06 Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool, 2006, pp.106-109

Beyond - Second Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou, 2005, pp.248, 249

Yang Jiechang - Memorandums, Paris : Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 2005

Dreams and Conflicts, The Dictatorship of the Viewer, Venice : Biennale di Venezia, 50^{ème} exposition internationale d'art, 2003, p. 212

«Yang Jiechang», in cat *Gwangju Biennale 2002 - Project 1, Pause Conception*, Vol.1, Gwangju, 2002, pp. 262, 263

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ARTICLES AND INTERVIEWS (selection)

«Multimedia Microbes and Music in December 9 Performance Piece at Stanford», in *The Wall Street Journal / Market Watch*, www.marketwatch.com, 29 décembre 2008

E. Lauren Wool, «News: 2008 Sterling Visiting Professorship explores art-science interface», in *Biotechniques*, www.biotechniques.com, 10 décembre 2008

Qiu Jiahe, «Yang Jiechang: Art needs inspiration and self-cultivation» (en chinois), Shanghai Zhengquan Bao, 6 septembre 2008

Li Jianchun, «An Eurasian Artist» The Discovery of Contemporary Chinese Art, Vol.3, in *Life Magazine* (Shenghuo), Issue 34, septembre 2008, pp. 148-152

«Artists continue to try hard», dialogue entre Yang Jiechang et Fée Hu Qihong, in *Life Magazine* (Shenghuo), Issue 34, septembre 2008, pp. 153-159

Britta Erickson, «A Cultural Revolution», in *The Atlantic*, juillet - août 2007

Beaux Arts Magazine, n°263, mai 2006, p. 74

Rosanne Spector, «So you want to be a rock 'n' roll star? Study molecular pharmacology», in *Stanford Report*, 15 mai 2006

Adam Geczy, «On Yang Jiechang», in *Art Asia Pacific*, n°38, automne 2003, p. 77

Martina Köppel-Yang, «Zaofan Youli / Revolt is Reasonable: Remanifestations of the Cultural Revolution in Chinese Contemporary Art of the 1980s and 1990s», in *Yishu - Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, août 2002, pp. 66-75

Wu Hung, «Variations of Ink: A Dialogue With Zhang YanYuan», in *Yishu - Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, août 2002, pp. 86-90

Yu Hsiao-hwei, «Yangqi mingxing pai gaoju shiyan feng», in *Jin yishu / Art Today*, mai 2002, pp. 62-67

Adrienne Joly, «MAMVP Paris», in *Art actuel*, n°12, janvier - février 2001, pp. 20, 21

France Huser, «La Nouvelle Seine des artistes migrants», in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, n°1889, 18 - 24 janvier 2001, p.106

Text :

Fritz Hansel / Yang Jiechang, «Republic of Fritz Hansel – A dialogue»,
in cat *Yang Jiechang - No Shadow Kick*, Shanghai : Tang Contemporary, 2008, pp.217-219

FH: ... Tell me more about the aspect of participation in your work. (...) I could discern this aspect in some of the works, especially the environments and videos, but what about your early paintings, such as *Hundred Layers of Ink*?

YJC: Well, let's start from *Hundred Layers of Ink*. From the surface these works seem very calm. I worked on the series for one decade, from 1989 to 1999. I created these works in a period of transition: I had left China and had just arrived in Europe. These works express a process of self reflection and self cultivation. I had chosen to acclimatise myself in the new environment. My earlier works are concerned with the question of how to deconstruct traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy by using the very means of these disciplines. Yet in Europe working on these questions that are specifically related to Chinese culture did not make any sense. I therefore chose the strategy of retreat to advance in the new environment. The precondition for *Hundred Layers of Ink* was the exhibition "Les Magiciens de la Terre" in the Centre Pompidou in 1989. The space the curator had chosen for my works was situated in the middle of the some very well-known artists of the period: Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, On Kawara, Kabakov, Sarkis, Nam Jun-Paik, Alighiero Boetti. I thought if I went ahead with the work I did in China a dialogue with these artists would be impossible. According to my education, I understood that I should choose retreat as a strategy, that I shouldn't expose myself to much, neither my personality, nor my art. I therefore returned to the basic elements I had distilled during my process of deconstruction in China: the process of applying ink, water, ink and paper itself; thus the *Hundred Layers of Ink*, a monochrome black square, on which layers and layers of ink were applied, appeared. I applied the ink on the same square day by day, as if I was writing my diary. This was in April and May 1989. So many things did happen at that time: The student movement in Beijing became a focus of world interest. Simultaneously, the three Chinese artists taking part in the exhibition in Paris became a focus, too. In my personal life also many things happened: I married, I received a residence permit for Germany, a visa for France, etc. Nevertheless, in my work I used a very simple approach and concept. The painting process itself became a kind of reflection on my personal life and history, as well as a part of my self-cultivation. When I installed the works in the museum after one month of painting, I felt that these were not flat two-dimensional paintings but actual three-dimensional spaces. I therefore asked to hang the paintings in a distance to the wall. I wished that the spectator and I could enter and participate into this space, which was a realm of memory and history, personal memory and history, but also of the history of my country, and who knows, of the "Magiciens de la Terre", too. Still today, I am moved by these works, and not only I, but also the public is still touched by them. The paintings are extremely spiritual, a spiritual space of participation. Only such paintings could be equal to the works by the masters surrounding me in the exhibition space. Looking at these works today I understand that the period I created them, April and May 1989, was a period when huge changes in the structure of the post-World War II political system began. First there was the fall of the Berlin Wall in October, and then there was the beginning of huge population movements, emigration movements, of which I was part, too. Someone who has experienced the spiritual realm engendered by my paintings will understand that the problems and questions after the fall of the Wall are even bigger than those of the Cold War. The control of information through the media became so important from this period on. I became aware of this aspect while having entered the autonomous space of my *Hundred Layers of Ink*.

Text :

Fritz Hansel / Yang Jiechang, «Republic of Fritz Hansel – A dialogue»,
in cat *Yang Jiechang - No Shadow Kick*, Shanghai : Tang Contemporary, 2008, pp.217-219

YJC: The standardization of information shocked me: is it possible that only two or three images record the War in Afghanistan, the Golf Wars and later September 11? There is absolute control. In the following, the overall occupation and usurpation of the world, the globalization, went on with swift path. I believe that this kind of situation is also caused by the lack of strong autonomous individuals worldwide. Facing the power of unification and globalization I feel that I have to strengthen my power as an individual and that participation is a must. I have to mingle with what happens. *Hundred Layers of Ink* records my perception of the world around, and my introspection, too. In the late 1990s I started to change the *Hundred Layers* paintings. The works became somehow narrative as I included images of elements and objects of my personal life, like for example my operation in 1969, or again the shape of my fingernails and my fingerprints. I called these works abstract objects. However, I was not totally satisfied with these works. I looked for something more complex, more profound. I and wanted to go further. In traditional Chinese painting there are three major disciplines: calligraphy, ink painting and meticulous colour painting. As a student we had to practice all of them. From 2000 on, I decided to use the technique of meticulous colour painting, a very traditional technique, to express my worldview. These works are more direct, as they have a concrete subject matter. Yet, my experience in calligraphy and in abstract ink painting, added spiritual depth to these realistic works. The aesthetic qualities of calligraphy and ink painting applied to this kind of technique make it more refined and elegant and further eliminate its tendency towards the vulgar. Calligraphy is very direct; nothing can be changed or redone. The first brush stroke is always visible. Your whole personality and experience is revealed in this first stroke. Another aspect of calligraphy is that you need your whole life to practice to obtain a good result. Today people usually don't have this time. Calligraphy helps me to control and solve the tensions and relations between ink painting and meticulous colour painting. In calligraphy I use a very straight forward and rough language: "Do not move", "Artists continue to try hard", "Oh, my god" and so on. I do not write some refined poetry, but I write poetry that incites people to react and to participate. This attitude affects my meticulous colour paintings in a way that they are as direct as my calligraphy. In my ink paintings nevertheless it leads to a kind of retreat and stillness. For me all these three disciplines form a whole.

Text :

Hou Hanru, «Towards A World of Poets -- Yang Jiechang's work»,
5 August 2008, San Fransisco

Towards A World of Poets -- Yang Jiechang's work.

Hou Hanru

Yang Jiechang is probably the most unpredictable and chaotic artists in his generation. For the last thirty years, he has constructed an immense body of work. It covers a large span of media and languages from ink-wash painting, Chinese calligraphy, drawing, photography, installation, performance, sound, music, multimedia to simply everyday actions while the formats vary from huge and oversized to tiny and quasi immaterial. However, he has never tightened himself to any fixed and established style, norm and issue. Instead, he always reacts to the given context and momentum of each events in which he participates and produces new concepts and forms to put forward his systematically critical, provocative and even subversive thoughts and expressions. He simply comes up with a new surprise every time.

1.

As we all know, the question of tradition and modernity has been the central debate for more than a century in China's modernisation process. Indeed, it's also a central or a battlefield in the modern history of the world driven by the clash the Western and the Non-Western worlds. Traditional forms of artistic expression have been regularly put in question. In the last century, "reforming" Chinese traditional painting (ink painting) has been an unsolved and somehow unsolvable obsession for the Chinese art world. It has been widely considered as a part of the national mission of cultural modernisation. This issue became even more crucial and urgent in the Chinese avant-garde movement of the 1980s. Trained as an ink painter and calligrapher, Yang Jiechang started his artistic career in involving himself with the debate. After gaining perfect skills of traditional painting and calligraphy and a deep knowledge of Chinese art history and theory, he sought to escape from the double confinement of the academic rules and the norms of the dominant Socialist Realism still prevailing in the art world, in order to obtain the real freedom and joy that art can offer. He spent a considerable amount of time in a Taoist temple in Luofu Mountain in Guangdong province and learned Taoism with a master. Instead of any fixed form of "traditional expression", he has learned that the real spirit of the tradition is to be found in the actions of the everyday which is in infinite change. One needs to face it in the normal state of mind and transmit the feeling in the immediate available language instead of any dogmatic formula. Tradition is actually a living process of accumulation of feeling, sensibility, knowledge and expressions that should be in constant evolution with time, rather than any kind of dogmas and fixed rules. It's a Tao, an endless route, instead of Tong, established rule and order. To reform the tradition does not mean an end of it. Instead, it's about injecting new and fresh energy and forms to continuously reactivate it. In the process, one should not simply destroy the existing and dominate norms but deconstruct it from within in the most active and reconstructing manner. Unlike many of his contemporary avant-gardists who claimed the death of the Chinese ink painting, Yang Jiechang simply continues to merge himself in the field and explores exhaustively all possibilities that the tradition can offer and invent totally new ways to utilise it.

Text :

Hou Hanru, «Towards A World of Poets -- Yang Jiechang's work»,
5 August 2008, San Francisco

Ink painting and calligraphy have hence remained the red string that conducts all his artistic adventures for the last three decades. And, it will continue to be so. In his numerous works, he incorporates all genres that ink painting contains and push them to the most radical degree of their possibilities. He has developed a system that combines huge scale “abstract” black-on-black works under the series names “thousands layers of ink”, meticulous brushwork paintings, gold-and-green landscape, splash-ink wash, and so on. What is really unique and stunning is he has decided to write calligraphy only in an upside-down way in order to obtain the exceptionally powerful but somehow eccentric effect that is impossible to achieve when written in normal direction. In addition, all these explorations of the expressions with ink are often expanded to take over the entire space of the exhibition as if their expansions could be totally beyond any boundary. Frequently, he incorporates any imaginable kind of media to bring this effort of expansion infinitely further: performance, installation, photography, video and even rock and roll! Together they create a wonderful world of a unique cacophonous concert of image, action, light and sound! It's in such a concert that Yang Jiechang navigates through the very tension of extreme control and radical abandonment of the control. In this way, Yang Jiechang opens up his own Tao, his own tradition that determines the very unique route that his art will take. If one can refer to the very spiritual state that Zen (whose Chinese version has been deeply influenced by the Taoist tradition) reveals, as Yang Jiechang himself often evokes, this is a powerful and effective *mélange* of the two opposite ways of the Northern school that emphasizes on hard working style meditation and the Southern school that argues for sudden enlightenment... It's by nature a world of hybridity situated in the constant evolving realm of the in-between. And this is also highly relevant in the contemporary world in which globalisation is driving us towards an increasingly hybrid and *mélange* reality. If Tao and Zen encourage the understanding of the inevitability of the communication and merge of Man and Nature, Yang Jiechang's engagement with the “tradition” actually provokes the necessity for everyone living in the contemporary world to embrace and merge with the other, with everyone and everything from different cultures while any “traditional form” of expression can be an effective medium to express the state of the world today... Yang Jiechang's art is somehow idealist and even utopian. It rejects any kind of dominant and normalised rules – political recuperation of norms of expressions. But it's by no means nihilist. Instead, it's always rooted on the ground in order to constantly revitalise the route of life itself. Taking real life as it is and absorbing it as a natural part of his work, it's a cocktail of idealism and realism, a pragmatic utopia...

2.

Fundamentally, Yang Jiechang's work is seeking for a complete merge of art and life. It takes place, at first, in the real in a literal sense of the term: art is a process of living experience that can only be sensed through the body itself. Understanding the circle between life and death as inevitable destiny of Man and the world, he lays bare his own body and its destiny in front of the public gaze: early in 1991, he announced his “Testament” in the form of a conceptual installation. A pottery pot is set in front of a white wall with a sentence written: “One day I die an unnatural death. Then one should feed me to a tiger and keep its excrements.”

Text :

Hou Hanru, «Towards A World of Poets -- Yang Jiechang's work»,
5 August 2008, San Francisco

Since then, he keeps resorting to his own body and turning it into a test ground for all kinds of exceptional states of being. In a series of performance and installation works dated back to the 1990s, he cut his own hairs and glued them to needles and nails with his own blood to form up "paintings". In another project, he installed a corridor in which the audience was forced to receive (low-voltage) electric shocks in order to be "enlightened". In many of his recent works, he introduces human skulls and body parts. Rather than showing the terror of death, he manages to turn them into suspiciously playful and ironic forms that provoke astonishment and laughter. For him, putting the body in an "abnormal" state and catch the extraordinary experience is certainly the best way to understand the very reality of his existence. This can be understood in a particular perspective related to his own life experience, which is, to different extents, shared by a great number of his contemporaries. As one of the first generation of Chinese contemporary artist settled abroad since the late 1980s, the question of cultural identity has been a central concern in his life and work. Like many of his colleagues, Yang Jiechang has never been entirely relying on his Chinese background. Instead, he adopts a completely open attitude towards all kinds of cultural influences that he encounters in his new living conditions consisting of a multi-national family, global city life and transcontinental travels. It's in the very process of confronting, embracing and exchanging with other cultures and different living realities that he has been constantly trying to reinvent his own identity. This is also a process that involves continuous reactivation of his own cultural background, memory and fantasy. For many immigrants, the first difficulty to adapt to the new life is often the language along with the difference of bodily habitudes such as instinct, taste, gesture and facial expression, etc. This is also the case for Yang Jiechang. However, instead of feeling inferior in the society, he manages to turn his somewhat "foreign" habitudes and uneven linguistic skill that mixes Cantonese, Mandarin, English, German and French into his advantage as an inventive way of communication that is increasingly gaining respects and understandings of his entourage and public. He incorporates such a linguistic mix bag in many of his art works. This shows the fact that, in the age of globalisation and trans-cultural communication, hybrid and alternative forms of linguistic and corporal, as well as artistic, expressions are indeed becoming more and more necessary and efficient. In a way, they are even more and more relevant in terms of the evolution of contemporary culture. It's in such an extraordinary state of being that one can actually rediscover one's true identity. This reveals a strong desire to subvert the socially received "common" values, criteria and even taboos. It's no surprise that sexuality has been brought to the centre of his work since his self-portrait of 40 years anniversary in 1996. Drawn with rough and strong black ink strokes, it's a full body nude of the artist with his penis erecting. Then, another series of ink paintings, multimedia installations and sound pieces, with or without images of love making, have been developed simply based on the joyful screaming of sexual ecstasy: Oh My God! On the other hand, in a number of his works depicting some extreme situations such as plane crashing, he uses Cantonese dirty words such as "Diu" and "Lokchat" as their titles and sound tracks. In fact, there is no better way for him, a "hybrid Cantonese", to express such an exceptional state of existence, the very existence between life and death!

Text :

Hou Hanru, «Towards A World of Poets -- Yang Jiechang's work»,
5 August 2008, San Francisco

3.

Obviously, Yang Jiechang's subversive usage of language in his work is a challenge to the established order of social codes and values. This mélange of the real and the surreal, the high and the low, the "clean" and "dirty", etc. destroys the usual moral hierarchy of language. It is a perfect way for him to continuously re-anchor his shifting identity and its relationship with the changing world in order to understand and manifest creativity in alternative forms. This anarchism is an act of liberation of the self. It also offers him a unique perspective to confront, observe and intervene in social reality itself. Living in a time of global conflicts, it's impossible for an artist like Yang Jiechang, who is extremely sensitive to changes in reality, not to express his reactions. Deeply concerned and even fascinated by spectacular events such as 9/11, he has come up with his own visual interpretations of them, pretty much based on rumours circulating among people of popular classes as alternative truths countering the biased assumptions promoted by mainstream media and political systems. In his installations "To Emily" and "Crying Landscape", he proposes the public to scrutinize the hyper realistic picture of the plane crashing into the Pentagon building in the morning of 9/11, 2001. The meticulous style that is capable to exhaust the potentiality of ink painting to reproduce the "real image" exposes all the details with articulations on some quasi-invisible elements to the public gaze. Eventually, it renders the image suspicious: the traces of the attack now look too real, too carefully organised, to be true... This in fact echoes the very popular "theory of conspiracy" claiming the image as a forgery, resulted from political manipulations. Indeed, the question here is not whether the image is real or not. What is important is that by messing his work up with such a polemic, Yang Jiechang has succeeded in making his art into a channel to make counter-reality visible and audible in a context where one can hardly hear any other voices but the propaganda of the mainstream media. This turns his art into a site of experiencing with alternative views, visions and voices in terms of definition of reality and truth. It certainly implies desires and strategies of resistance, allowing the oppressed, or the silent majority, to express themselves vis-à-vis some crucial and grand issues of society and the world. It's no surprise that, a couple years later, in the 2nd Guangzhou Triennial, 2005, that Yang Jiechang came up with an audacious but intelligent provocation, the performance-installation named "The Pearl River". The Triennial with the title "Beyond – an extraordinary space of experimentation for modernization", referring to the particular historic and cultural context of the Pearl River Delta, focused its concern on the dynamic and conflictive relationship between global and local, between national and regional, between art and reality in order to claim for the opening of an in-between space for alternative models of thinking and actions. Grasping this opportunity, Yang Jiechang created an installation with a huge flag in the form of a national emblem along with a huge neon sign stating the voice of the P.R.D. (Pearl River Delta): "We are good at everything, except for speaking Mandarin". On the opening, a rock and roll band played a song that resembled an anthem... In 2007, exactly ten years after Hong Kong's hand-over to China, he showed another even more provocative series in the city under the title "The Most Beautiful Country of China". Again, it's a series of hyper realistic paintings with meticulous brushwork franked by neon signs.

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Next to the phrase, one can respectively observe the post-card style views of Victoria Harbour, Mong Kok shopping streets and Lingnan School ink wash paintings. These are clichés that can be seen as emblems of this international metropolis that has lived through a complex colonial and postcolonial history and still remained in a certain complicated relationship with the “motherland”. However, if it’s certainly justified to consider Yang Jiechang’s work, with all its purported contradictions, suggest a claim for a form of autonomy or even independence of the region, what is much more important is to understand such a claim is indeed pointing to a much more universal dimension. In the age of conflict between homogenisation prompted rapidly by globalisation and “differentiation” as resistance of the establishment of the nation-state, one should look for a third road that leads to a real liberation of independent spirits and encourages a destruction of the tyranny of the dominant logic of confrontation and struggle between the dominant and dominated.

In an interview, Yang Jiechang explained his motivation to emphasize the linguistic and cultural autonomy of the Cantonese:

“To simplify traditions has become a serious problem. It belittles traditions and creates confusion...

“Culture appears, disappears, and relives in a natural environment. If we don’t remind people how beautiful Cantonese is, it will soon be gone. Mandarin will soon become the mandatory official language in Hong Kong, and people in Macau already speak Mandarin. This is no good! I think such a trend is horrible. If things continue to go this way, it’ll be very dangerous. China will become one big empty shell. It’s impossible for China to have a great literary writer today. The language is empty; the newspapers are empty. There are no poets anymore.”

It’s time to imagine a world that language can become rich and complex again. That will be a world of poets instead of the one of advertisers. This can only be constructed with multidimensional paradigms in terms of conceptualising and structuring territory, population, culture, politics and economy. An open society governed by hybridity instead of purity, in ethnic, cultural, economic and political terms is the answer. And tolerating and encouraging alternatives, minor but vital forms of expressions are no doubt the first step towards such a new world.

5 August 2008, San Francisco

Visiting information

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FREE ADMISSION

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Information and booking :

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