

THAT WAS THEN

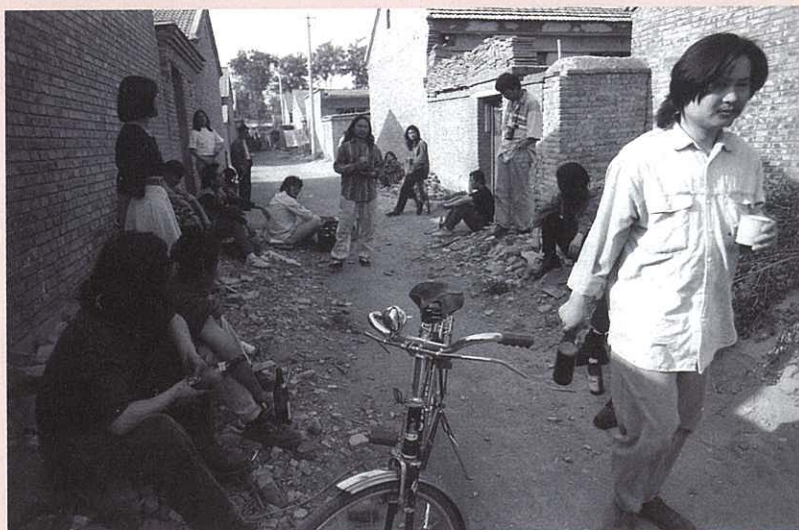
Four Leading Figures Look Back on Chinese Art in the 1990s

BY ANTONY DAPIRAN

Before the boom of the 2000s—before Ai Weiwei exhibited at Tate Modern, and Cai Guo-Qiang at the Guggenheim, before a canvas by Zhang Xiaogang sold for USD 12 million, and one by Zeng Fanzhi went for USD 23 million at Sotheby's—there was the 1990s. It was a very different period for art in China, when even the idea that artworks might be sold, or that a contemporary artist might make a living from their art, seemed far-fetched. The thought of a Chinese artist being an international media darling, exhibiting at global art institutions and breaking auction records in New York or London, seemed an impossible dream.

When looking back on the history of Chinese contemporary art, most would consider the 1990s as the formative years. Yet some argue that the origins of the genre date back to Deng Xiaoping's Opening Up and Reform policies in the late 1970s—among them Dr. Claire Roberts, associate professor of art history at the University of Melbourne. Roberts, one of four leading experts on a panel organized by *ArtAsiaPacific* during this year's edition of Art Basel Hong Kong to mark the magazine's 25th anniversary, traced the long backstory of Chinese contemporary art to the "late 1970s with the changes that were happening in China: the resumption of publishing, artist groups organizing themselves and creating exhibitions, and the reopening of universities such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts after the end of the Cultural Revolution." These reforms enabled a series of overseas exhibitions to tour China in the 1980s, allowing art students—and the wider community—to see important works by Western artists, including Pablo Picasso in 1983, Robert Rauschenberg in 1985, and an exhibition of Australian art that toured China in 1989.

The late 1970s and early 1980s also saw the founding of China's first artist groups, such as the Stars Art Group, which included artists Ai Weiwei, Ma Desheng, Wang Keping and Huang Rui, among others, in 1979, and the '85 New Wave art movement, associated with artists such as Gu Wenda, Mao Xuhui, Geng Jianyi and Xu Bing. The decade culminated in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, held at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, in February 1989, featuring artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi and Zhang Peili. This exhibition, according to Johnson Tsong-zung Chang, founder of Hong Kong's influential Hanart TZ



LIU SHUYONG, *Artists Gathering at Fuyuanmen Village, Yuanmingyuan, for the First Gallery Opening, 1993*, photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Gallery, was the "defining moment of the conclusion of the experimental avant-garde movement of the '80s." However, subsequent events that year ended this brief period of public experimentation.

The beginning of the 1990s found China cut off from the outside world. Inside China, artists again found themselves isolated and discouraged from making art. Yet this birthed an important period of "incubation," explained Chang: "Art-making did not stop. Artists basically went back to the studio and worked more independently than they had before." To onlookers, however, it would have been difficult to foresee the flourishing of art that would unfold over the subsequent decade.

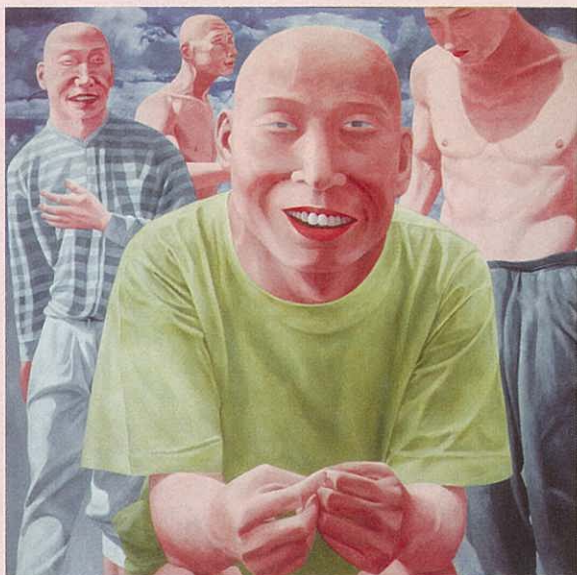
This period of isolation soon came to an end when Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in the early spring of 1992 officially endorsed a resumption of "reform and opening." The art world took its cue, hosting two key events in October and November of 1992: the Guangzhou Biennial Art Fair and the Art Asia Hong Kong fair. Though billed as "art fairs," these events took on a larger significance. According to Karen Smith: "Artists were less interested in selling art than having a platform. This was the start of artists receiving affirmation that their work had value." At the time, Smith was based in Beijing and engaged directly with

Chinese artists, visiting studios, attending gatherings and exhibitions. Through time, this role developed into one of helping Chinese artists communicate with visiting curators and institutional representatives, eventually aiding them in exhibiting their works in China and abroad.

This affirmation was boosted by the attention of international collectors such as Uli Sigg, who recently donated his collection of 1,500 works of Chinese contemporary art to Hong Kong's M+ museum. While living in China in the early 1990s in his capacity as Swiss ambassador to China, Sigg began seeking out new Chinese art: "At first I was looking at it just with my personal taste," Sigg recalled, "until I realized that no one else was collecting, so I imposed that mission upon myself to collect like an institution would. Then I started to collect at a rapid pace."

The following year saw a number of landmark events that brought Chinese contemporary art to the attention of the wider world. An international touring show curated by Chang featured in the Hong Kong Arts Festival in January 1993. Chang, working together with curator Li Xianting, toured artists' studios to select work. As he recounted, "I was looking for artworks by artists who were active in the previous years but who had totally changed their styles from 1990 onward. The idea was to show what were the new artistic markers of the new decade, the spirit of the '90s." This became the "China's New Art, Post-1989" exhibition, a remarkable gathering of the leading Chinese artists including Zeng Fanzhi, Fang Lijun, Zhang Xiaogang and many others. After showing in Hong Kong, the exhibition went on to tour internationally for five years, to Taipei, Melbourne, Vancouver, London and around the United States. Also in 1993, Chinese artists were featured for the first time at the Venice Biennale. Sigg notes the importance of this exposure for Chinese artists, several of whom were exhibited in the Arsenale, in the "Aperto" section, and the "Passage to the Orient" exhibition in Venice: "The gatekeepers of these big institutions in the West *had* to walk through it. They *had* to look at Chinese art."

In the early 1990s, much of the focus of artistic activity in China was around artists' villages such as Beijing's Yuanmingyuan village. These villages arose



FANG LIJUN, *Series II, No. 1, 1991-92*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

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as a result of new government land-use policies, which permitted farmers living on the outskirts of cities to build and rent houses on their land. Although the policy was originally intended to accommodate the first wave of migrant workers moving from the countryside into the cities, artists embraced the opportunity to live outside the strictures of the traditional "work unit." In the Yuanmingyuan artists' village—and other similar areas such as the East Village and, later, Songzhuang—artists who had come from outside Beijing and were not "assigned" a job in Beijing upon graduation could continue to live and work in Beijing without an official *hukou* residence permit. The accommodation at the Yuanmingyuan village was basic, as Smith described: "They were just brick huts with no glass in the windows—there was paper for windows—and people like Fang Lijun, who was one of the first to move in, froze through the winter." However, Yuanmingyuan village was unexpectedly cleared and shut down in 1995.

Smith emphasized the important role these artists' villages played: "The artists' villages really gave a face to a new form of art. In these places, artists were able to work, to communicate with each other, [and] dialogue with visitors . . . In spite of all the [government] surveillance, what was really important was that they were together and able to focus on creating great work."

However, notwithstanding the action the authorities took against places such as Yuanmingyuan, Chang warned against any temptation to over-romanticize the notion of "underground" art: in China, he explained, "the division between the 'underground' and the 'above-ground' was not such a sharp divide." While we may think of Chinese contemporary art as radical or non-conformist, Chang countered that "in fact, they were all artists who had graduated from art academies. Many of the artists we consider radical were artists who survived on stipends from the [state-backed] art academies."

Still, Chang views the 1990s as a time of significant transformation. During the 1980s, he contends, "artists saw themselves as part of a cultural movement, not just within visual arts, but something that was integral to wholesale cultural change." This relationship between artists and socio-cultural movements changed in the 1990s, when the affirmation that artists' sought was no longer that of critical regard in Chinese art journals or the attention of "those audiences that were going to effect policy and social change in China," said Chang, but rather "international curators and critics, and important global art institutions."

For Roberts, though the progress made by Chinese artists in the 1990s and after on the international scene is significant, there is still work to be done. "It's still not a common thing for us to walk through major museums and see a strong representation of contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region." Institutions outside China, Roberts believes, still need to "catch up." Smith looks back on the 1990s as "an incredibly important decade that deserves a lot more attention than it gets," a time of creativity and experimentation. Yet the art historian also feels that a fuller narrative of the 1990s is still to be written: "Only when this younger generation actually starts to go back, question, dig up, revisit and deconstruct—only then we will see what is the legacy of the 1990s."