THE MAKING OF UNOFFICIAL SPACE:
1989 AND THE DEFINITION OF A CHINESE VANGUARD

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Introduction.

In February of 1989, just months before the Tiananmen Square protests caught the attention of the world, a remarkable event had already taken place in Beijing: an art exhibition called *China /Avant-garde* (Fig. 1) was held at the National Gallery of Art, the first comprehensive display of contemporary and “experimental” art to be presented in the People’s Republic, let alone one set within a bastion of official culture. “The first grand modern art exhibition of China organized by Chinese artists themselves,”¹ as Gao Minglu, one of the chief organizers of the show put it, and “the first nationwide unofficial exhibition in China since 1949,”² took years to organize,³ but in the end, managed to feature nearly three hundred works from nearly two hundred artists, spanning all three floors of the exhibition space.

Two interesting things happened after the exhibition opened: first, while it may be tempting to view the show as a triumph in the development of modern art forms in China,⁴ the general public was actually bewildered by the work on view, even aggravated.

³ About three, to be more precise, starting with a conference in 1986 initiated by Zhongguo meishubao (中国美术报) (China Fine Arts Newspaper), and continuing with planning in 1987 at locations which had to be continuously moved due to pressure from the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism campaign. For a thorough overview of the planning and negotiation required to stage the exhibition, see Ibid., 269-76. See also Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, “The avant-garde’s challenge to official art,” in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China* eds. Deborah S. Davis et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 239; Tang Qingnian, “The Eighties in Modern Chinese Painting,” trans. Richard E. Strassberg, in “I Don’t Want to Play Cards with Cézanne” and Other Works ed. Richard E. Strassberg (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1991); or Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 19.
⁴ Perhaps such an expectation of artistic advance can be explained in terms of a western modernist affinity for a teleological development of culture. A historiographic lens suggesting that culture inevitably moves
Next, party officials expressed antipathy toward the exhibition, and even a kind of anxiety over the show as a possible “political” act, this despite an almost complete lack of overt political content in the work itself. In looking at the intersection of these responses, we can characterize the effect of the exhibition on Beijing society at the time not as an effective aesthetic revolution – one which might prompt art audiences to suddenly accept and appreciate new media – but as a jolting destabilization of the discourses of official culture embedded in a space like the National Gallery of Art. Seen in aggregate with other social reform movements of the time, we can read the exhibition as one component in an overall momentum toward social opening, and these components, occurring in close geographic and temporal proximity to one another, could increase each other’s discursive weight, inform each other’s meanings, and free up each other’s acceptance as viable possibilities. In this sense, it is important to remember that the content of work is not the only aspect of an exhibition that can be politicized – new strategies of presentation and reception, new modes of communication, these must all be taken into account when determining social effect. And so perhaps the question most appropriately posed is not simply whether China / Avant-garde was a political exhibition, but if so, how so?

For their part, officials seemed at least initially to continue defining “political art” primarily as a matter of content: of the work exhibited in China / Avant-garde, it appears that only Wang Guangyi’s Mao Zedong No. 1 was continually scrutinized and fretted over as a work which potentially harbored political undertones, which was not surprising given the centrality of Mao’s visage to the composition (Fig. 2). As reported in The Economist: “Only one painting, a triptych of Mao heads covered with a black grid, appears to make any political comment.” “Get set, go.” The Economist (18 February 1989). The official worry was that this work could be read as an image of Mao imprisoned. Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 277.

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As the first large-scale declaration of a Chinese “avant-garde,”\(^6\) we can look at the specifics of the exhibition as a conceptual totality, giving semantic, theoretical and sociological consideration to just what it meant to be “avant-garde” in this context. How might a broader social impact, in other words, have been generated by this visual upheaval in 1989 Beijing, and what was its ultimate role in facilitating the larger movement of modernization and reform that year? Wu Hung has commented that we can think of this exhibition as a single coherent work of art unto itself,\(^7\) arguing that, as an introduction of Chinese “avant-gardism” to the general public, it was regarded by organizers as a singular, cohesive event, a kind of grand stage on which to declare the potency of contemporary Chinese art. I believe that we can build on this idea by analyzing this “work” in the same manner as we would any of its constituent parts—formally, semiotically, contextually—looking at the ways in which the works displayed were categorized, packaged, and presented for the digestion of the public.

In examining any exhibition, the arrangement of exhibits in the space of display reveals an outline of emphases, and in art shows in particular, certain aesthetic emphases can speak of value and ideology, and suggest stasis, reaction, or shifts within. This is true also of *China / Avant-garde*, and in statements of curators and artists, surviving photo-documentation, examination of the placement of work, and the resultant historiography, a pattern of emphasis emerges prioritizing some media above others—in this case, installation and performance, forms which would have been largely unseen by the Chinese public at this time.

\(^6\) Gao describes the show as “the birth of the first avant-garde exhibition in contemporary Chinese art history.” Ibid.

\(^7\) Wu, *Transience*, 20.
By promoting these formally unprecedented works, organizers and artists expanded on the National Gallery audience’s relationship to art, strengthening the audience’s role in establishing the meaning of the experience. Installation and performance works infiltrated the space of spectatorship, and visualized an artistic avant-garde as a literal attack on the physicality of the National Gallery and the experiences of its visitors. These media changed not only the way that art was viewed in the context of an official cultural space, but also the way that the site itself was experienced physically, psychologically, and socially. Through emphasis on work requiring bodily engagement and interpersonal interaction, the traditional trajectory of the visitor at the site was replaced by a new, jarringly counter-discursive scenario. The nature of the new art required the audience to abandon rote movement through an officially constructed narrative, emphasizing instead individual action, both on the part of the artist and the audience. Through unexpected participation, *China / Avant-garde* prompted the audience to exercise agency, making decisions on how best to engage with the art on view, or how best to respond to chaotic events unfolding at the museum.

In this way, the audience was pressed into a condition of communal meaning-making, not only helping to define the significance of the art, but collaboratively asserting the potency of individual and collective action in the very heart of official control. This is true because many of the events in which the audience played a role went beyond artistic expression into the realm of cultural subversion, and such extraordinary conditions revealed through phenomenological engagement that the authority of the National Gallery, and of the Party on the whole, was open to viable challenge. In this sense, the show didn’t just expand on forms of artistic expression – it facilitated an
experiential reception of new possibility, and created in the audience a pool of social agents, carrying with them a personalized understanding of the potential for individual efficacy.

Thus, though the post-Tiananmen crackdown on progressive artistic pursuits might suggest that the exhibition didn’t have the opportunity to effect a significant influence on the development of Chinese art forms, I believe such an assessment misses the mark when it comes to gauging the show’s impact on its community. Ultimately, the significance of *China / Avant-garde* should be measured not in its immediate shaping of art trends, but in the ways that it upset routines of audienceship silently reaffirming a monolithic presentation of official culture. Such an outcome was intrinsically tied to this particular time and place: the National Gallery of Art in Beijing had, since its mid-century founding, been employed in the display of official celebration, commemorating and solidifying policy and ideology. Such museum spaces – especially ones serving as

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8 In fact this remains debatable, as many of those involved in the show went on to gain international stature as curators, critics and artists in the global scene. Among the chief organizers of the show, for instance, were Gao Minglu, Li Xianting, Fei Dawei, Tang Qingnian and Hou Hanru; and participating artists included such now iconic figures as Zhang Peili, Gu Wenda, Wang Guangyi, Geng Jianyi, Xu Bing, Fang Lijun, Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, Zhang Xiaogang, Ding Yi, Wu Shanzhuan, Yu Youhan, Wang Youshen, Wang Luyan and Li Shan, among numerous others. However, acclaim for many of these artists and curators would come first abroad, taking root in China only after a cooling of the political climate. The crackdown on progressive art that followed the Tiananmen protests made it impossible to now know whether these new art trends could be immediately followed up upon. The old accusation of “bourgeois liberalization” was once again leveled at proponents of progressive art: the *Zhongguo meishubao* offices were shuttered, and *Meishu*’s (美术) (Fine Arts) editorial board was purged of forward thinking editors. See Ralph Croizier, “The Avant-garde and the Democracy Movement: Reflections on Late Communism in the USSR and China,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51:3 (1999), 505-6. In 1991, two years after *China / Avant-garde* and Tiananmen, the Beijing Domestic Radio Service reported on an article in the *Renmin ribao* which declared: “On the issue of the principle for literature and art, there have been controversies and struggles in recent years. The controversies and struggles are one of the most conspicuous indications of the confrontation between the Four Cardinal Principles and bourgeois liberalization. Literary and art workers in some areas and units had for some time lost their direction and gone astray. It has been a profound lesson. The article pointed out: To implement the party’s correct policy and rectify the direction of literature and art, we should strengthen the party’s leadership.” Beijing Domestic Radio Service, “Party’s Leadership over Arts Stressed” (4 January 1991), in *China Since Tiananmen: Political, Economic, and Social Conflicts* ed. Lawrence R. Sullivan (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 267.
major civic monuments – present a vision of cultural correctness, or “truth,” from a position of authority, and in these instances, museum-goers enact a receptive ritual, personally legitimizing the citations on display, and any attached ideological assertions within them. Against such a construction of official discourse, China / Avant-garde changed the meaning of the site, upending the reflexive receptivity normally in place. In doing so, the exhibition freed up not only a new aesthetic space, but a whole new notional and social space in which an “avant-garde” identity could exist at all.

Accumulations of discourse at the National Gallery of Art.

The National Gallery of Art (Fig. 3) was completed as part of a program called the Ten Great Buildings project. Conceived of as a series of civic structures representing the development and success of the state under the Chinese Communist Party, these structures frequently took their cues explicitly from models of civic architecture found in western capitals like Paris (Fig.4), Washington (Fig. 5), Moscow. And understood in this choice of emulation appears to have been that such structures could serve as functional monuments: buildings which could at once fulfill a primary

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9 As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains: “Displayed objects of all types are made meaningful according to the interpretive frameworks within which they are placed, and the historical or cultural position from which they are seen. Thus the interpretation of visual culture has political implications; it may be used to open or close possibilities for individuals, groups or communities”; she goes on to say that, “through display, museums can make new meanings which are produced through new equivalences. Museums thus have the power to remap cultural territories, and to reshape the geographies of knowledge. These are political issues, concerned with the opening up or closing down of democratic public life…This is why museums are sites of contention, but also why they are potential sites for change.” Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture, Museum Meanings series (London: Routledge, 2000), 8 and 21, respectively.

10 See Wu Hung, Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 118.

educational or recreational function, while at the same time aggrandizing an ideology, or
a political or social policy.

Such a utility in these western structures was used in Beijing as well, and the Ten
Great Buildings could, through this dynamic, assert China’s development into a modern
state,\textsuperscript{12} under the guidance of the CCP. In addition to their architectural grandeur, these
institutions in China were also thematically didactic, solidifying ideological legitimacy
and providing a creation myth for the successes of the Party. Among the institutions in
this program, for instance, were such establishments as the Great Hall of the People, the
Museum of Revolutionary History, the Chinese People’s Revolutionary Military Museum,
the National Agricultural Exhibition Hall\textsuperscript{13}: these themes assert a triumph of policy,
presenting an assortment of historical narratives to buttress the civic virtue of the
People’s Republic of China.

Beijing’s National Gallery used this strategy as well, and its history of official art
served as an agent of cultural regulation in a number of ways. To begin with, of course, it
suggested formal limits on the types of art produced, in that art was given a “correct”
form, suggesting that deviation from this form was itself subversive. Against these
conventions, \textit{China / Avant-garde} would have been thematically and formally very
different,\textsuperscript{14} and the type of art promoted by the exhibition (even work presented in such

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} As Zhu Linyong writes, the exhibition was remarkable in that it “[challenged] the conventional, ‘socialist
realism’ approach to art” (Zhu Linyong, “The Shooting Star,” \textit{Asianews} [14-20 November 2008], 24), and
as Lars Laamann, of the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, notes more
specifically, “I think what made the exhibition so experimental was it was one of the first ones that did not
show happy farmers plowing the fields and people from ethnic minorities dancing. In a way, it was quite
disturbing.” Lars Laamann, quoted in Anita Chang, “Police Block Events Ahead of Tiananmen
Anniversary: Beijing police block events surrounding avant-garde art exhibit marking 20 years since 1989,”
“standard” media as painting or sculpture) was anathema to official sensibilities of acceptable art, in which “the most controversial point was that it was a show of Western modern and postmodern styles. These art styles and schools have always been considered heretical by the government.”\(^{15}\)

But what ultimately changed in the National Gallery, upon the display of these new forms? Where, in other words, can we locate the extended transformational possibility to which I have alluded in introduction? We can describe the ways that the materiality of the structure – its paintings, sculptures, corridors, walkways – took on new appearances, but simply listing such an inventory says little about the *meaning* of a space, and ultimately it is this meaning that undergoes the most drastic transformation. To understand how such meanings are generated to begin with, perhaps Henri Lefebvre’s ideas will be useful, as for example when he explains that “these spaces are *produced*. The ‘raw material’ from which they are produced is nature. They are products of an activity which involves the economic and technical realms but which extends well beyond them, for these are also political products, and strategic spaces.” Lefebvre goes on to say that “the state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces – but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements.”\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 271. Worth mentioning, however, is the fact that Soviet art was not considered “western” in this sense. Examining the socialist realist styles promoted by Chinese officials, for example, we can note that such styles were typically derived from Soviet models.

\(^{16}\) Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 84. The importance of the relationship between art and its space of display, in ultimately generating an experience of meaning, has led some contemporary visual culture theorists, such as David Summers, for example, to propose replacing the term “visual art” with the more all-encompassing “spatial art.” See David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York: Phaidon, 2003).
Thus, while space, as it is basically understood – an expanse which objects might occupy, which people may pass through, or where events might transpire – begins in nature, it becomes, under political influences, circumscribed. And when thus controlled in a particular context of power relationships, it is no longer useful to consider spaces “natural.” This is particularly true of exhibitory spaces, spaces of display controlled by governmental power – civic monuments, for example, like national museums. Once controlled, the meanings of these spaces can be described as products, and in that structures like the National Gallery of Art are commissioned, overseen, and upheld by official agencies, we can say that these products are generated and dictated through power, and often for power, as an articulation of its veracity.

At the National Gallery of Art, one additional way this function was furthered was through the very types of exhibitions staged at the museum prior to China / Avant-garde. Although the National Gallery was conceived of as a venue for “contemporary art,” the types of art exhibited there were frequently subject to official selection and promotion, as indicated by Gao when he explains that “all the important official art exhibitions, such as the National Art Exhibition…and certain commemorative exhibitions, such as the Exhibition of the Twentieth, Thirtieth, and Fortieth Celebration of the Foundation of the People’s Republic of China, have been displayed in the National Gallery.”

The work

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17 All of which leads Gao to conclude that “the National Gallery is a symbol of the highest authority on the national level in the Chinese art world.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 272. He explains, for instance, that the Sixth National Art Exhibition was made up primarily of “idealistic realism,” though it also included examples of the newer trend of “scar art.” See Gao Minglu, “The 1985 New Wave Art Movement,” trans. Don J. Cohn, in China's New Art, Post-1989, with a Retrospective from 1979-1989 ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), C1V. The term “scar art” here describes a painting style which first appeared toward the end of the 1970s, and which thematically addressed the injuries of the Cultural Revolution in its narrative content. Although the mood of these paintings was quite novel in the aftermath of those times, the work continued to be rendered in an academic realist style, stemming from the tradition of Socialist Realism. Such a ceaseless preponderance of realism prompted
displayed in these official exhibitions, therefore, was thematically celebratory, harmoniously describing a valorized history of the PRC. Significantly, this avenue for normalizing and authenticating power would also be upended by *China / Avant-garde*, along with the aesthetic norms of the institution: the spatially confusing installations and bewildering performances staged were often dangerous and contentious, doing away with

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Liao Wen to conclude that “the official art world maintained its monopoly over major exhibitions such as the All-China Art Exhibition, that showcase for orthodoxy” (Liao Wen, “Unrepentant Prodigal Sons: The Temper of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in Doran, LV), and Li Xianting (another of *China / Avant-garde’s* chief organizers) to comment that “Maoist art still held sway in official circles as evinced by the *Sixth All-China Art Exhibition* held in 1985.” Li Xianting, “Notes and Illustrations to ‘Major Trends in the Development of Modern Chinese Art,’” trans. Geremie Barmé, in Doran, LXXVIII. By contrast, although it does appear that works of new media, such as installation, video, and performance, were steadily gaining momentum in underground circles during the mid to late 1980s, exhibition of these works seems to have been kept at a comparatively lower profile in the country at that time, and was regularly interrupted and hindered by conditions of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983 and 1984, and the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism campaign in 1987. As a result of these conditions, Hou Hanru (who was also a central member of the *China / Avant-garde* organizing committee) describes 1980s art shows as being primarily “independent events, often underground or semi-underground.” Hou Hanru, “Longing for Paradise, Negotiating with the Real: Looking at the Chinese Art Scene Today,” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* eds. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 33. Li explains also that the new Chinese art was organized as “predominantly an underground movement,” revealing itself through “privately-run exhibitions” (Li, “Notes and Illustrations to ‘Major Trends in the Development of Modern Chinese Art,’” LXXVIII), and Liao that “artists outside the establishment mainstream had no choice but to organise unofficial and autonomous displays of their work. These ‘underground activities’ took place in a legal no man’s land. They were always open to political attack….The leading artists of the ‘85 New Wave Art Movement – Zhang Peili, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Xiaogang, Ding Fang and Li Shan never had individual shows.” Liao, LV. Many of these and other artists who would go on to exhibit in *China / Avant-garde* seem to have encountered particular difficulties in showing their work during the earlier 80s. An exhibition of modern art in Xiamen, in 1983, which included Huang Yongping, was “prevented from being shown to the public,” and another exhibition Huang was involved in, in Fujian, in 1986, was “shut down two hours after the opening.” Feng Boyi, “Chronology 1979-2004,” in Fibicher and Frehner, 324 and 327, respectively. Gu Wenda’s first solo show, in Xi’an, and also in 1986, similarly fell victim to closure (John Clark, “Modernity in Chinese Art, 1850s-1990s: Some Chronological Materials,” *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* vol. 29 [1997], 148), and in 1985, an exhibition in Taiyuan which included installation and video work was stopped by authorities on opening day. Feng, 326. As Gao politely puts it, “few of the [‘underground’] exhibitions lasted very long.” Gao, “The 1985 New Wave Art Movement,” CIV. Even the shows which did successfully take place often ended up being staged only for the benefit of other artists or art world insiders, at smaller galleries or in university settings. See Feng, “Chronology.” The Red Humour International Group, for example, which included Wu Shanzhuan and Ni Haifeng, both of whom would later exhibit at *China / Avant-garde*, mounted a show in 1986 called *Red 70%, Black 25%, and White 5%*, “for private view only.” Ibid., 326. And the Pond Society, which also counted eventual *China / Avant-garde* participants Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi among its founders, created a public installation in the woods in Hangzhou, called *Work No. 2: Walkers in the Green* – “only a few spectators [were] present.” Ibid., 327.
a peaceful celebration of culture in favor of a suggestion that contemporary culture was instead in a state of discordance.

Introducing such new situations and dynamics would have been effective in altering the site because, although the meanings of spaces might at first be dictated by power, these meanings can never be fixed – their borders and substance are always further nuanced, re-contoured by the social interactions taking place within them; they are legitimized by micro-affirmations in the social life of the site. In the case of a national museum, these interactions can shape the parameters of a gaze, the connotations and understandings of a cultural experience. So when Lefebvre wonders if space is a “floating ‘medium’, a simple abstraction, or a ‘pure’ form?” he answers himself by concluding that it is not any of these things, “precisely because it has a content.” And this content is relational: even as a space is defined by power, the efficacy of that definition depends on its unimpeded reception by a visitor, a constituent, etc., and it is in this circuit of reception that the most effective disruption can take place.

As such, official agencies will often go to great architectural and exhibitionary lengths to solidify the “truth” of a particular site. As Carol Duncan writes, “a museum is not the neutral and transparent sheltering space that it is often claimed to be. More like the traditional ceremonial monuments that museum buildings frequently emulate [Fig. 5, for example]…it also carries out broad…political and ideological tasks.” In the Ten Great Buildings project, Wu Hung has noted that a common design trait of the buildings is a construction plan emphasizing an expansive, monumental exterior, while the interior

18 Lefebvre, 82.
spaces of the buildings were disproportionately limited. In that façade was given priority over usable display space, we can conclude that the function of the structures was more iconic than it was utilitarian: the façade served as a symbolic face for the spaces within, and entering through these faces suggests to the visitor a certain solemn air, an expectation of reverential reception appropriate to the site – the façade infuses the space with its particular receptive timbre.

In its aggrandized face, therefore, the National Gallery of Art claims the significance and authority of the spaces within, reinforced by the immovable gravity of the structure itself, and begins a ritual of reception as described by Duncan, when she explains that

Museums do not simply resemble temples architecturally; they work like temples…Museumgoers…bring with them the willingness…to shift into a certain state of receptivity…So visitors to a museum follow a route through a programmed narrative – in this case, one or another version of the history of art. In the museum, art history displaces history, purges it of social and political conflict, distills it down to a series of triumphs.

In the process of this ritual, visitors affirm their positions within a national heritage, participating in and validating a legitimization of present-day power relationships. With its series of commemorative exhibitions dedicated to celebrating the foundation of the People’s Republic, the National Gallery establishes this aura of unconflicted triumph perhaps more explicitly than other such institutions. Moreover, it was not only this particular institution that promoted a triumphant, unconflicted view of art. Within the cultural history of the nation, we can trace back at least as far as Mao’s Yan’an talks an

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20 Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, 118.
21 Duncan, 90.
explicit guideline suggesting that art be free of conflict unless it is presented as part of the revolutionary struggle.\(^{22}\) From the standpoint of policy, official art in the 1950s and 60s (see Fig. 6, for example) took an unwavering celebratory approach, an attempted reassurance that CCP social policy had delivered chiefly sunlit bounty.

Thus, Duncan’s emphasis on citizenship is particularly relevant in a PRC context given the agenda of image-building used by sites like the Ten Great Buildings to reinforce political and cultural formations of power, and the venue of the National Gallery fits this model well. Not only does the building’s very structure fit the model of a “civic temple,” but even the content of its exhibitions focused on national legitimacy, serving up a cultural history unblemished by disagreement.

In this way, the National Gallery illustrates very well the idea of a space as a symbol, asserting the righteousness of an official cultural patrimony. With so deep an accumulation of ideological history, the museum was anchored in the social life of the city by considerable discursive mass, tightly-constricted and hemmed in by the laudatory exhibitions staged within. The museum, therefore, was a heavy presence, a stealthy

\(^{22}\) Or also, at that time, as part of the resistance to Japan invasion. As Mao declared on that occasion, artists and writers “should unite…on issues peculiar to the literary and artistic world, questions of method and style in literature and art.” Mao Tse-Tung (Mao Zedong). “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art: May 1942,” in Mao Tse-Tung, \textit{On New Democracy, Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art, On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People, Speech at the Chinese Communist Party’s National Conference on Propaganda Work} (Peking [Beijing]: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 98. He continued by clarifying that, “according to the political criterion, everything is good that is helpful to unity and resistance to Japan, that encourages the masses to be of one heart and one mind…on the other hand, everything is bad that is detrimental to unity and resistance to Japan, foments dissension and discord among the masses (Ibid., 99-100).” In our criticism we must adhere firmly to principle and severely criticize and repudiate all works of literature and art expressing views in opposition to the nation, to science, to the masses and to the Communist Party, because these so-called works of literature and art proceed from the motive and produce the effect of undermining unity for resistance to Japan.” Ibid., 100. In the end, Mao suggests that artists can look to Soviet models from periods of socialist construction, in order to portray “mainly the bright…[the artist might depict] shortcomings in work and…negative characters, but this only serves as a contrast to bring out the brightness of the whole picture.” Ibid., 104. Thus, as Leo Ou-fan Lee summarizes, Mao’s Yan’an talks established the stipulation that “art must ‘extol’ the positive aspects of life.” Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Against the Ideological Grain: A Background View of the Resurgence of Artistic Creativity in China During the Eighties,” in Strassberg, 3.
enforcer in the cultural power relationships of the nation. And in this sense, we can read the National Gallery as a prime example of both Lefebvre’s controlled, strategic spaces and Duncan’s civic monuments infused with ideological ritual. And it was this ideological arena, I will argue, which served as the actual battleground on which China / Avant-garde was ultimately fought, more than any terrain laid out by the formal development of art.

Designing a spatial attack.

The two chief curators of China / Avant-garde were Gao Minglu (then editor of Meishu [美术] [Fine Arts], and later to curate the pivotal Inside Out exhibition in the United States, in 1998), and Li Xianting (then editor of the relatively newly established Zhongguo meishubao [中国美术报] [China Fine Arts Newspaper], one of many publications cropping up at the time dedicated to critical examination of contemporary Chinese art). The two seem to have been at odds when it came to a curatorial strategy23: whereas Gao hoped for a retrospective covering the development of what’s known as the ‘85 New Wave of Chinese art (Bawu xinchao) (八五新潮),24 an approach which might demonstrate this movement’s logical progression, and its connection to the then contemporary movements in Chinese art,25 Li viewed the exhibition as an occasion on

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23 In Michael Sullivan’s overview of the proceedings, he describes how these differences of opinion nearly brought the men to blows. Michael Sullivan, Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 274.
24 Also sometimes ‘85 Art Movement (Bawu meishu yundong) (八五美术运动).
which – and a vehicle through which – the participants could “pound society.”

Li, therefore – contrary to Gao’s more diplomatic approach of an introduction to, or survey of, modern Chinese art – appears to have held the more radical view that the exhibition could function through a sort of aesthetic militancy, regarding the show as a visual offensive. Given that Li was largely responsible for the layout of the exhibition, we can read such a confrontational philosophy in the design of the show by taking stock of the provocative nature of the work shown, and especially the manner in which it was presented.

Many accounts of the exhibition note the placement of the most “extreme” forms of artwork in high-profile, highly-visible locations. The first floor of the museum (Fig. 7), the most immediately accessible, densely populated area, appears particularly to have been tactically geared toward a sensationalistic jolt: Wu Hung mentions generally that the works on the first floor of the gallery were those with the greatest capacity to “shock society.” Hans van Dijk also notes the presence on the first floor of installations, “happenings,” and performance works, as does Martina Köppel-Yang, who points out the immediate viewing locations of installation and performance works, as well as citing

26 Sullivan, 274.


28 Wu, *Transience,* 20. In n. 15 the author specifically cites the presence of Huang Yongping’s “A History of Chinese Painting” and “A Concise History of Modern Painting” Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes, December 1, 1987 (Fig. 8).

the presence of “pop” in the first room.⁰⁰ Feng Boyi explains that Li placed installation, performance, and pop art in the first room in the hopes of combating “aesthetic inertia.”⁰¹

The many references to installation and performance on the first floor of the museum suggest an abundance of new media which would have been spatially more active than such customary forms as painting, for example, which typically remains relegated to an assigned plane on the wall surface, separate from the paths through which a viewer walks and moves. Installation and performance are also more interactive than a medium such as sculpture, which is frequently confined to a pedestal and thus granted a demarcated area of display. By contrast, installations, for example, are on some level immersive – they conflate the space of the viewer’s bodily movement with the space of artistic presentation, in this way including the viewer in the display space, and incorporating the viewer and his or her response to the spatial usurpation into the content of the work. Installation, therefore, particularly for an unexposed audience, creates a disruption of the usual spectatorial distance granted to the observer. In China / Avant-garde, such an exhibitionary interest in spatial interference appears to have been widespread.

Adjustments were continually made to allow for the greatest exposure to sensational forms – Xiao Lu’s Dialogue installation (Duihua) (对话) (Fig. 9), for

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⁰⁰ Köppel-Yang, 63.
⁰¹ Feng, 329.
⁰² The announcement of the exhibition run in Zhongguo meishubao makes clear the extent to which an exhibition of such media in so broad and accessible a way was unprecedented in Chinese society: “The ‘China / Avant-Garde’ exhibition will for the first time exhibit artworks with a modern artistic concept and spirit to artists in China and the world, as well as to the general public.” “Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan chouzhan tonggao, diyi hao,” Zhongguo meishubao 171 (1988): 1, quoted in Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 274. Gao notes how, in particular, “performance art was a totally new art form, representing a complete break with the conventional idea of art.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 274.
example, a large construction made of two life-sized telephone booths, was seen as unconventional enough, striking enough, to be moved to a more high-profile location late in the process of installation.\textsuperscript{33} Gao Minglu notes that Dialogue ultimately wound up in the East Gallery on the first floor, immediately visible upon entering the room, in “perhaps the most visible location of all.”\textsuperscript{34} This work would become instantly still more sensational upon the show’s opening, when it was fired upon by the artist within the crowded gallery. Xiao’s unexpected action at that point highlights the many sources of exhibition strategy for \textit{China / Avant-garde}: while organizers were prohibited from planning performances for the exhibition, artists took it upon themselves to carry out such unsanctioned actions, and Julia Andrews and Gao speculate that perhaps the artists felt a particular sense of fearlessness due to an awareness that the ultimate blame for these transgressions would rest chiefly with the show’s organizers.\textsuperscript{35} They explain that, because of this, “from the point of view of the curators, the artists in the exhibition were something like terrorist bombs, with forbidden performances exploding in unpredictable places, magnitudes, and times.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Fei Dawei, a member of the exhibition’s organizing committee, decided to move Dialogue from the last room of the first exhibition hall to the first room, on the day before the show was to open. See Xiao Lu, “关于 1989 年在中国美术馆枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian zai zhongguo meishuguan qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’ at the National Gallery of Art”), Tom.com (21 October 2005) <http://arts.tom.com/1004/20051021-23816.html> (10 December 2008).


\textsuperscript{35} Andrews and Gao, 253-4. Organizers ended up being largely correct about this consequence, and Gao describes how “the National Gallery decided that the organizational committee of the exhibition should be fined 2,000 Yuan and that the six sponsoring institutions would not be allowed to hold any shows in the National Gallery in the next two years.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 281.

\textsuperscript{36} Andrews and Gao, 258.
From a photograph of *Dialogue* (Fig. 10), it can also be seen that the Gao brothers’ *Midnight Mass (Inflatism)* (Fig. 11) was installed in the same gallery, directly opposite, accosting viewers almost immediately upon entry to the museum with a work flaunting taboo themes. Viewers of the work would have been greeted with a mammoth vision of vague genitalia at a time when even “natural” nudity in art had not completely lost its taboo standing. Wu Shanzhuan’s *Big Business* shrimp stand performance (*Da shengyi*) (大生意) (Figs. 12-15), in which the artist created a makeshift booth from which to unexpectedly sell prawns, also took place on the first floor just inside the museum’s entrance and before the actual exhibition halls, immediately establishing a sense of bewilderment and uncertainty about what was happening at the site. As visitors entered the premises expecting to assess “new art,” they became instead engaged in a confusing spectacle of incongruous behavior in a museum – asked to purchase seafood instead of contemplating aesthetic virtuosity and moral exemplars. In one photograph of the *Big Business* site, taken after the action was shut down by authorities (Fig. 16), we can also see in the background that Wei Guangqing’s *Suicide Series (Zisha xilie)* (自杀系列) was installed on the first floor as well, just within the museum’s entrance. Wei’s work featured an actual noose dangling in front of photographs documenting the artist staging suicidal acts, and the installation would later be augmented by an actual “hanging,” performed by the artist. With its spatial intrusion, uncommon materials, focus on taboo topics, and eventual, live recreation of these themes in the presence of visitors, *Suicide Series* continued the high profile installation or performance of works that could upset the

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37 Describes Maggie Ma of encountering this work in the exhibition: “Visitors swarming in through the eastern hall entrance on the first floor would suddenly feel the psychological impingement from the installation ‘Mass of Midnight.’” Ma, “Memories of 1989.”

38 Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 277.
viewers’ expectations of the art experience at the museum, in spatial, psychological, and social terms.

We will examine such characteristics in each of these works in turn, but, in a general sense, it’s clear that the first floor of the National Gallery was arranged in a way that disabled previous understandings of how the site functioned. Although it was not only installation and performance on the first floor, and while not every instance of installation and performance was confined to the first, the point is that the audience was met with these interceding elements before all others, establishing an encounter which would have never allowed them the opportunity to settle into a routine acceptance of the site’s conventional narratives.

By contrast to the first floor, works that could be regarded as more visually and spatially innocuous appear to have been designated for display in less prominent locations. Van Dijk indicates that the other floors largely featured works created in more “standard” media, such as painting or sculpture,39 and Köppel-Yang suggests similarly that the work displayed on the other floors was less disturbing than that shown on the first.40 Wu observes that the second floor works were chiefly paintings executed in modes of expressionism and symbolism, while art on the third floor, such as abstract ink painting, focused on formalistic concerns.41 In Maggie Ma’s account, the author describes the third floor as being designated for the relegation of work fitting “pure art language”

40 Köppel-Yang, 63.
41 Wu, Transience, 20.
categories, like abstract painting and experimental ink painting, and Feng Boyi also characterizes this floor as mainly used in the display of ink explorations.

In considering this layout for the exhibition we can deduce that there was a hierarchy of avant-gardism at work, and important in gauging the spectator’s new relationship to the museum prompted by the emphasized forms of installation and performance is that such media deconstructed the very understanding of how art was to be experienced. The forms did not only change the scopic regime at the site – by which I mean the mediated order of visuality at museums, the controlled system of display and reception solidifying value and ideology on a prereflective level – they disrupted the museum experience spatially and experientially. As such, this disruption was registered not only on an intellectual level, but in visceral terms, and in such a way that prompted an intuitive, subjective affirmation of experience. The new artforms expanded on – perhaps overturned altogether – a formerly horizontal act of gazing on an untouchable zone of art, an experience in which the expected role of the visitor is pure spectator and never participant. Such a contained role forces the audience into a position of unilateral reception, wherein audience members have little room to make individual decisions on how to most effectively relate to the art or its spaces of display.

In place of this scenario, *China / Avant-garde* rendered the relationship one in which the audience was forced to negotiate with the physical intrusion of installation into its own space, and then to interact in unexpected artistic “situations,” ones implicating the

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42 Ma, “Memories of 1989.”
43 Feng, 329. The curators appear to have been right in assuming that installation and performance would generate the most sensational impact, and the historiography of the show has borne this emphasis out. While many pure painters in the exhibition would go on to gain widespread recognition, relatively little in the scholarship on *China / Avant-garde* is said of their presence in the exhibition, continuing even in retrospect a valorization of media unconventional to average National Gallery audiences of the time.
audience in the proceedings through its unwitting contribution to them. Thus while the “avant-garde” in China / Avant-garde appears to have been conceived – as it was in many historical manifestations of the term – as an attack against the status quo, in this case such a notion played out in a manner that went beyond expanding artforms as metaphor for social change; it was also manifest in a tangible, material attack – a sometimes literal violence – carried out against the spaces of the art experience. And the emblematic target in closest reach of this attack appears to have been the spaces of the National Gallery and of its attending visitors.

**Installation and the infringement on physical and psychological spaces.**

We can conceive of such spatial attacks in a number of ways. In the first place, the traditionally organized itinerary and familiar navigational protocols of the museumgoer were subverted by the alien presence of intrusive installations, such that the visitor needed to maneuver through a new space made unfamiliar by artwork eschewing its typical confines, expanding its territory of occupation, and breaching the space of the observer. Such dynamics can be seen in many of the installations exhibited in China / Avant-garde, such as Gu Xiong’s Fence Wall (Fig. 17). Here, panels depicting a chain-link pattern line an entire alcove of the gallery, a painting multiplied. But going even further, the motif is extended to the floorspace of the gallery as well, infringing on an area normally reserved for audience. The work is in this way a painted blockade of sorts, lying across traversable space, and forcing viewers to abandon mechanical movement in favor of designing their own progression. Through negotiation of the work’s space,
viewers participate in it bodily rather than simply assess it from an outside position, and a conflation of the display space with the spectatorial space is the first step in generating a more “active” environment within the site, and in the experience of it. It primes the audience for not only an observation of an event, but a participation in it.

Adding to this physical interruption is also a conceptual interplay to confound the usual, expected distance between representation and reality. The motifs are representational boundaries, but they are also affixed, literally, to physical boundaries – a gallery wall, a floor – and in this way can iconographically imply in the structure of the National Gallery a hidden cage. In this light, the central rift in the chain-link motif suggests a forceful exit from the confines of the structure, in the mode of a cultural prison-break. A look at the artist’s oeuvre reveals that representing conceptual boundaries through fence motifs was a theme which continued to occupy him: Gu had previously painted other interiors in chain-link patterns, transforming these spaces into environments of imprisonment, and once even recreated the pattern on a plywood wall he constructed outdoors (Fig. 19), generating an unexpected barrier in the natural realm. The fact that the artist painted a fence design instead of erecting an actual fence revealed to the viewer that this sudden imposition in the wild was the result of an individual expressive effort, arguing for the possibility of personal action affecting the dynamics of a space normally taken for granted. From the artist’s perspective, then, his recurring

44 In a report run in The Christian Science Monitor, two days after the show’s opening, the artist comments that “man can create great cultures, but he also encloses himself, I want to break out of this, I want freedom.” Gu Xiong, quoted in Ann Scott Tyson, “Avant-garde Bursts onto Chinese Art Scene; ‘Action Art’ symbolizes artists’ determination to brashly take advantage of eased state censorship,” The Christian Science Monitor (7 February 1989), 7. Another photograph, taken on the day of the opening, shows the artist posed before the painted fissure of the work, dressed in costume, hands behind head in surrender and caught in a searchbeam, thus reinforcing notions of incarceration and escape (See Fig. 18).
45 Strassberg, “‘I Don’t Want to Play Cards with Cézanne’ and Other Works,” in Strassberg, 40.
chain-link motif often stood in as a notional substitute for actual barriers. In this way, a metaphorical obstruction is made visible, to fuse with, theoretically hinder, or reveal the symbolic constraints of any space it adorns. Along these lines, the hole in the design of Gu’s *China / Avant-garde* installation implies a rending of that space – physical or otherwise – in the National Gallery itself.

This tendency to interfere with the navigable space of the viewer can also be seen in a work like *Maze Walk* (Figs. 20, 21), by Lu Shengzhong, in which the paths of the gallery are again co-opted by the extension of the work across the floorspace. The typical order of such a space, its symmetrical walkability, is supplanted by an artform running unchecked off its wall, crowding the position of the viewer, and overtaking even the typically aesthetically neutral surfaces of nearby structural supports. Half of the work’s large maze motif covers the entire wall surface, while the other half overrun the floor in front of the wall, where the audience would have been accustomed to standing in order to best view the displayed work. Pushing even further beyond standard display confines, a point of entry into the labyrinth is offered, from which a procession of footprints advances, eventually convening in the center of the work as a pile-up of phantom walkers congesting the juncture between wall and floor.

Such a layout perpetuates two shifts in the experience of the spectator: first, when compared to the dimensions of a standard wall painting in this setting, the installation is significantly expanded, annexing the path of the viewer and pressing the audience into closer proximity to the art object. Given the normally untouchable position afforded to artifacts in a museum, the visitor’s progress is thus made something of an aesthetic obstacle course, as she or he finds new ways to traverse the space while not wanting to
disturb the work. This circumstance heightens the viewer’s participation in the display space – his or her individualized choices are necessary in successfully moving through it. Second, the overlapping of the display with the aesthetically “neutral” spaces usually occupied by the viewer grants the work a more autonomous standing – it frees the art from typically understood rules limiting the territory it can occupy, and presents the act of the artist as one which is relatively unlimited when compared to the exhibits previously encountered in the museum.

As in the case of Gu’s installation, Lu’s Maze Walk also works to ambiguate the gallery space in both physical and conceptual ways. The application of a maze motif to impede a path normally crossed by foot traffic creates an interplay between the work’s theme and the viewer’s confusion over the reordering of the museum space. On the other hand, it also makes the work conceptually inhabitable, as if, should he or she feel inclined, the viewer could step on and enter the work, contributing to its substance through occupation. Such a notion strengthens the idea that the space of the art and the space of the viewer are no longer quite separated from one another in the usual sense – the viewer engages in ideational and spatial dialogue with the work, which has suddenly been opened up and made approachable, accessible.

The next way in which the exhibition attacked the spaces of the visitor was by impinging on the viewer’s psychological sense. The Gao brothers’ Midnight Mass (Inflatism) (Fig. 11), for example, offered a work to make social taboo monumental. Along with Xiao’s Dialogue, Midnight Mass was placed in the first room of the east hall, on the museum’s first floor, and viewers would have thus encountered the giant, ambiguously sexual forms after just passing Wu’s shrimp stand and Wei Guangqing’s
Suicide Series. The Gaos’ installation was constructed of air-filled rubber gloves, condoms, and pale, skin-toned fabrics, shaped into over-inflated anatomical structures. These uncannily pseudophallic and mammarish forms loom over the viewer from a stark black background, against which the enormous pallid shapes contrast starkly and strikingly, emphasizing the extension of the construction into the viewer’s space. Above the fleshy structures, ballooned condoms describe a cross design on the ceiling, while underneath, a sheet of red drapery cascades onto the floor before the work, cradling a pile of inflated rubber gloves.

We can note from photographs of the space (Figs. 22, 23 for example) that both Dialogue and Midnight Mass were installed in a compact gallery, perhaps little more than ten feet in width, and the modest scale of the room would have rendered the disturbing forms all the more imposing. Enormous, disconcerting, and bearing an ironical religious reference in its title, the work is in some ways an altar to intrusive social discomfort, disclosing and distorting private yearnings and anxieties, and then exaggerating them to nightmarish proportions. In this way, Midnight Mass is confrontational in its scale as well as in its themes: even “standard” depictions of nudity in art – in the form of naturalistic or realistic paintings, for instance – were not free of scandal at this time.

Other installations in China / Avant-garde were not only psychologically provocative, but also addressed themes that could specifically dispel the comfort of safety

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46 A compression which would be exacerbated by the exigent circumstances of gunfire, when Xiao Lu fired live rounds at her work.
47 Just prior to China / Avant-garde, another art show exhibited at the National Gallery, consisting of nudes, was regarded as a scandalous event. See Xiang Pu, “Avant-garde art show may shock as nudes did,” China Daily (1 February 1989), 5. Another installation in China / Avant-garde, described as “a large vagina with a zipper,” apparently did not fare as well as Midnight Mass, and was evidently removed by police. “Get set, go.,” The Economist (18 February 1989).
from the viewer’s mindset. One example of such an approach can be seen in Zhang Peili’s X? series (Figs. 24, 25), originally of 1987. The paintings here depict a collection of surgical gloves, rendered realistically, and occupying a standard position of display on the gallery wall. As they were installed, however (Fig. 26), visitors approaching to view the paintings would have again found a sudden spatial incongruency in the low table occupying the floor in front of the work, a space normally taken up by viewers attempting to appreciate the exhibit.

Atop the platform, the audience here would have found a collection of objects whose physicality again encroached on the vicinity of the observer, translating the experience from one of mere remote gazing into a conceptual, tangible totality in which the themes of the work transcend the usual detachment of frames and mounting, rendering them uncomfortably visceral. This is particularly true when we consider the content of the objects displayed (Figs. 27-29): it is an assortment of filthy plastic gloves that the artist abandoned around town and then later re-collected.

The painted glove images would have been recognized as the more traditionally created art objects, and, remaining at safe spectatorial remove from the audience, are pristine, and sterile. But sabotaging this aesthetic reverie is the physical reality of these same items, now sharing the audience’s space and revealed as unsanitary, calling to mind infirmity, and infectious qualities. What is more, the uneasiness experienced when observing these objects, and attempting to take stock of their aesthetic contribution would have been amplified by an awareness of the actual, serious outbreak of Hepatitis A, which had occurred in the region in 1987. The artist himself was infected, and Karen Smith comments on the ubiquity of such gloves in China at the time: “The unnatural
rubber skin, adopted now as a protective barrier, was a familiar yet jarring sight...Latex gloves were first-line defence for people trying to insulate themselves against infection.48 Against this existing discourse of disease, therefore, the work functioned on a conceptual level by suggesting an element of danger in the artwork’s nearness to the spectator: pressed beneath a thin layer of glass, the objects are imaginably tactile, and the signifiers of blood and bodily fluid call to mind injury and disease, while their damaged, nearly disintegrated appearance hints at a lack of containment. The presence of these objects in the viewer’s space thus suggests not only the concept of infection, but the physical proximity and imminence of it.49

On top of this psychological agitation there is naturally the formal revolt at play to consider as well, in which, juxtaposed against the paintings, the gloves would have been wholly unrecognizable as art objects, regarded not only as vernacular items, but perhaps even contaminated litter. Thus confronted with this discrepancy, the viewer is prompted to reconsider the constructed nature of representation – the orderly presentation of art in this case is complemented by disorder, by an invasion of filth into the cultural temple.

On some level, perhaps in their uncanny reference to the potential of bodily harm, these works remind me of another installation in the show – the vaguely organic, disturbingly eviscerated plastics of Gu Dexin (Figs. 23, 24), which were said to be of sufficient scale to fill an entire gallery. Upon entering such a space, the audience would have been completely enclosed by grotesque, loosely intestinal forms, eliciting a very different type of response than a leisurely tour past congenial paintings, cheery in

49 Oscar Ho Hing-Kay sees in these gloves “an analogy of the violence of violation.” Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, “1989 and China’s New Art Post-1989,” in Doran, VIII.
disposition and triumphant in tone. Furthermore, against the common understanding of the materials of fine art, plastics would again have appeared to have come from a startlingly vernacular source. This is reflected even in Gu’s explanation of his motivations: “Plastic made a deep impression on me as a child. It was a new material [to China] and it was everywhere. Everything in the house was plastic: shoes, tableclothes, bowls, utensils.” Given this household ubiquity of the substance, the artist succeeded in introducing a distinctly pedestrian material into the lofty hall, upsetting the notion of a supposed elevated exclusivity in the National Gallery.

Another example of art in China / Avant-garde subverting the conceptual safety of the viewer is Wang Youshen’s and Yang Jun’s mixed media work, simply known as “tick,” or “checkmark” (Fig. 32). Here, a large pastiche of photos covers an expanse of gallery wall with snapshots of random passersby taken on a busy thoroughfare. In this way, a visual, incidental familiarity of daily life is generated, but the comfort in this familiarity is thwarted by the juxtaposition of the intrusive poster in the center of the collage, bearing a tick mark, a symbol which would have been understood as an announcement of a death sentence carried out. Signs of this sort, bearing the notice of such a ruling, were publicly posted in Beijing, and then “checked off” with a red tick mark after punishment was concluded.

In a compositional flourish which we might regard in hindsight as eerily prescient, the entire collage is also writ over with an oversized checkmark, creating the idea that the average citizen is vulnerable, and could be in danger of officially-sanctioned harm at any time. Thus, like X?, “checkmark” establishes in its photos a prosaic scene for the viewer,

50 Gu Dexin, quoted in Smith, 193-4.
51 Ma, “Memories of 1989.”
but this construction is manipulated to undercut a complacency of assumed safety. An overriding interest in upsetting the comfort of the viewer was underscored by the artist Wang’s own actions, as he busily video-taped viewer reactions to the work.\(^{52}\)

Simultaneously, “checkmark” raises an awareness of the viewer’s role in facilitating the messages of art as well: the images in the work feature oblivious, average citizens, unsuspectingly appropriated for the purposes of artistic expression. Conceivably, a viewer could even recognize himself or herself within the work. But even otherwise, understood in the randomness of the photos would have been that anybody viewing the work could have just as easily been one of its subjects. In this way, the work relies on the viewer’s identity to make its case as much as it does the identity of the artist.

Wei Guangqing’s *Suicide Series* (seen in the background of Fig. 16; see also Fig. 34) similarly introduces the threat of physical harm to the site. The title refers to Wei’s installation of a series of various photographs documenting his previous performances of staged suicide (Figs. 35, 36) (lying across train tracks, for example). Before the photos dangled an actual noose, such that, standing in front of the work to examine the images, it may have seemed as though the viewer was herself awaiting an execution. The content and motifs of the installation were therefore enough to instill a consideration of danger and harm, but this idea was further augmented when the artist performed a mock hanging in the installation, putting the normal, quiet predictability of the site into still greater question. Thus, the psychologically pensive themes of many of these installations would go on to serve as backdrop for still more startling works that would unfold alongside them.

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\(^{52}\) Ibid.
Renegade performance and the shaping of social space.

Were the show to have opened and progressed as curators originally envisioned, these installations would have done the entirety of the work establishing a new sense of space at the National Gallery. As turned out to be the case, however, the social space of the site was also dramatically meddled with by renegade performance works staged inside the museum. As a condition for allowing the exhibition to take place, live performance was banned, and the works that were subsequently performed were largely the result of independent, unsanctioned action on the part of the artists. In this way, the artists were just as responsible for contributing to an exhibition strategy emphasizing the spectacle of new forms as were the curators and organizers. Although they did this independently, their actions expanded on the approach the curators had already established, taking it further, into areas the curators might have wanted to explore, but were forbidden to.

The resulting acts were frequently confrontational, or at least confusingly interactive – many of the works blurred the line between spectatorship and direct intervention in the typical social dynamics of the site. Wu Shanzhuan, for instance,

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53 As Gao clarifies: “None of the performances had been announced to the gallery or even to the organizational committee before the opening of the exhibition.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 280.

54 In fact Gao’s oft-stated separation between the planning of the curators and the actions of the artists does not always appear to have been so black and white, or at least, not as far as his partner, Li Xianting, was concerned. Li later admitted of Wu’s shrimp selling performance, for example, that “to make sure that this work of art would not die prematurely, I helped Wu to arrange several strategies of concealment. It should enter the National Gallery as a work of art and then turn out as a performance.” Li Xianting, quoted in Lü Peng and Yi Dan, Zhongguo xian dai yishu shi 1979-1989 (中国现代艺术史 1979-1989) (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe [湖南美术出版社], 1992), 337, quoted in Köppel-Yang, 65, n. 152. See also Li Xianting, “Confessions of the Organiser of the China/Avant-garde Art Exhibition,” cited in Liao, LVII-LVIII.
established his shrimp stand in the gallery (Figs. 12-16), unexpectedly peddling prawns on the exhibition’s opening day, until authorities forced him to cease and desist.55

Occupying the space outside the main exhibition hall on the first floor, the artist created an impromptu stall from a simple assortment of boxes, and stocked it with sixty pounds of live shrimp that he brought with him from Zhoushan, his hometown.56 Not budging from character, Wu complemented his stall with the following handwritten, expository sign (seen in Fig. 12):

Dear Customers,
As our entire nation celebrates the Year of the Snake, in order to enrich the spiritual and material life of the people of our nation’s capital, I have brought from my hometown of Zhoushan the highest-quality export shrimp (to be sold to the domestic market). Venue of display and sale: National Gallery of Art Price: 9.5 yuan per catty. Hurry while supplies last.57

The artist’s own comments on the work suggest the motivation for this incongruous action, a wholly commercial enterprise in a setting of ostensible “high culture”: “Selling prawns in the China Art Gallery was a protest against the gallery itself…a protest against art theorists…On the morning of 5 February, 1989, the China Art Gallery became the black market it has always been; art theory, the profiteer it really is.”58 From the perspective of artistic intent then, Wu seems to be emphasizing that, hidden beneath the lofty airs of high culture is a purely commercial scam, one relegating the artwork to commodity, and using the language of theory as sales pitch. The work calls into question

56 Ibid., 6.
57 Wu Shanzhuan, quoted in Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humor International (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2005), 13, quoted in Harrison, 6.
58 Wu Shanzhuan, quoted in Barmé, “Artful Marketing,” 203. For more on Wu’s discussion of the commercialization of art at this time, see Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 261.
the museum’s role as a purveyor of a profitable art apparatus, described here by the artist as being base and vulgar.\textsuperscript{59}

More importantly, however, Wu’s actions propagated two continuing strands of disruption within the exhibition: first, they further fostered a sense of confusion about what the acceptable or expected parameters or confines of art were. Second, the incident was not only a performance in a spectatorial sense, but was directly interactive, adopting the audience into the affair. In this sense, the artist did not only introduce a new medium to the site, but aggressively interfered with the sociality of the space, establishing obstacles to hiccup the normal, heedless motion of a visitor through the museum. These actions short-circuited a deferral to the manicured, orderly presentation of cultural narrative, and adding to their effectiveness was the fact that Wu, while performing the act, would have been the very first “work” encountered by an audience visiting the exhibition: positioning himself in an intermediate zone, outside of the actual, declared areas of display, Wu advanced a contraction of the usual divide between art and life. From the outset then, the audience would have encountered a different sense of experience at the site, a heightened awareness of the need for critical attentiveness rather than automatic reception. As visitors gathered around the artist to purchase shrimp, or even simply to sort out what could possibly be going on, they loosened to some degree their associative holds on the museum as a site primarily functioning in the dutiful affirmation of the state’s historical prudence. Even after Wu’s action was shut down, the incongruity he

\textsuperscript{59} The artist would explore similar terrain for his project \textit{Missing Bamboo}, in 1993. For this work, Wu created a “gift shop” in the Wexner Center for the Arts in Dayton, Ohio, in which he sold stuffed pandas while wearing a matching panda outfit (Figs. 37-38). This time, however, Wu made certain to obtain the proper permits (Fig. 39).
introduced in the function of the space lived on, as Wu left a sign with his abandoned
stand, indicating that the space was, essentially, “closed for inventory” (Fig. 15). This
notice would have been a cryptic announcement to anyone arriving later for the art show.

Perhaps effecting a similar strategy, we can infer from the title of Li Shan’s
installation and performance, *Invitation to Foot-Washing* (Fig. 40), that the audience
would again have been directly implicated in the “function” of the work, invited to be a
participant above and beyond their standard role as an observer. In the middle of the
floorspace, visitors would have suddenly come across a bright red curtain blocking the
path, in front of which were arranged the everyday objects of a folding chair, a washbasin,
a bucket, a pair of slippers, and a selection of clothing hung on the wall where one might
have traditionally expected to find a work of art. These artifacts were radically altered –
covered in a silly decorative pattern prominently featuring the face of Ronald Reagan –
but to the average National Gallery audience of the time, would still have appeared
remarkably out of place, as everyday items inducted into the National Gallery without
warning. Thus the work softens a number of exhibitionary boundaries ordinarily
ensconced in the location: the objects are recognizable as having been fabricated to some
degree, and yet are still discernibly utilitarian and thus unanticipated, suggesting some
obscure function apart from the normal visual appreciation. Moreover, the irregular
objects become coupled with an equally divergent action, as Li, decked out in a bright red
outfit bearing the same decorative pattern as the objects, set an example of the work’s
usability by actually washing his feet with the “art objects,” on the day of the exhibition’s
opening.60

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60 See Ma, “Memories of 1989,” and Tyson, 7.
Occupying a full corner of a second floor gallery, the artist Zhang Nian sat cross-legged on a straw mat surrounded by eggs and encircled by banners and printed images spread across the gallery floor. Through this action, Zhang disoriented visitors who would have found him and then been charged with determining whether to simply watch him, communicate with him in the hopes of apprehending his meaning, or politely circumvent him (Figs. 41, 42). Furthering this sense of uncertainty about the proper course of action (or interaction) to be taken, the artist donned an improvised sign reading “No theoretical debate during my floating egg performance, lest it troubles the next generation.” In this way, like the other performances discussed, Zhang’s actions similarly intersect with the audience’s behavior by implicitly seeking to direct it – in this case, playfully dissuading them from a normal art gallery behavior, rather than inviting them into an aberrant one. Zhang’s performance takes the tack of making light of his allegorical position as an avant-gardist – he sits literally “hatching” the next wave – remarking wryly on the muddled state of understanding surrounding the avant-garde.

Elsewhere, Wang Deren threw over seven thousand condoms at visitors in the galleries, and other artists are described as having wrapped themselves up in white cloth, plowing through the galleries and bumping into visitors, and dressing in sheets, then attempting to disrobe before being stopped by authorities.

These actions undermined expectations held by visitors for experiencing such an environment – in the persistent conditions of unpredictability and spectacle, behavioral

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61 Ma, “Memories of 1989.”
63 The Boston Globe (11 February 1989).
64 Tyson, 7.
and communicative codes at the site were expanded. The audience’s social boundaries were radically reshaped in such a way that cued the viewers themselves into action. In this sense, the behavior of the audience, as much as that of the artists, began to mold the startling events taking shape in this normally controlled space – the audience became part of the catalyst for and outcome of the banned actions being performed. This participatory role generates an empathetic, experiential connection to the subversive acts witnessed. Viewers are jarred out of a passive approach to the art, and they begin to index through personal experience the idea that the enforced order of the space can be diverted by individual actions, even their own.

To explore still more extreme strategies amplifying these effects, let us return to the idea of removing the complacency of safety at the site, and thus dislodging a default notion of an official space as one which administrated into a state of predictability. The most infamous action taken by any artist during the run of the exhibition (and certainly the work that most made public safety a concern) was the *Pistol Shot Incident* (*Qiăngjī shìjiàn*) (枪击事件) (Fig. 43), carried out by Xiao Lu, when she entered the crowded gallery shortly after the opening of the show and fired two shots at her installation, *Dialogue*, from a pistol. The action occurred around noon, barely hours after the gallery opened, and panic immediately ensued in the museum: the police arrived promptly, closing the exhibition and arresting Xiao’s friend Tang Song on the scene (Figs. 44-47) (Xiao escaped but would turn herself in later that afternoon).65

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65 Although this work has previously been commonly cited as a collaborative effort between Xiao and Tang, examining Xiao’s first hand accounts of the incident makes clear that Tang’s role in the activity was chiefly as an鼓励or of sorts at the time of the shooting – suggesting to Xiao that she “Give it another shot!” after she fires the first one at the installation. Immediately after the incident, Tang’s main role appears to have been simply the person who was initially mistakenly arrested in place of Xiao. While Xiao had
Popular photographs of the event (as represented by Fig. 43, for example) obscure the fact that *Dialogue* and *Pistol Shot Incident* should really be considered two separate, in fact largely unrelated, works. So separate was the gunshot from original curatorial intentions for selecting the work that few people even knew in advance of the planned stunt. It could be argued, in fact, that the artist herself didn’t even know what was to transpire. The installation is seen on its own in Fig. 49, in an earlier setting, without the abrupt scars it would suffer later on. The work features two actual telephone booths made from materials donated by, and with assistance from, the telecom bureau in Hangzhou. Inside the booths, two figures in muted gray tones, dressed like students, stand with their backs facing the viewer, while a telephone receiver dangles impotently between the

mentioned to Tang before the show opened that she was considering shooting a gun at her work, they broke off contact shortly afterward, and, on the day of the opening, Tang was not even aware that she had acquired a gun, or that she intended to carry out the action. As Xiao says, “Just think for a moment! If Li Songsong had brought the gun a little bit earlier, I would have long since shot it already, and then there would have been no possibility of Tang Song’s involvement. That day Tang Song didn’t even know I had brought the gun.” In fact, the primary reason she gives for writing her account is to clarify common misunderstandings of authorship, which she feels have persisted through the years. Xiao explains that, in the media frenzy following the event, she felt shy and bewildered, psychologically unprepared to face the situation. Under these circumstances, Tang Song took the initiative as chief explicator of the work (see Fig. 48), discussing its ostensible motivations and meanings, and serving as something of a spokesperson for the action. Implied in Xiao’s explanation is that, because Tang Song played such a large role in fostering discussion and criticism of the work, he has gone down in the work’s historiography as one of its assumed authors, and even, frequently, the chief architect behind the action. However, as Xiao makes clear, “after the sudden occurrence of the events, he saw that I was terrified and jumped at the opportunity to become the explicator, but he was not the artist.” Xiao, “关于 1989枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’”), my translations. Still, even as late as 2003, Gao Minglu characterizes the *Pistol Shot Incident* in the following way: “Xiao Lu and Tang Song, two young artists from the Zhejiang Academy of Art, made a performance that literally shocked the National Gallery. Xiao Lu, Tang Song’s girlfriend, suddenly pulled out a gun and fired two shots at their installation, *Dialogue*.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China.” 279. Whatever one’s interpretation of Tang’s tangential role in the shooting, he certainly had nothing at all to do with the construction of the original installation, and even his designation as Xiao’s boyfriend at this time appears now to be overstated.

66 Xiao explains that she was unable to arrive at a decision on whether or not to attempt the action until late at night on February 4th, the day before the opening of the exhibition. Xiao, “关于 1989枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’”).

67 Ibid. Xiao’s father was at that time an administrator of the local Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, which perhaps accounts for how she was able to acquire these materials.

68 Gao, “一声枪响” (“Yi sheng qiangxiang”) (“The sound of gunshots”).
stands, before a mirrored background. When installing the work in the National Gallery, Xiao Lu decided to collect cement tiles from the street outside, to pave the ground beneath and in front of the installation.\textsuperscript{69}

This work is often interpreted as a commentary on an inability to communicate in modern Chinese society,\textsuperscript{70} but a formal reading of \textit{Dialogue} becomes somewhat moot when overshadowed by the historiographic fact that its significance is often read only in its notorious involvement in the eventual performance, and not in the aesthetic terms of the material object.\textsuperscript{71} As it was installed, \textit{Dialogue} and its subsequent shooting were situated in a narrow space (Figs. 22, 23) compressing the distance between viewer and artwork – and, in this instance, between viewer and gunfire – and such a claustrophobic condition would have exacerbated the confrontational and perilous nature of the performance. The crowd appears to have been pressed in behind the artist, wondering what she was up to, when the gunshots abruptly rang out and Xiao spun her way around to weave through the subsequent commotion, seeking out a place of hiding. As Zhu Linyong describes, “The sudden gunshots shocked the artists and visitors around. The exhibition was immediately thrown into chaos. In minutes, police officers swarmed into the museum and it was evacuated.”\textsuperscript{72}

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\begin{itemize}
  \item{69} Xiao, “关于 1989 枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’”).
  \item{70} Xiao’s own explanation of the motivation behind \textit{Dialogue}: “The work \textit{Dialogue}’s creative premise comes from individual emotional bewilderment. As for facing these losses in emotional life, they had made me to sink into a kind of self-contradictory state. Just like what the work illustrates: a male and female couple is right in the middle of making a phone call to each other, but the telephone dangling in the middle is also obviously telling people that they are not communicating cleanly. This kind of complicated as well as contradictory emotional state was the original concept giving rise to the work.” Ibid., my translation.
  \item{71} Still, a thorough formal analysis of \textit{Dialogue} can be found in Gao, “一声枪响” (“Yi sheng qiangxiang”) (“The sound of gunshots”).
  \item{72} Zhu, 24.
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Although the events of the exhibition can be described as having continuously traversed a multifaceted network of social thresholds, there was no bigger transgression than this. *The Christian Science Monitor* observed that, when the gunshots went off, “even the most radical spectators recoiled,” indicating that, at this moment of social percussion, no one was spared from the full-scale destabilization of the site and its expected limits, from these processes maximizing unpredictability, and thus, maximizing a proportional scale of possibility in turn. For no longer was there simply a new sense that any art could be shown in the National Gallery; it now had to be acknowledged that anything at all could happen, official restrictions be damned.

And so the discharge of a live firearm in the museum brings us to the fourth way the space was attacked, this in the form of damaging actions carried out, literally or figuratively, in proximity to or against the physical structure of the gallery itself: in addition to gunshots being fired within the building, two bomb threats were made against the institution during the run of the show, furthering the symbolic attack on the material structure of the institution. On February 12, anonymous letters were received by the National Gallery, Beijing Public Security Bureau, and local government, which read: “You must close the China / Avant-Garde exhibition immediately; otherwise, we will set off bombs in three places in the National Gallery.” However, these bomb threats were not really the result of a heat-of-the-moment complaint from disgruntled citizens, but rather a move on the part of another artist to further intensify the new sense of erratic instability surrounding the museum. For many years, the identity of the person who had sent the threats remained unknown, but in 1995 it was revealed that an artist from

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73 Tyson, 7.
74 Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 281.
Zhejiang Academy named Liu Anping was responsible for the act. Thus, artists attempted to contribute to an undermining of the site even from afar, and this idea of an architectural dismantling, threatened by Liu’s work/prank, is also analogized in Huang Yongping’s *The Museum Pulled away with a Rope* (*Tuozou zhongguo meishuguan*) (Fig. 50), a proposal to forcibly remove the institution. In many ways, an attack on the façade of the building – the symbolic face of the institution so prized by the authorities who’d planned its design – amounts to an iconic assault in which the ideology of the space is likewise demystified.

Within the building, this stripping of discourse was partly facilitated by the breakdown the works encouraged in the standard separation of elevated cultural space and mundane vernacular space. In addition to arguing for artistic liberation therefore, the fact that these performances confounded the very definition of art, seeping into uncategorizable states of social interaction, suggested that agency wasn’t limited to insular artistic developments. As the divide between artistic declaration and pluralistic interaction blurred, the exhibition began to conflate new notions of what an artist was capable of with new notions of what *anybody* was capable of. Moreover, such new notions as highlighted by the performances included the suggestion that action could be carried out in spite of the risks in pursuing them, for all of the performances of *China / Avant-garde* were at risk at the least of drawing official ire. More than this, some of them resulted in monetary penalties, and even jail time. As Richard Strassberg notes, Xiao’s performance, for instance, was particularly shocking given that “private possession of

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75 See ibid., 282.  
76 This can only be considered as an illustrative aside, however, as the work was not ultimately displayed in the exhibition. Instead, the artist exhibited “A History of Chinese Painting” and “A Concise History of Modern Painting” Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes, December 1, 1987 (Fig. 8).
weapons [in China] is virtually nonexistent and a seriously punishable offense.”

Ultimately Xiao and Tang were jailed for three days because of the incident, and the artist Liu Anping, likewise, was arrested and charged for the “performance” of his bomb threat. That these actions were carried out in the face of such threats, therefore, encourages a shedding of the fear of retribution, promoting a continuous push of the social envelope and the gradual gaining of ground.

In this light, one idea I have been emphasizing in reading the works of *China / Avant-garde*, that of “danger,” warrants additional consideration. Danger was introduced unexpectedly to the site in startling ways, through the works’ themes, aggressive performance actions, and extra-textual sensationalism. In the customary, unconflicted safety of civic monuments, there is a suggestion of concurrence: the museum holds up its narrative as one which is fundamentally consensus, a claim supported architecturally, in its trappings of cultural authority. This quality of timeless grandeur, typically purged, as Duncan put it, of political and social conflict, suggests that the story being told is a given – concretized, sealed into the space of the structure as unbending truth, both uncontested and uncontestable.

When the invasive performances of *China / Avant-garde* exploded into this tightly bound narrative, a divergent experience was immediately generated from heterogeneous sources, creating a more fractured and kaleidoscopic sense of anticipation. Being violently accosted in the normally quiet gallery with odd interactions and

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77 Strassberg, “‘I Don’t Want to Play Cards With Cézanne,’” 24.
78 See Xiao, “关于1989枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’”). This punishment is likely to have been far more severe, had the artists not been so well connected to high-ranking officials and administrators.
79 Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 281.
incomprehensible propositions, backing away from gunfire in close confines, being ushered out of the site due to bomb threats, avoiding thrown prophylactic devices as one struggled to comprehend the baffling new forms on display – these are all conditions that shatter the shell of reverie crystallized around the institution, and this sense of danger, of conflict, makes of the National Gallery a more malleable field. It pries open a space in which previous assertions of monolithic truth can be strategically fragmented. The idea of danger then, of conflict, doesn’t really describe a visualization of a particular contest; it is instead a visualization of conflict made possible, an act not only of simple protest, but of fundamental iconoclasm, in which the chief icon being smashed is the site itself.

To further examine the effectiveness of artistic conflict introduced into a hegemonized and homogenized cultural order, we might look to Renato Poggioli’s discussion of avant-gardistic antagonism, his assessment of why confrontational activity is so often a feature of avant-garde action. Poggioli concludes that “if the avant-garde has an etiquette, it consists of perverting and wholly subverting conventional deportment, the Galateo rules, ‘good manners.’”80 He outlines strains of “antagonism toward the public” and “antagonism toward tradition,” but clarifies that, “actually, the two antagonisms are merely complementary forms of the same opposition to historic and social order.”81

We can note that this description of avant-garde antagonism is in some ways non-specific regarding its targets: the particular historic and social orders being disrupted can vary. In late nineteenth-century France, avant-gardes aimed at the disruption of elitist and academic impositions on art, and classist marginalization in society. In the early twentieth

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81 Ibid., 30.
century, it was a disruption of an historic and social order which had led an entire
continent into warfare the scale and horror of which had never before been seen. But the
function of the avant-garde’s antagonism toward public and tradition in these instances
remains the same: it is a way of suggesting that the current state of affairs is one subject
to disharmony, and that such a condition needs urgently to be made violently clear. It
suggests that the status quo is vulnerable to entropy, and in fact that this entropy should
be helped, ushered along to its historical end. The confrontation in China / Avant-garde
worked in much the same way – it fractured the daydream of wholesomeness and
benevolence supporting official doctrine. The idiosyncrasy and antagonism of the show
recalibrated the discourse of the site to accept divergence and contestation.

Thus, the performance actions served as a means through which to introduce this
conflict, and this potentiality, which the institution otherwise presses and mounts into a
cleanly innocuous display. The very notion of confrontation, then, of disorder within a
traditionally sterilized venue of cultural authority, was necessary in truncating channels
of comfortable, habitual compliance, weakening automatic consent. And so perhaps the
need to unsettle the exaggerated sanitation and containment of art was particularly strong
in a PRC context, in which the already charged space of a museum was further
superimposed upon by the system of “acceptable” culturality stemming from Cultural
Revolution remembrance. As Julia Andrews and Gao Minglu note, “the exhibition venue,
the National Art Gallery, had previously been the most important site for exhibitions of
official art. Those who attacked the artistic or social system at this site thus felt an
exciting sense of sacrilege.”

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82 Andrews and Gao, 253.
This violence, then, was indicative of a campaign to attack and destroy the traditional cultural complex, in which confrontation with visitors to *China / Avant-garde* was necessary as a sort of collateral cultural damage. As Hou Hanru, one of the organizers of the exhibition, noted of Chinese art in the late 1980s, “‘ideologic-centric’ unofficial art has taken the form of radical, agitating, violent revolt and rebellion against order.” In light of these sweeping aims, it was perhaps not strictly personal grievances or particularized hostilities being vented in the actions of the exhibition – instead, the very visualization and representation of any aggressive rebellion at all was important in displaying the prospect of new social potential. Thus, while interpretations of the pistol shot as a specific political, social, or even emotional statement abound, perhaps in the end the gunshot was simply a gunshot: a literal manifestation expressing an avant-garde front as a legitimate threat to status quo, here visualized in corporeal terms through the peril of physical danger.

84 Nevertheless, to account for Xiao’s own description of motivation for carrying out the action: “this idea of shooting a gun had tightly bitten onto the center of my psyche. The power and shock of the gunshot accumulated toward a collision with all the hostility in my heart. My heart was being torn apart; I had been tossed out of the rules of action – where was I? The previously stable ground beneath my feet began to loosen and move, I became deeply submerged, like falling into a black pit deep in a forest, going down, continuously going down. Each breath in this hell is a draft of ice-cold air, swirling all around me. My instinct was to pull out a gun and ’bang!’ release the sound of it. After the bullet surged forward through the barrel of the gun, there would be tranquility all over the Earth.” Xiao, “关于1989年枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’”), my translation. For other readings of the action, see Strassberg, “‘I Don’t Want to Play Cards With Cézanne,’” 24, or Gao, “一声枪响” (“Yi sheng qiangxiang”) (“The sound of gunshots”), in which he mentions that “Xiao Lu’s works carry a heavy social element, growing out of vivid Chinese reality. This work also provides a vivid representation of how an artist from a family of traditional artists grows up and sets on the path of subversive contemporary art. In this process, Xiao Lu felt the contradictions and contrasts between being a socially committed artist and a sentient human. This story is itself unsettled, full of extremely individualized narratives. At the same time, she is the basis for a tragic social narrative...Xiao Lu’s contradictions, conundrums, pain, and anger were expressed in those two shots she fired at her installation ‘Dialogue.’” Despite arguing for the relevance of cultural and biographical stimuli, in accounting for the motivations for the work, Gao also notes that while “the original author of this work was Xiao Lu...the interpretations which followed were not hers. In the moment before
And so while Gao Minglu suggests that much art just before 90s was representative of “anarchistic urges,” concluding that, “for many, the urge to vent their frustrations was primarily destructive, even aimless,” I suspect that it may be too simple to cite blind destruction as the only motivation for staging avant-garde action in this context. After all, implicit in such destruction is an eventual reconstruction of culture, along more open lines of receptivity – an iconoclasm mounted to generate an expansion of free conceptual and societal terrain. As Geng Jianyi, an artist who also exhibited in China / Avant-garde, said of the contemporary art movement at the time, “we’re like adults in a children’s swimming pool. Every time we stretch out a limb to make a full stroke, we hit ourselves against the sides of the pool.” Under these circumstances, what better way to generate greater freedom of individual movement than to simply destroy the pool, then to build a new one according to one’s own terms?

she fired her shots, Xiao Lu still had the power to control the order and process of her work, as well as its formal structure. However, after the gunshots, the interpretation of ‘Dialogue’ no longer belonged to her, but to society. The meaning of this incident was not determined by Xiao Lu, but by the community of artists, critics, and social media (including international news organizations), and even by departments of the Chinese government (including the police) [again, I would emphasize here the extensive inclusion of the audience within this interpretive community]. Although it was not the result of social planning, it is undeniable that the aforementioned factors formed an ‘interpretive system’ which enabled Xiao Lu’s gunshot ‘Dialogue’ to be thoroughly incorporated into a social and political reading.” Ibid. Interesting in this assessment is Gao’s acknowledgment of possible “accidental” meanings to the work, a sort of organic discursive process unfolding after the fact. So there is some expansion in this explanation on Nicholas Bourriaud’s relational ideas on the art experience. But again, despite asserting a multifaceted definition for the work, Gao tends to emphasize the roles of artist, critic, media and official, in establishing the ultimate meanings of the art, over that of audience, which, to my mind, plays an equally important – if not more important – role in applying the work’s social impact.

85 Gao, Inside Out, 161.
86 Andrews and Gao, 253.
87 In some other characterizations, however, Gao does appear to somewhat qualify the aimlessness he notes in the ‘85 New Wave: “For the generation that was born in the 1960s and that emerged with the ‘85 Movement in the middle of the 1980s...the anti-utopian project of the movement was itself a kind of utopian vision, for it aimed to replace Mao’s utopia with that of modernity.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 250.
88 Geng Jianyi, quoted in Smith, 32.
The relational definition and phenomenological affirmation of subversion.

Many of the aims of these performances appear to have been centered on a collapse of the space between art and viewer, encouraging the audience to adopt a greater role in helping to shape the experience. Installation work interrupted traditional orders of display and reception spaces, and performance developed this rearrangement even further, in that it did not stop at an infraction of the viewer’s physical boundaries – now, psychological and social spaces were equally infringed upon. In this sense, the performance work in *China / Avant-garde* demonstrated some of the singular features of Chinese performance at about this time, cited by Gao Minglu, for instance, when he explains that, “in the late eighties the focus [of performance art] shifted to creating confrontation in the public sphere,” and that “unique to Chinese performance art was the fact that it was frequently a spontaneous event staged in a public space – a deliberate goad to authorities, since performance was strictly censored.” In this light, perhaps no public space could have been regarded as a bigger goad to perform in than the official sanctuary represented by the National Gallery.

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91 Along these lines, Gao considers that “it was precisely for this reason that it was vital for avant-garde art to use and modify the sacred symbolic image of the National Gallery. The Chinese avant-garde could take advantage of putting a heretical show into the sacred art palace it had never been able to touch. For the first time, an unorthodox critical activity would be entering the National Gallery, exemplifying the suppressed, skeptical identity of the avant-garde. This would bear two consequences. It would challenge the authorities in a very aggressive manner and would be a boost to the development of the avant-garde movement because of the anticipated public attention.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 272-3. Although I agree with the assessment that the show generated a considerable amount of exposure for the artists, through appropriation of the National Gallery’s image, I think such an analysis of how the artists interacted with this space stops too short of examining the consequences of its reception, which is what I would like to bring to the fore. In my estimation, the events of the exhibition did more than just grant the
Thus, the spontaneous, contentious character of the performances in China / Avant-garde fit in well, for instance, with aims such as those of the Pond Society (Chishe) (池社) during the development of the ‘85 New Wave – of which China / Avant-garde is often seen as a culmination – and taking stock of this pattern of motivation in 1980s Chinese art helps to shed light on the startlingly communal performances eventually staged at the National Gallery.

During the ‘85 New Wave, members of the Pond Society are characterized as having attempted to “rouse their local community with aggressive ‘actions’ in public spaces.” Founded by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, the Society cited as an influence the Polish dramatist Jerzy Grotowski, who believed that actors needed to remove all inhibition, allowing for a freer, more direct communicative line with the audience. If a performance artist can be regarded as an actor in this sense, then such a philosophy could explain why Hans van Dijk ultimately characterizes the Pond Society as becoming chiefly interested in creating “more aggressive and provocative works which were aimed at eliciting an enforced reaction.” In this way, the development of performance art in 1980s China can be seen as one which progressively encroached on the role of the art audience, creating an ever-increasing intimacy aimed at generating dialogue, in which

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92 This was a period of rapid-fire activity and experimentation among artists in China, which included the onset of artist groups, journals, and critical debate. For more on these developments see Gao, ed.; Gao, “Conceptual Art with Anticonceptual Attitude” and “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China;” Strassberg; Claire Roberts, “Towards Self-Reliance?: A Selective View of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in Modernization of the Chinese Past eds. Mabel Lee and A.D. Syrokoma-Stefanowska (Broadway: Wild Peony, 1993); Hans van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates: Part II: 1985-1991,” China Information 6: 4 (Spring 1992) and “The Fine Arts after the Cultural Revolution;” Crozier; Fibicher and Frehner; Sullivan; Köppel-Yang and Smith; among others.

93 Bernhard Fibicher, “Zhang Peili,” in Fibicher and Frehner, 72.

94 Van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution,” 2-3.
“artists had wanted to change the relationship between art and the public…establishing an informal and spontaneous form of interaction with the audience.”

The main goal of the new relationship, therefore, was a sort of communicative democracy, in which the audience was given an equally weighted position from which to formulate an understanding of the exchange, perhaps applying Grotowski’s belief that “artist and audience should engage in an honest, genuine dialogue from equal positions.” In many ways, this approach begins to counteract the communicative hierarchy that is a symptom of most art exhibitions, one in which the artwork is regarded as a source of meaning that the audience is expected in turn to discern. By emphasizing a dialogic relationship instead, artists advocated for a multi-lateral conversation. Wang Luyan touches on just such a strategy, when he emphasizes the audience’s part in his work: “Most people haven’t realized that they can create art every day…As an artist, I have nothing different from ordinary people except that I first found the form of art and can cite several examples for touching to arouse their consciousness.”

Wang is elaborating on his style of “Touching Art,” presented in *China / Avant-garde*, the content of which focused on people’s internal experiences as they encountered sensory stimuli – wind, for example, or water. According to the artist’s explanation then, the consequence of his work is a revelation to the audience of its own proactive interpretive capacities.

As a key figure in the ’85 New Wave, Geng Jianyi became very interested in this kind of egalitarianism, encouraging the audience to take a stake in building the communicative framework. In 1988, while *China / Avant-garde* was being planned, Geng

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95 Ibid., 2.
97 Wang Luyan, quoted in Xiang, 5.
misrepresented himself as one of the show’s organizers, sending biographical questionnaires to about a hundred artists. Later, at an art conference, he exhibited the forms he got back as an installation called Investigative Forms (Diaocha biao) (调查表). Publicly exposing these entries, Geng made the audience privy to information normally reserved for the assessment of a selection committee, and in this way conceptually admitted them into a democratized vetting process. As Gao Minglu notes, the work allowed “the public, rather than a panel of judges, to determine the merits of each entry,”\textsuperscript{98} which divested from the act of art appreciation a portion of the elitist structures normally governing it.

Zhang Peili, meanwhile, worked to address another concern of many artists at this time. This interest is suggested by Hou Hanru when he describes how the targets of contemporary art were shifted by artists of the ‘85 New Wave to focus on the sources of ideological formation: “the whole Chinese avant-garde movement since 1985 was actually centred on the antagonistic debates of ideology and its mode of discourses.”\textsuperscript{99} In other words, artists of the time took their criticisms beyond a contention with particular policy, taking aim instead at the very sites where these policies were legitimated and given a credence that came to be taken for granted. The typically unquestioned and

\textsuperscript{98} Gao, “Conceptual Art with Anticonceptual Attitude,” 135.
\textsuperscript{99} Hou, “Towards an ‘Un-Official Art,’” 41. And as Norman Bryson notes, many artists of this time were “strikingly concerned with the terms of discourse and the subject’s place in discursive regimes.” Norman Bryson, “The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde,” in Gao, ed., 55. In this sense, the ‘85 New Wave focused at least some of its criticism not only at the standard content and forms of art, but at the larger discursive formations within which the new forms might be interpreted. Indeed, Gao mentions that the Conceptualists (one artist group within the overall New Wave) “recognized that the first step...was to demolish the illusion of subjectivity generated by Mao’s revolutionary agenda, with its statistical notion of ‘the people.’” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 252. This suggests that a primary concern of these artists was to address umbrella frameworks of official meaning, which might be shaping how their art could or could not be viewed.
uncriticized status of these discursive fortifications was one which the artists sought often to address.

For instance, in 1987, Zhang created a conceptual work which would eventually be exhibited in *China / Avant-garde*. Titled *Art Plan #2 (Yishujihua erhao)* (艺术计划二号), the work consisted of a twenty-eight page document full of detailed, specific instructions outlining absurdist regulatory conditions under which an exhibition had to be viewed. These fanciful stipulations at times appeared arbitrary, such as when Zhang insisted that “visitors must be taller than 4’3” or shorter than 5’8.” But other times, the work also caricatured the normal, ingrained social regulations of art viewing behavior, such as when it directed visitors to “refrain from speaking, and follow a route marked with mathematical precision,” and when it set forth “guidelines for the content of the dialogue” to be carried out in the exhibition.

The work therefore brought into the foreground normally unseen social behavioral constrictions of art viewing frameworks, the invisible itineraries laid out by sources of cultural authority. Karen Smith describes the implications of the work as a criticism on Chinese society in general, when she explains that “complacency – towards regulations, which Chinese society had made to accept without question for so long – had been provocatively challenged.” As installed in *China / Avant-garde*, however, the idea of invisible complacency brought into question by *Art Plan #2* could then also be conceptually linked to an unquestioned acceptance of cultural authority at the National

100 See Gao, “Conceptual Art with Anticonceptual Attitude,” 135.
101 Van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution,” 3-4.
102 Smith, 386. In fact this was a point of concern for many artists of the time, and Geng Jianyi seemed similarly to be working from “‘the principle of attack,’ targetted [sic] at accepted norms of behaviour, and his installations [sought] to represent the breakdown of these everyday rules and values.” “Geng Jianyi (b. 1962, Henan Province)” in Doran, 28.
Gallery in particular, especially as the work used an exaggeration of art viewing rituals as its vehicle of commentary. The effect of the work thus becomes somewhat site-specific: a hyperbolic critique of the very conventions of conduct in which the audience of China/Avant-garde might have been actually engaged.

This silent itinerary of the art exhibition is one which would be frequently thwarted – actively, kinetically – by many of the performances discussed so far, works making it virtually impossible to simply go through the spectatorial motions. Zhang’s work addresses this same itinerary but takes a different strategy, one not obstructing the behavior directly, but calling explicit attention to it, taking a playful jab at the audience that might have been uncritically accepting the narratives at the site.

Tony Bennett describes the impact of such an “itinerary” in art museums as well, one in which the visitor is provided an organized path to follow. Through bodily movement, this path creates a corporeal experience reinforcing a dictated development of culture. In the case of the National Gallery of Art, in which commemorative exhibitions on the anniversaries of the PRC’s founding were regularly mounted to display the prudence and triumph of the nation’s cultural trajectory, I would extend this thought to suggest that the end point, or pinnacle, of this progression is implied as being the present time, the official state of culture as overseen by the CCP. LeiLani Nishime also takes up the idea of itinerary:

The museum “speaks” not just through objects or placards but also through its organization of space. The physical space through which the subject moves guides and informs the progression of the exhibit’s narrative...The viewer’s participation in the exhibit’s “performance” turns physical space into narrative, and narrative into a visceral, physical

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experience. While the overt narrative of the exhibit may be displayed on placards, another narrative is told through the body.\textsuperscript{104}

In this scenario, if an organized itinerary asserts ideological standards of “correct” national culture through its reiteration by the viewer’s bodily movement through the space, then it stands to reason that a disruption of this space, a stymieing of the itinerary, can similarly effect a corporeal experience of divergent discourses, or at least the possibilities thereof.

Increasing the impact of the individual on such narrative paths – socialized and collectivized in the interest of accepting an official discourse – can be related to Foucault’s idea that interaction and experience at the individual level works to construct, reiterate and validate power structures, discussed when he says, for example, that “the individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.”\textsuperscript{105} So it is the reiteration of power structures, a demonstrated acceptance of power’s normativity by the individual, which establishes its authority to begin with. In this sense, individual moments of interaction also hold the capacity to interrupt the normalization of power at its cellular level of formation.

Thus, in considering \textit{China / Avant-garde}, we find that what the exhibition did in the multi-layered context of uniform behavior encouraged at the site was to disrupt the controlled affirmation of power in the capillaries of its social circulation. In its place, the prospect of new modes of communication was opened for consideration, not only new

\textsuperscript{105} Michel Foucault, \textit{Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977} (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 98.
media but new messages. Whether such aesthetic messages were understood intellectually or historiographically, therefore, becomes a secondary consideration: the fact that dissident messages were witnessed, felt at all in the public consciousness as something that could be cultivated even in controlled environments – this was key. Thus, not only were new meanings encouraged, so too was a reconsideration of the very source of meaning: instead of a top-down declaration from a point of authority, artists and audience sensed that they could generate their own, personalized meanings within the art, a dynamic which would have seemed inconceivable in such times as the Cultural Revolution.

This idea of art disrupting the assumed power relationship at a site, and doing so at a level of individual encounter and occurrence in daily life, would be implemented later and elsewhere as well, and comparing some of these instances with what happened in *China / Avant-garde* may help us to further illustrate this condition. In the Chinese context, the artist Song Dong would, in the 1990s, co-opt spaces as well (and in particular Tiananmen Square) for performance purposes, effecting subtle interruptions of entrenched discourse and official control of social spaces. Nicolas Bourriaud’s ideas on

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106 In the 1996 performance *Breathing* (Fig. 51), for example, the artist lay face down on the ground of Tiananmen Square late at night in the dead of winter, breathing onto the stone surface for forty minutes. As he performs this action, his breath condenses and creates what the artist described as “a little pool of ice, like a shining island in an ocean of concrete.” Paraphrased by Wu Hung, “On the Contemporaneity of Contemporary Chinese Art” (University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Honolulu, HI, 13 March 2007). To my mind, this work comments heavily on possibility: at Tiananmen, commemoration and public mourning of the events of June fourth is still not permitted, and in such a light, Song’s action reminds viewers that there occurred events in which personal voice at this location was violently stamped out, but with a simple gesture, the artist symbolically reestablishes a personal impact on the site, demonstrating that, even here, individual effect remains a possibility, however obscured. Similarly, in the work *Jump*, of 1999, the artist returned to Tiananmen Square – this time in the daytime, when the square was full of tourists (Fig. 52) – and jumped in place for sixteen minutes. The performance introduced an anomalous action into a space where discourses of power are normalized. Under such conditions, the jump subtly disabled processes of routine, and brought into question the assumed normalcy of the site. As was the case with the artwork in *China / Avant-garde*, this rupture was not asserted at the larger level of individual versus state, but, perhaps
relational aesthetics may also be helpful in further considering this strategy. In his work, Bourriaud examines the case of Gabriel Orozco, for instance, and his piece *Hamoc en la moma*, 1993, in which the artist strung a hammock up in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. In such unexpected installations, artists effect a change in the audience’s daily encounters and experiences at charged sites, causing a reconsideration, a redefinition of the meanings and functions of these locations.

According to Bourriaud, when an artist performs such actions, “(s/)he is operating at the hub of ‘social infra-thinness’…that minute space of daily gestures determined by the superstructure made up of ‘big’ exchanges,” and these actions leave a “record of tiny revolutions in the common urban…life.”¹⁰⁷ At the crux of such “tiny revolutions” is an action questioning the meaning of a space, and in particular, a space whose social guidelines are assumed to be static, controlled and impermeable. The MoMA’s garden, for instance, can be understood as a setting for appreciating a sculpture collection, or even a space to assert the museum’s elevated cultural status through its control of civic landscape, its ability to enclose and claim space; but it is not understood as a site of individual loitering or repose. That the hammock was out of place in a charged context – an individualized function that ran counter to the standard meaning of the space as outlined by cultural authority – gave the work its efficacy.¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁸ One of the chief criticisms of Bourriaud’s ideas on relational aesthetics, however, is that the audience can never really be on an equal footing with the artist so long as it remains the artist dictating the original parameters of the exchange. Grant Kester, for instance, has drawn attention to “the ‘choreographed’ nature of relational aesthetics,” as an “a priori event for the consumption of an audience,” an argument suggesting that, whatever the audience’s new relationship to the art, they are still subject to the original communicative
eliciting a more active participation with the work from the audience. For example, the show featured a conversation that addressed these very relationships. I presented the work in progress for this paper at a conference called Crossing the Boundaries XVII: Social Art History Now, and my presentation was followed by one from Rachel Chatalbash examining two recent exhibitions in New York, including the Guggenheim’s *TheanySpaceWhatever*, held in late 2008/early 2009. This show seemed similarly aimed at eliciting a more active participation with the work from the audience. For example, the show featured a piece by Carsten Höller, who installed a giant bed within the museum; for a reported sum of $700, two people could spend the night inside the Guggenheim. Also receiving much attention was a collaborative piece by Carsten Höller, who installed a giant bed within the museum; for a reported sum of $700, two people could spend the night inside the Guggenheim. Also receiving much attention was a collaborative work by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Douglas Gordon and Illy Caffe, entitled *Cinéma Libéré/Bar Lounge*. This work was comprised of a make-shift cinema screening previously banned films, and an unexpected coffee stand set up adjacently (Fig. 53). Jennifer Lee describes the bewildering effect this exhibit had on visitors, and the ways in which it began to ambiguate the function of the space: “It’s confusing for many a passer-by. Is the Guggenheim expanding its downstairs cafe? Are the stylish machines being celebrated for their design, as the Museum of Modern Art honors consumer products. Were the baristas performance artists? Or perhaps it’s a promotion for Illy Caffe?…Um, do people really get it?…‘Some of them do, some of them don’t,’ said Mariuxi Tapia, one of the baristas. ‘We always have to explain it to them,’ chimed in Travis Rosenberg, another barista. He noted that a lot of people think the coffee is being given away free ‘because the Guggenheim is nice.’…Or they think it’s just a cafe, he said. ‘They’ll come and ask, “How much is it?” and we’ll say, “Free.” And they’ll say, “Three?”’ But others assume the baristas are the installation — perhaps models. ‘A lot of people will come and ask, “Are you the art?” And we say, “As much as you are,”’ Mr. Rosenberg said.” See Jennifer 8. Lee, “Guggenheim Turns Coffee Into Art,” City Room, *The New York Times* (12 December 2008) <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/can-serving-espresso-be-considered-art/> (4 May 2009). Chatalbash’s chief argument regarding this exhibition was that these actions in the Guggenheim were ultimately ineffective in establishing a truly collaborative elaboration of artistic meaning, and instead ended up being largely an occasion through which an institutionalization of celebrated “relational” artists could be effected. In the ensuing panel discussion, Barbara Abou El-Haj commented that this may have been because the Guggenheim was, in some ways, a “compromised” venue, to which John Tagg added that, comparatively, there may be no more compromised a venue than a place like the National Gallery of Art in Beijing or 1989. Thus, in comparing our talks and the outcomes of these particular exhibitions in their respective institutions, and noting my observation that, despite all efforts to control the National Gallery, the ensuing social destabilization emerged unpredicted and unchoreographed, Tagg asked both Chatalbash and myself about what we thought the difference was in these instances, wondering if there might be some threshold beyond which a communal art experience can be more easily effected. My response to this was that, again, it seemed the audience’s frame of reference in each instance would have been drastically very different – in the case of the Guggenheim, we would have had, by the time of *TheanySpaceWhatever*, a venue with a long history of displaying radical art forms and, more importantly, an audience “equipped” to view them. And so, perhaps a reflexive experiential expectation of viewing art at the Guggenheim could not be fully escaped (even in instances in which the museum’s typical display dynamic is suspended by the artist, the institution sometimes steps in to police it nevertheless. Tiravanija, for example, now recognized as a sort of modern master of the relational aesthetic, has had other of his seeming interactive works face problems when exhibited, due to the already institutionalized status of his reputation. In 2007, for example, also at the Guggenheim, Tiravanija installed a piece called *Untitled 2002 [he promise]*, described as a grid of chrome and steel bars. Although the museum itself
Similarly, the performances in *China / Avant-garde* are effective for producing events to extraordinarily loosen the expected restrictions of the National Gallery, allowing for the exploration of individual territory. When Zhang Nian abruptly sat down in the corner of a gallery hatching eggs and commenting on the future of art, he disrupted the understanding that the institution usually acted as chief controlling power, deciding which art was of enough value to exhibit, and what could be said about it. His dictum barring theoretical debate playfully transferred cultural authority to the individual artist (or, perhaps, to the eggs), and a renegade artist at that.

Likewise, when Wu Shanzhuan set up his shrimp stand, he removed from the venue a measure of its lofty air, disturbing the standard perception of the museum as a site solely for official cultural citation. In its place, Wu inserted individual enterprise, and as the audience clamorously purchased prawns from him (see Fig. 13), his “customers” collaborated with him in asserting that the space could be wrested from the official and explained the work as “a platform for improvisation and interaction,” describing the piece as “inviting the public to enter into and literally engage with [it],” organizers later felt it necessary to clarify that “it might look like a structure for climbing…but that would be dangerous, both for the piece and the visitors,” when people actually attempted to interact with it (quotes: museum description of *Untitled 2002 (he promised)*, and co-curator Kevin Lotery, respectively. Quoted in Kurt Soller, “It Only Looks Like a Jungle Gym: Don’t hang on the art, please,” Daily Intelligencer, News and Features, *New York Magazine* (10 September 2007) <http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/37265/> (4 May 2009)]. Soller reports that Jennifer Yank, a tourist from Dallas, said “‘it looks like a playground with monkey bars…It’s pretty much inviting you to climb.’ But when she scaled it, she was accosted by security. She wasn’t alone: Ten minutes later, two European tourists were reproached after one announced, ‘I’m going to get my daily exercise,’ and tried a pull-up…When the Euro-exerciser called the guard over to the description of the piece, saying, ‘Look, we’re allowed to do what we want,’ he was ignored,” leading Soller to ultimately warn, “Don’t climb on the conceptual art at the Guggenheim! Even if the concept seems to be about climbing.” Ibid.) Thus, however invitational the art work in the Guggenheim show might appear in form, it retains an “a priori” status because of its institutional frame. In contrast, in the National Gallery of Art in Beijing of 1989, we found a situation in which the audience was not even entirely certain at all times of what it was they were seeing, whether or not they were even experiencing art, allowing in its very ambiguity for a much more malleable experience, a freeness of speculation, and increased room to personally explicate and expand on the event. These considerations were addressed in the discussion on Panel 2, Crossing the Boundaries XVII: Social Art History Now, Binghampton University, State University of New York, Binghampton, NY, 18 April 2009, in response to the presentations Rachel Chatalbash, “Exhibiting the Social: An Examination of Two Exhibitions,” and Gary Liu, “The Making of Unofficial Space: 1989 and the Definition of a Chinese Vanguard.”
then communally redefined, no matter that the new definition was a patently absurdist one. In fact, as Nate Harrison describes, what separates Wu’s action from the work of previous artists dedicated to criticizing institutional structures is the relational aspect of his scenario. Harrison points out that “Wu’s works part ways with institutional critique, instead swapping out contemplation for participation and the potential for dialogue.”

In relational conditions, therefore, art’s transformative potential forms through the process of bringing people together for a “collective elaboration of meaning,” and thus, this form of display and reception represents a populist opportunity to formulate meaning, in place of an elitist structure claiming sole rights to define cultural value.

It is for such a reason that the performance actions of China / Avant-garde were based on the principle of interference, designed not to be mutely witnessed at a distance, but in terms of invitation, sometimes insistence. Blurring the divide between performer and audience, the viewer is put on the spot, no longer afforded the comfort of passivity. Thus through its unforeseen involvement in the happenings, the audience forges an empathetic connection to the action – a direct, bodily, phenomenological experience of subversion as they determine whether or not to participate, and if so, how so? Having first registered the prospect of agency in witnessing artistic actions carried out outside of official approval, the audience processes this idea further, digests it more thoroughly, through first-hand understanding.

We can further understand the importance of an individualized processing of ideas by looking beyond the traditional world of the art exhibition – which, as I have said,

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109 Harrison, 5. Harrison is contrasting Wu’s work with that of the generation of conceptually based artists in the 1960s whose aim was criticism of institutions, such as Michael Asher, Robert Barry, Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke.
110 Ibid.
has historically fostered separate roles for exhibits (as purveyors of meaning) and audience (as receivers) – and this consideration centers on the bodily experience of ideas, the importance of a corporeal interaction in helping an audience to grasp and accept ideas on view. For instance, the development of science centers in the West during the 1960s – and their subsequent wide proliferation in the 1980s and 90s – promoted a direct engagement with displays, through which visitors could experience and internally avouch exhibited concepts.

Writing on this subject, Richard Toon describes how “many contemporary science centre exhibits mediate knowledge through the body, letting the user feel, touch, hear and smell physical forces and explore their own perceptual apparatus. They are, thereby, mimetic.” He further explains that, through a phenomenological experience of knowledge, “objectivity and subjectivity merge, or rather the latter guarantees the veracity of the former,” and thus “active participation is required for learning through personal meaning making.” Barbara Stafford works with such ideas as well, as when she describes how “participatory enactment…made abstraction concrete,” generating a sort of “phenomenologized instruction.”

We might similarly think of installation and performance as creating a phenomenologized experience of art, as opposed to one purely grounded in an intellectually-mediated gaze. In this case, the engagement is a sensorially-based one as well, but beyond this it is also psychological, and it is social. And while the educational

111 Richard Toon, “Science Centres: A museums studies approach to their development and possible future direction,” in Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed, eds. Simon J. Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 110.
112 Ibid., 114.
objectives of science centers can differ quite markedly from those of art museums (and in particular from “avant-garde” exhibitions with radicalized agendas) the mechanism for instilling a subjective affirmation of experience remains the same in both instances: it is the interactive, the experiential, the bodily enactment of the experience which actualizes it in the cognition of the participant. In the case of a science center, this experience might help to reinforce an understanding of a scientific principle, the validity of which is apprehended through its seemingly unmoderated confirmation by a visitor.

In the case of *China / Avant-garde*, phenomenology is linked to a recognition of subversion – although the audience did not instigate the dissident events unfolding, they *lived* them. They enacted the shaping of these events through their own actions and responses; they reinforced an awareness of their potential for personal expressivity, long made invisible at the National Gallery of Art. Under such conditions, whatever choices visitors make – whatever the ultimate nature of their interaction with the art, the artists, or each other – the very fact that they must to generate personalized response, and that this response has a bearing on the substance of the site, renders real the feasibility of social agency.

During the development of the ‘85 New Wave, Geng Jianyi similarly took an interest in physically drawing his audience into a bodily engagement with his work. The work would then be used as a mechanism to prompt communication between audience members, engendering an increased sociability in the artistic situation. Geng explained his interest in broadening the audience’s position in the act of correspondence: “In [Chinese] art today, one point is still neglected…namely the relation between audience and work…This is not simply about the meaning of a work or the audience’s response to
it but the relationship between the two."

In 1988, Geng drew up plans for a project called *Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation* (Figs. 54, 55), in which two winding corridors beginning at opposite sides of the installation would lead eventually to central points within. Through peepholes, some of which would be surrounded by picture frames, audience members on their way in to the installation would come unwittingly face-to-face with those already in the center, and vice versa, producing a sort of forced communicability.

That the ideas explored in the ‘85 New Wave, as well as the new media of *China / Avant-garde*, adopted the audience into their very content provides an additional indicator of the ways that installation, and especially performance, were seen as able to impact the experience of a space. In this way, we might say that these forms promoted an increase in, as Bourriaud might put it, an artshow’s *sociability*. As Bourriaud explains art’s ability to generate communal bonding:

> Art…*tightens the space of relations*, unlike TV and literature which refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption…At an exhibition…there is the possibility of an immediate discussion…I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time. Art is the place that produces a specific sociability.\(^{116}\)

More clearly I would say that art constitutes a series of cultural building blocks which, when assembled publicly, encourages sociability. But ultimately, the *place* (or space) of such an increased sociability is more precisely the *exhibition*.

This would have been true even of the exhibitions in the National Gallery prior to *China / Avant-garde*, but, in the later example, two important developments have been


\(^{115}\) See Van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution,” 4.

\(^{116}\) Bourriaud, 15-6.
introduced into this existing dynamic of art-sociability. First, the relationship is accelerated and amplified by the new forms introduced – i.e., communal interaction through art is not only more likely here, or more available; it is thrust upon the audience, thrown at the visitor, fired from a gun mere feet from him or her. Secondly, the idea of generating impromptu sociability takes on new twists here, in that the network of interactions being melded together, the community being solidified and affirmed through the participatory actions of *China / Avant-garde*, is a community coalescing not only around art, but also, importantly, around subversion.

In addition to any social network created in the interest of appreciating art, this particular network was also linked around an example of culture being pushed past officially defined limits – it is a sudden community built on a common witnessing of official control disrupted. More than this, it is a community built on direct contribution to this upheaval, if even by accidental association. This community may be disorganized, and it may be impermanent, but, at the moment of its existence, it is rife with opportunity for the minute interactions that can either confirm hegemonic discursive systems or contest them, and even momentary sparks between social synapses can be enough to transmit new messages. In this case, such new messages went well beyond the connoisseurship of art.

The extent to which this community was being constructed around a participation in subversion can be seen in examples of visitor actions in the events of the show, even after it became clear that art was no longer the only thing at stake. We’ve already talked about the fact that the audience was pressed into close interaction based on the events of the exhibition. But it was not simply that they were forced into proximity; they also had
to exercise judgment, to figure out how to take action. Even after Xiao Lu discharged a live firearm in a crowded gallery, and admitted as much to those who inquired of her after the fact, her escape from the premises was facilitated by sympathetic individuals with no connection to the action, the artwork, or possibly even the exhibition. As Xiao describes:

It was totally dark inside the black box of *A Guide to the Mandate of Heaven* [the work in which the artist was hiding, after chaos erupted in the gallery due to her shooting]...I stayed in a corner, and some people came over to talk to me. I told them I had just shot a gun, and I thought something was about to go down – I was hoping they could help get me outside. I don’t remember which people it was, but they came up to me, and as I came out of the black box, they gathered around me, and together we walked out of the gallery...[and] went out through the museum’s back door...I went out the main gate of the National Gallery without any problems.  

Remarkable in this account is not only the fact that people were so brazenly willing to assist Xiao in her escape from police, and that they were willing to do so even after hearing her explain point blank that she had fired a gun, but also the apparent *randomness* of her accomplices: while it’s possible that those who enabled Xiao’s escape were acquaintances, she never mentions in her recollection any notable relation to them, and in her inability to recall even the identities of her helpers, we can assume that they were at least not close associates, and perhaps unrelated entirely.

If this is the case, then her accomplices may well have been visitors to the exhibition who had witnessed possibilities of personal action taking effect. The net result of the art in *China / Avant-garde*, therefore, came not only from looking at the exhibits, but from engaging in a communal defiance of a cultural, social, even legal nature. As

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such, we may for such a scenario aptly invoke Bourriaud’s description of global contemporary art to come in the 1990s, when he says that “art is a state of encounter.”\textsuperscript{118}

Such effects are demonstrative of an important trait that Bourriaud locates in the relational dynamic, when he says that “the issue no longer resides in broadening the boundaries of art, but in experiencing art’s capacities of resistance within the overall social arena.”\textsuperscript{119}

In relational or communal circumstances, therefore – especially within a domain laden with cultural dominance – the artwork’s importance can arise in the ways the social interactions it promotes overturn and redefine understandings of control, the nature of which might have been previously unconsidered. Applying this characterization to \textit{China / Avant-garde}, then, the meaning of \textit{Big Business} is not to be uncovered in discerning the formal qualities of shrimp-selling, but in Wu Shanzhuan’s inviting spectators into an act to muddle the stately status of the National Gallery. Moreover, the significance of the action is chiefly understood in its \textit{defiance} against the cultural regulations of the exhibition, the venue, and the Party – a rebellion observed and solidified through audience participation. The action immediately changed the function of the site,\textsuperscript{120} allowing the audience to register the flexibility of the setting and its meanings.

Likewise, the \textit{Pistol Shot Incident} is not only important for broadening artistic media to include gunfire and evasion. It is remarkable for helping to manifest a community of independent actors in the pool of visitors to the site. The work heightened an experience of iconoclastic attack, one which, as the artist rightly observed, created a

\textsuperscript{118} Bourriaud, 18.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 30-1.
\textsuperscript{120} Nate Harrison speaks of how the space was “recoded” through the introduction of an object – the shrimp – alien to the environment and its understood function. Harrison, 8.
“change in the entire National Gallery.”\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Pistol Shot Incident} suggested the achievability of sabotaging an emblem of Party control in Beijing of 1989, and it rode on a wave of fomenting social momentum. These times and places, these conditions and responses and interactions, they are all to be considered the \textit{substance} of the work, beyond the installation constructed by the artist, beyond her sensationalist provocation, beyond even her artistic intent.\textsuperscript{122}

\textbf{Sensationalism, spectacle, and the expansion of destabilization.}

In these events, also, we can consider that all of the acts and pseudo-accidents surrounding \textit{China / Avant-garde} worked to generate an extreme sense of spectacle – a sensationalism vital in extending the discursive destabilization generated in the museum, applying it to domains outside the institution. This spectacle was manifest not only in the works selected, but in the peripheral, extra-textual occurrences surrounding the event, causing its scandal, closure, and near-cancellations. And though the repeated closures may have limited visitation to the exhibition, they also did much to raise its notoriety, legend, and thus sense of potency as an effective messenger of societal unrest.


\textsuperscript{122} In fact the artist’s stated intentions in carrying out the action are notably vague: in addition to the concisely described need to “complete” the installation, or to “damage” it, Xiao summarizes her artistic impetus by explaining that “after the bullet surges through the barrel of the gun, there would be tranquility all over the Earth.” Ibid., my translation. Gao interprets the gunshot in the following way: “Xiao Lu’s gunshots came first and foremost from her own doubtful attitude toward modernity, which is to say that she used the violence of the gun to damage the technological nature and material texture of modernization...Another principle was her roar against the tragedy of human existence. As a young lady she had been harmed, and this virginal harm decided the tragedy of her life as it followed. Her happiness and her misery were all bound up under this original shadow.” Gao, “一声枪响” ("Yi sheng qiangxiang") ("The sound of gunshots"). Zhu Linyong describes this motivation as well: “In 2003, Xiao broke her silence and announced, to the disappointment of many, that the original motivation behind the installation and performance art ‘was simply the virginal harm’ she had suffered in the mid-1980s.” Zhu, 25. This “harm” is not really explained or elaborated upon, but it seems to suggest sexual abuse.
Commenting on the cancellation of experimental art exhibitions later in the 1990s, Wu Hung suggests that “a cancellation does not mean a failure. In fact, a cancellation always enriches the significance of a canceled exhibition: it confirms the experimental nature of the exhibition and enhances its impact on the public consciousness. It also confirms the unofficial identity of curator and participating artists, and strengthens their determination to change the system.”\(^{123}\) In other words, what a canceled exhibition loses in running time, it gains in infamy, and such attention functions to confirm it as a vital social force, a phenomenon effective enough in altering the cultural landscape to warrant pre-emptive strikes against it from the official mainstream.

This characterization can be used to describe *China / Avant-garde* as well, in its generation of a new sense of possibility in Chinese society: the audience’s exposure to the sabotage of the National Gallery’s assertive program suggested that a significant change was unfolding, but there would still have been the matter of assessing the efficacy of these actions. In this light, the continued urgency of authorities in shutting down exhibits, closing the exhibition with riot forces in “steel helmets with Uzi sub-machine guns,”\(^{124}\) and arresting artists, suggested that disruption of official control wasn’t simply a contingency here, but was already manifesting in a measurable way. The official worry over the exhibition helped to elevate the sense of the show’s threat, allowing it to transcend the abstract and symbolic, revealing it to be worthy of governmental fear.

Increasingly stringent measures were taken at the museum to compensate for the growing feeling of disorder: Gao Minglu mentions how, when the exhibition reopened

\(^{123}\) Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 2000), 42.

\(^{124}\) “Get set, go.,” *The Economist* (18 February 1989).
after the shooting, the committee was forced to hire twenty security guards to ensure that no further unforeseen dangers would unfold. When the bomb threats were received by the museum, city, and police force, “armed police units, the latest technical equipment, and search dogs were used to search for bombs in all the corners of the National Gallery.”

And, after the subsequent round of closure and reopening, visitors were forced to leave their bags with security before entering the exhibition, and even more security guards were put in place to keep watch for bombers. In this sense, “the art exhibition seemed to have become a dangerous battlefield in which an unpredictable incident might occur at any time.”

Given the overriding interest in spectacle, therefore, it should not be surprising that the scene outside the gallery (Figs. 56, 57) was at least as important as the scene within. It was an irreverent usurpation, a large-scale appropriation of the institution’s façade and attendant grandeur, against which was juxtaposed the avant-garde’s absurdist pageant to undermine the structure’s symbolic weight. Thus, when I mentioned that the disturbance of space in the National Gallery began with Wu’s shrimp stand, even before visitors entered the actual exhibition halls, perhaps this observation is understated. Because actually, the aim of unsettling not only the museum’s control over art, but its control over civic space in general, was initially manifest even in the exterior of the building: the courtyard in front of the museum’s façade, as a sort of spatial prelude to the institution, was transformed in as broad a way possible by the show’s organizers (Fig. 58),

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125 Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 281.
126 Ibid., 282.
who draped the entire space in banners bearing the ubiquitous “no u-turn” logo of the exhibition’s theme.\footnote{127 As Ann Scott Tyson, of The Christian Science Monitor, observed, these ostentatious banners were also quite effective in sparking the curiosity of passersby. Tyson, 7.}

As the run of the exhibition progressed, the building’s grand façade would overlook carnivalesque proceedings (Fig. 59), and this preliminary co-opting of spatiality was the first step toward asserting that the definitions of the site, normally upholding civic correctness, could be dramatically restated. This is true especially to the extent that this outside scene would have radically overturned a visitor’s standard expectations for entering such an institution – a respectful passage through the façade to pay homage to the congratulatory tales told within. These occupations of the square (Fig. 60, for example) should be kept in mind as we investigate the ways that the ideological intervention taking place within the show could be extended beyond the museum’s structure, the ways that the transformations instigated could transcend the realm of art.

The space of the square is a liminal zone, attached to the museum but serving as a connection between the museum and the city beyond. As various events produced confusion, or even panic, visitors were forced into this space, bringing their experience to an important threshold between the spaces of the museum and the city.

This resonation of discursive incursions across both micro and macro spaces – from individual, internal space to museum space; from museum space to city space – meant that the new work could affect more than just museum workings: new possibilities of space were generated first within the gallery, but this new social space occupied an \textit{existing} one – or rather, multiple existing ones – and, because of this, didn’t exist independently, but in constant dialogue with an institution, a city, a community. Thus,
while the visitor’s museum experience was drastically affected by the exhibition, also
affected were the museum’s spatial and conceptual surroundings – its position in the
social and cultural fabric of Beijing.

Such scenes outside the museum set the foundation for the sustained conceptual
assault taking place within. Thinking again of Carol Duncan’s assessment of the museum
as a ritual space, a monument solidified through artifact and architecture\(^\text{128}\) (Fig. 61), we
can say that by dismantling this solemnity and ostentation, the assumed validity of the
site’s authority is also assailed.\(^\text{129}\) The spectacle then, or scandal, was more effective in
capturing the attention of the local community (and even the international community)\(^\text{130}\)
than was a measurement of the “avant-garde” form of the work itself, and we see that,
frequently, the biggest instances of public scandal related to the exhibition did not include
debate on form or style at all.

The heavy involvement of law enforcement in the proceedings of the exhibition
gives some insight into just how far outside the discourses of art the events of the show

\(^{128}\) Duncan, 90.
\(^{129}\) Wu Chu-Jen recently described another instance in which modern art was put to use toward similarly
irreverent aims: in Taipei of 2007, the Democratic Progressive Party moved ahead with plans to change the
name of the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall to the Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall, attempting to
reposition Taiwan’s modern national identity as one no longer reliant on Chiang or his rulership. Although
regulations prevented organizers from removing or altering the commemorative statue, this did not prevent
them from adorning the hall surrounding Chiang’s statue (Fig. 62) with what Wu describes as modern art.
According to Wu, this worked to dispel the aura from the site and the effigy. Extending this strategy of
recoding a commemorative space through modern art forms, an exhibition of Andy Warhol’s work was
held at the Hall in early 2009 (Figs 63, 64). As a consequence of these exhibitionary endeavors, Wu
believes that the art exhibition function of the site began to displace its original memorial function, and I
see in these incidents an additional example of how sensationalism, particularly irreverent sensationalism,
can be used to disrupt the solemnity of a site, intruding into its ideological formations. These events were
discussed in Wu Chu-Jen, “The Contestation over Historical Memory and National Identity: A Case of the
Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall,” The 8th East-West Center International Graduate Student Conference,
Imin International Conference Center, Honolulu, HI, 14 February 2009.
\(^{130}\) Gao mentions, for instance, that the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Presse, United Press
International, Bangkok Post, Hong Kong’s Shen Pao Daily and most of the major European newspapers
reported at least on the Pistol Shot Incident. Gao, “一声枪响” (“Yi sheng qiangxiang”) (“The sound of
gunshots”).
had moved. Xiao describes the scene outside the National Gallery, after she fired her shots and escaped from the museum:

The scene before my eyes, it already wasn’t nearly as simple as Tang Song getting arrested; instead, it was a change happening to the entire National Gallery. It was mass confusion in front of the museum’s doors: the main gate at the entrance had been shut; people were just coming out, not going in; the people inside started streaming toward the outside; the police and the crowd were mixing together in the square. The main street outside the museum…was full with a crowd standing around looking in, people inside and out had joined into one big mass.\footnote{Xiao, “关于 1989 枪击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”), my translation.}

This mass, filling not only the museum’s square but even the street outside, inflated the sense of confusion beyond the confines of the institution, to the exterior spaces bleeding out into the terrain of the city. There is a sense in Xiao’s description that the destabilization generated by the exhibition was not confined to the museum space, that it appeared, at least for the moment, uncontainable. In this throng – a mass of both visitors and policemen likely to be speculating wildly about what gunfire and riot response could possibly have to do with art\footnote{Xiao’s interrogating officer would later jokingly implore of her: “My son is studying art right now too, I’m so worried that later, when he finishes his education, he’s going to do something like what you did. Young lady, any which way I think about it I just can’t understand – how does learning art turn into shooting a gun?” Ibid., my translation.} – the phenomenon of an impromptu commentary amid a generated sociability as described by Bourriaud must have run particularly rampant, and these commentators were pressed together in both an experience of art and an experience of upsetting official control over it.

In this scene, we can also consider a distinctly Chinese social model for a particular disposition toward, or receptiveness to, a public sense of spectacle – an investigative interest in events which appear to be making waves in the public sphere.
Kan renao (看热闹) is a popular Chinese expression describing, basically, a keenness for watching excitement,\textsuperscript{133} and such an openness toward digesting stimuli from spectacle has been cited in other contexts of Chinese social history, sometimes to account for the formation of impromptu, socially discursive arenas which prompted or facilitated the development of progressive social trends. One example in particular discusses the kan renao propensity as a platform for the spread of Spirit Boxing sympathies – the martial art whose practitioners, believing they were invulnerable to bodily harm, would eventually instigate the Boxer Rebellion in 1900:

The most common way for Spirit Boxing to spread from village to village was for young men from one village to hear of the practice nearby, and to go watch the performance out of curiosity – “to watch the excitement” (kan re-nao) as the informants often said, using the same term that would describe a visit to a busy market or an opera. Being impressed, they would invite one of the more accomplished practitioners to establish a boxing ground in their own village.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{133} A phenomenon described well by an American expatriate living in Beijing, who attempts to convey the connotations of the term: “‘Kan re nao’ is a perfectly valid explanation for stopping and staring at a domestic spat that has erupted into the street, a fight between a driver and a cyclist, a bus accident, a crying baby, or anything else out of the ordinary. It’s ‘rubbernecking’ without the negative connotations.” Brad O’Donnell, “December 9\textsuperscript{th}: Two Articles,” (9 December 2004), Ou Yang Bin’s Beijing Blog: A “trailing” spouse comments on life in China’s answer to New York and DC with a hotshot wife and an adorable toddler (if I do say so myself), Blogspot, <http://bradodonnell.blogspot.com/2004/12/december-9th-two-articles.html> (22 Feb 2009).

\textsuperscript{134} Joseph W. Esherick, \textit{The Origins of the Boxer Uprising} (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 231. Much more contemporarily than the Boxer Rebellion, and specifically in the context of visual culture, many artists in China appear to use this tendency as a vehicle for their work as well. I would argue, for instance, that the efficacy of Song Dong’s anomalous actions relies quite a bit on a particular interest in taking stock of social incongruencies on the part of the Chinese public– a willingness to register and ruminate over the causes and effects of public disruption. Similarly, the Shanghainese artist Xu Zhen has illustrated the phenomenon well in his work \textit{Shouting}, of 1998 (Fig. 65), for example. Comprised of a series of video clips, each segment begins by training a camera lens on the backs of teeming pedestrians, rushing ahead in their daily affairs. At the point when Xu and a partner yell out at the top of their lungs, the entire crowd pirouettes and is caught staring silently and intently into the camera, attempting to sort out the meaning of what they have encountered. My adviser Kate Lingley described to me an incident in which she successfully “created spectacle”: “What happened was that a friend and I were walking down Nanjing Road in Shanghai, which is one of the main shopping streets of the city, sometime in the fall of 1992. We were talking about the propensity for people to gather around anything that was ‘happening’ in the street, whether it be a performance, an argument, an accident, or anything that other people already seemed interested in. One of us, I can’t remember which one, said ‘What if we pretended to be looking at something right here?’ and pointed up, at a snarl of power lines (maybe a junction box?). We stood there, gazing at the box, for about five minutes, talking to each other in English (as if discussing what we were seeing), and
In such an instance then, the *kan renao* phenomenon, as a vernacular substrate of community interaction, was central to the spread of this new social tendency, and in this account of Spirit Boxing’s dissemination, Joseph Esherick deemphasizes more structured avenues of idea-transmission – such as direct instruction and influence from earlier anti-dynastic movements, for example – and focuses more on these organic discursive possibilities in communal or relational micro-structures of exchange. Thus, the author traces the formation and spread of the movement outside of formal written or oral discourses, “stressing instead the impact of social ecology and popular culture.”

Considering the magnitude of the *renao* surrounding the National Gallery during the run of *China / Avant-garde* – in which a major Beijing thoroughfare (see Fig. 61, for example) was impeded by barricades, police, and masses of people – this sensibility would have found plenty of opportunity to flourish. Such a scenario could then generate the investigation into and speculation over a scene like this, which then might have shifted the debate from a hermetic, artistically-enclosed one, to a more general discussion of how subversive actions had affected the “itinerary,” or the “ritual,” of Beijing life on the whole.

Then turned around to discover that we’d acquired five or six other people who were standing around trying to figure out what we were looking at. They were asking each other what there was to see. The best part was when we explained our ‘experiment’ to them, they thought it was hilarious, and agreed that people in China are often willing to treat anything that happens in the public sphere as spectacle, without any sense that certain things might be private or that there’s anything in public space that is not to be looked at. They didn’t seem to be embarrassed by it, but just treated it as the natural way of things.” Kate Lingley, Re: 看热闹, email correspondence, 1 March 2009, and personal communication. Upon hearing the anecdote, I suggested to my adviser that perhaps she holds an effective performance art potential in the mode of Song Dong.

136 And the occurrence was certainly a highly visible one, which the citizens of Beijing took notice of, whether or not they understood its artistic motivations and philosophies – as Leo Lee describes, “residents who passed by openly cheered the radical artists on for their daring defiance of authority.” Lee, 1.
Decreased intelligibility vs. increased possibilities.

Given the widespread coverage of the exhibition, it seems that the sensationalist tactics worked at least to generate a significant level of attention. But at this point the question remains: how was this assertion of a new revolutionary spirit in art ultimately received – was it embraced, or even understood, by the public? An assessment of some surviving reports on the exhibition uncovers an ambivalence on this point. Indeed, in gauging visitor reaction, we are forced to reconcile the idea that, although the exhibition – with the self-label of an “avant-garde” – suggested that it was a harbinger of art to come, the show was met largely with widespread bewilderment. Xiang Pu, of China Daily, was quite prescient when suggesting in an article written just before the show’s opening that “the dialogue between the artists and the public may not be easily conducted. Many ordinary people may be shocked, puzzled or irritated by the various modern styles and forms. They are strikingly different from the familiar ones they have learned to appreciate.”

Party officials, perhaps predictably, were frequently incensed by what they saw. Wang Qingcai, a Party cadre, wrote in the show’s comments book that, “My general feeling is that this exhibition is incomprehensible, a confused hodgepodge that has

137 At the time of the show’s opening, reporter Andrew Higgins observed that “critics have hailed the show as a breakthrough for the development of art in China,” indicating that there was a desire to regard the exhibition as the beginning point of a new artistic tradition. Higgins, 12. Strassberg interprets Gao Minglu’s manifesto as asserting “that the exhibition was a first step in firmly establishing modern art in China.” Strassberg, “I Don’t Want to Play Cards with Cézanne,” 25. Geremie Barmé has also contributed to a critical historiography assessing the exhibition in terms of a successful (or failed) formal advance: “The China/Avant-Garde exhibition to a certain extent was a display of quick-frozen styles, innovations that seemed to lead nowhere and tired-out artistic trends of academic rather than artistic interest.” Geremie Barmé, “Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing from China, 1989-93,” in Doran, XLVIII.

138 Xiang, 5.
everything in it but works of real artistic value...It reflects ideological emptiness...promoting sexual liberation, lust that will drive people into obscenity. Disgusting, naked filth.”

Michael Sullivan also explains how “there were some critics at the time, particularly officials, who felt strongly that this sensationalism was in fact the only point of the exhibition, and that the work did not extend beyond shock, into the realm of aesthetic value.”

Joan Cohen mentions that “the art establishment conservatives denounced the exhibition as having been incomprehensible, ugly, and unserious.”

Beyond the expected official denouncement and institutional conservatism, however, there are some indications that even the general public sometimes had a hard time getting a grip on the art on view: The Economist reports that, “Most Chinese consider that they were shocked enough by the absurdities of the Cultural Revolution. Visiting this exhibition, they seem to be merely puzzled.” The Boston Globe describes how some spectators “[did] not appear to be amused,” while The Intelligencer describes how others “[seemed] to be mocked.” Anthony Higgins, of The Independent (London), recounts that “‘disgusting’, ‘incomprehensible’, ‘obscene’ read the comments of scandalised visitors to China’s most ambitious attempt at introducing avant-garde art to the general public.” Nate Harrison describes how many of the visitors to the gallery were repelled by the smell emanating from Wu’s shrimp stand.

139 Wang Qingcai, quoted in Higgins, 12.
140 Sullivan, 275.
142 “Get set, go.,” The Economist (18 February 1989).
143 The Boston Globe (11 February 1989).
144 The Intelligencer (12 February 1989).
145 Higgins, 12.
146 Harrison, 7. By and large, media coverage appears to have focused on aspects of the exhibition which were most bewildering from the standpoint of public reception. A review of the exhibition in Time magazine of that year was subtitled “Condoms Eggs and Gunshots,” further drawing attention to the
Newspaper accounts of the exhibition, therefore, tended to convey a sense of mainly shock, or confusion, in relation to the exhibition, and illustrating this perplexed state of affairs is a clipping from *The New York Times*, of February 6, 1989 (Fig. 66), which captures in photograph a group of puzzled visitors locked out from the National Gallery grounds after authorities closed the exhibition due to Xiao’s shooting. A passage from the report reads: “At one point, two carloads of riot policemen drove into the crowd, but left immediately when their cars were surrounded by curious onlookers. ‘That must be performance art too,’ an artist said.”

Implicit in this kind of uncertain speculation being made by the observer – taking his or her best shot at sorting out what is and isn’t art in this instance – is an underlying ambivalence over not only what the message of the art was, but in fact what constituted the art at all, and where such art could be situated. The degree of guesswork necessary to locate the art suggests the extent to which art had successfully transgressed its usual confinement to circumscribed spaces, of a formal, institutional, and social nature. Remarkably, there appears to be a sense that any provocative or socially unsettling incident occurring near to the National Gallery grounds could now be reasonably construed as potential art, no matter that the occurrence appears to be entirely incomprehensible.

This uncertainty highlights, to some degree, a failure of intelligibility in the new artistic language being proposed by *China / Avant-garde*, and such a lack of elements of the show regarded as being the most bizarre and idiosyncratic, those which may have posed the biggest challenge to visitors as far as comprehensibility. Edward M. Gomez and Jaime A. Floracruz, “Beijing Art: Condoms Eggs And Gunshots, Beijing Gallery Goers Meet the Challenge of Modernism,” *Time Magazine* (6 March 1989). Cited in Gao, “一声枪响” ("Yi sheng qiangxiang") (“The sound of gunshots”),

understanding can be gauged in terms of Tony Bennett’s discussion of the “invisible” in art appreciation, such as when he says that “the relations between the visible and the invisible in art museums became increasingly self-enclosing as the works on display formed part of a coded form of intertextuality through which an autonomous world of ‘art’ was made visible to those who were culturally equipped to see it.”[^1]

In other words, increasingly, art could only be understood by those who were granted access to particular lexicons of aesthetic concepts and terminology – it became a restricted terrain which couldn’t be navigated by those who had not been trained to do so. Pierre Bourdieu takes up the idea of the aesthetic invisible as well:

> Given that the work of art exists as such, (namely as a symbolic object endowed with meaning and value) only if it is apprehended by spectators possessing the disposition and the aesthetic competence which are tacitly required, one could then say that it is the aesthete’s eye which constitutes the work of art as a work of art. But, one must also remember immediately that this is possible only to the extent that the aesthete himself is the product of a long exposure to artworks.[^2]

In this instance, then, a successful appreciation of art is subject to certain qualifications – the ability to discern and understand an abstract framework of meaning that informs the process of art appreciation, and that allows for an esoteric apprehension of an artwork’s significance. This condition has only increased through the development of modernist

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[^1]: Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), 171. Although *Zhongguo meishubao* hoped that the exhibition would serve “as a high-powered exchange and research event in the field of modern art, [and that] the show [would] boost the development of artistic pluralism in the Chinese art world,” if such new forms were not comprehended, then perhaps at best we could see the aesthetic development of the exhibition as amounting to a sort of pluralism for pluralism’s sake. *Zhongguo meishubao*, cited in Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 274-5.

[^2]: Pierre Bourdieu, “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* no. 46 (1987), 202, quoted in Bennett, 163-4. Even Gao acknowledges: “it also has to be said…that because traditional and academic art had always been the dominant art style in China, it was no wonder that, in the public eyes, avant-garde art was a rather incomprehensible art form.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 275.
and post-modernist forms in the West, in which the very nature of art appreciation grows increasingly insular, self-referential.\textsuperscript{150}

Returning to Bourdieu’s final point of the qualified aesthete needing a long exposure to artworks in order to attain a “qualified” level of understanding and appreciation, we should say that, in 1989 China, this problem would have been compounded. It was not only a question of an established visible, through which access to the “invisible” was granted to a cultural elite. In addition to this usual stratification, the \textit{China / Avant-garde} situation included the added difficulty of the “visible” itself having never been seen. Many of the ideas being explored in the exhibition were inspired by art concepts transplanted from sources which had been culturally distanced from China for decades.\textsuperscript{151} In other words, there could have been little infrastructure for an appreciation of avant-garde art as we understand its western form, here transplanted to, and translated within, China.\textsuperscript{152} Besides art institution insiders, many of the visitors to the exhibition

\textsuperscript{150} And Chinese artists of the time were not at all shy about declaring their affinity for the western model of modernist and avant-garde art, leading Hans van Dijk to hold that “statements on philosophy or Western art currents” were viewed as “two prerequisites for avant-garde art, at least according to the Chinese avant-garde art press.” Van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution,” 4.

\textsuperscript{151} Perhaps it is just such a situation which prompts Yi Ying to conclude that “in China, conceptual art (including performance art and installation art) tends to be executed in a rather superficial and blind manner because it lacks…the cultural readiness provided by the Modernist experience.” Yi Ying, “Choice and Opportunity: The Fate of Western Contemporary Art in China,” trans. Rachel Wang, in Doran, XLIV.

\textsuperscript{152} But then, perhaps comprehensibility was never really an option on the table. Consider what Renato Poggioli says of a \textit{necessity} of incomprehensibility in avant-garde movements, a gap between the artist and an uninitiated audience, here using poetry as one example of such a tendency: “Linguistic hermeticism…would be conceived of as both the cause and the effect of the antagonism between public and artist. The problem of obscurity in so much contemporary poetic language is furthermore understood…as the necessary reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech…According to that doctrine, the linguistic obscurity of contemporary poetry should exercise a function at once cathartic and therapeutic in respect to the degeneration afflicting common language through convention and habits.” Poggioli, 37. According to this characterization, incomprehensibility is described as being vital to the assertion that old or historical modes of communication had become moribund, with the extended suggestion that those who did not comprehend avant-garde aesthetic terms needed to shed the trappings of “old language” for the expressions of the new. There is also the secondary suggestion that, in any event, legibility might simply be an unavoidable casualty of the avant-garde stance of antagonism against public, a communicative sacrifice necessary because articulating the element of conflict with tradition is more vital to asserting a self-
were young, and, on the whole, receptive to the possibilities of social reform. But this didn’t stop many from “[voicing] complete bewilderment.”\textsuperscript{153}

All the same, in the freeness of speculation surrounding the question of “is it art?” being bandied about by visitors to the site, there is an important play of ideas which gets at the crux of the show’s ultimate efficacy: in wondering at just how far beyond previous limits the artists had been able to push, there is the implication that culture had, in this instance, been successfully disentangled from the official constraints normally placed upon it – in a very palpable sense, officials appeared to have, at least temporarily, lost control of the possibilities of cultural expression. The chaos that took over the site during the exhibition’s run contrasted sharply to the social order typically established, and considering the exacting stance taken against individual expression in recent PRC memory, this may well have appeared to be a sea change. If officials could not enforce guidelines for this exhibition, then perhaps the boundaries of what could or could not be

conscious rupture with the past than is the legibility of the work. Writing on the Russian avant-garde in the early twentieth century, Ralph Croizier notes that “artists ahead of their times (‘avant’) could not, despite their best efforts, effectively communicate with the broad masses whom the revolution was supposed to serve.” Croizier, 486. And as Matei Calinescu has concluded about the late-nineteenth century French avant-garde: “the representatives of the artistic avant-garde consciously turned against the stylistic expectations of the general public, whom the revolutionists were trying to win over through the use of the most platitudinous revolutionary propaganda.” Matei Calinescu, \textit{Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch} (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1977), 112, quoted in Croizier, 486. In the China of the 1980s as well, there appears to have been an interest in the kind of insular linguistic exercises that Poggioli describes: “In their prose, as in their discussions, [artists of the time] employed an abstract and difficult style. Sometimes the result was so odd that it read like an inept translation from a foreign language. But it was all done for effect, one that would embrace the reader in a vague ambience, the message hidden somewhere in the mists.” Liao, LIV. Interestingly, appreciability may not have even been a priority for the organizers of \textit{China / Avant-garde}, either, as indicated by Gao, when he said shortly after the show’s opening that “we want to show the world that China, too, has modern art, no matter what its present quality might be…We want to let Chinese people know that we can create modern works, not only traditional art.” Gao Minglu, quoted in Tyson, 7. Gao’s disclaimer about the quality of the works (or rather, the lack of necessity in gauging this quality) indicates that a fundamental declaration of modernity was the guiding motivation for the exhibition, and that the particular content of the work ran second to this emphasis. Nicole Combs goes even further when discussing work labeled in China at this time as being “avant-garde,” “experimental,” or “new wave,” saying that “it is…important to appreciate that even in China, intellectuals, artists, and the general public may not understand the breadth of these works.” Nicole Combs, “Struggle for the New,” \textit{Asian Art News} 9, no. 3 (May/June 1999), 61.\textsuperscript{153} Higgins, 12.
expressed were much broader than previously thought, and were expanding faster than could have been anticipated. Along these lines, Michael Sullivan describes a slowly emerging conviction among the artists of the 1980s, which was that “the cultural apparatchnik, for all his power, was seen for what he was – a hollow man,” and perhaps it was just such a signal as this, that China / Avant-garde attempted, in its social reverberations, to broadcast.

In this sense, the audacity of the artists in carrying out such actions espoused a dismissal of fear, as a dissuader of individual statement. Although the Cultural Revolution was a little more than a decade removed at this point, the exhibition was staged in the recent vapor trail of the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism campaign, which had reignited fears that official retribution for cultural deviation might be reprised. In this light, the artists’ willingness and capacity to stage dramatic and bold rebellion against such political conditions challenged the social tenor of the time, invalidating such fear as a deterrent to action.

So, it is perhaps true that the show did not usher in a new aesthetic language which could be immediately understood by the public within the trajectory of Chinese art’s development. This language was incomplete, for starters – the disconnected syllables uttered in fevered experimentation after the Cultural Revolution. And anyway

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154 Michael Sullivan, “Brush-Strokes and the Party Line: Tensions Between Artists and Officialdom in China,” in Doran, XXV.

155 Although the exhibition happened thirteen years after the Cultural Revolution, it is clear that there remained, in Chinese cultural society, a fair amount of ambivalence and anxiety over what was acceptable in art. Gao says of the first abortive attempt to stage a contemporary art exhibition of this type that “no official institution…would agree to take the risk as a sponsor for such an exhibition. Even Zhongguo Meishubao, which originally promised sponsorship, finally decided not to get involved due to political pressure.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 270. Even during the planning for the 1989 show, organizers had to look outside of the art world for sponsors, because the nature of the exhibition was still regarded as being too risky. Despite securing a first round of sponsors, Gao “was informed that the gallery had declined the proposal due to the artistic orientation of the exhibition and its possible political consequences.” Ibid., 273.
this hardly mattered, as the audience was syntactically unprepared to engage with it, even if it had been cohesive. But whether or not it was the intention of artists and organizers to establish an accepted repertoire of new aesthetic forms, and whether or not such a presumed aim may have failed or succeeded, all of this largely falls outside of the argument being put forth here: that the importance of the show occurring in this particular time and place is more to be uncovered in analyzing how such actions changed people’s relationship to the site – from a state of static, inactive, reverential reception, to a more unstable condition, in which could be witnessed opportunities for conflict, for dissidence generated at the individual level, potent enough to shut down an icon of official culture.

This change in perception and its revelation of agency was the most immediate accomplishment of *China / Avant-garde* – the show changed the way that viewers experienced art, changed the way they experienced the site, and gave them new parameters within which they could question previous understandings of the site’s significances, and the validity of its claims. Interactions with civic spaces like the National Gallery are culturally conditioned, and this condition is stymied by *China / Avant-garde*, reordering the social atmosphere so as to disarm automatic response. Out of such disruption, actions and responses come from a personal place, and through beholding and partaking in the events besetting the National Gallery, audience members realized that their own responses to a controlled space were just as vital to shaping its parameters of possibility as anybody else’s.
Defining a vanguard, visualizing a modern consciousness.

So, was the exhibition, *China / Avant-garde*, actually an avant-garde? The goals of an avant-garde intent – as understood in its western historical form – were, at any rate, in place, and, despite a lack of exposure to such historical goals in the Chinese public, were even ultimately met, though perhaps through round-about avenues. That is to say that I believe the intention of effecting broader social change was always a part of the show’s conceptual program; the pressing need to make new directions in society visible was always recognized.

But to further consider this question of “avant-garde intent,” we need of course to pose the untidy question of what an “avant-garde” can mean when transplanted across geographic and cultural divide.\(^\text{156}\) After all, the choice of such a label for the exhibition is a telling one, and it’s interesting to consider that the Chinese name of the exhibition – *Zhongguo xiandai yishu zhan* (中国现代艺术展) – can be translated, perhaps more neutrally, as “Chinese Modern Art Exhibition,” while the English name for the show was *China / Avant-garde*. This is not an issue of translation, but a designation affixed by the show’s organizers to themselves, as we can see in surviving promotional materials for the exhibition, like catalogs, placards, and advertising posters, all bearing the name *China /...*  

\(^{156}\) The problematic of transplanting the “avant-garde” (like translating the notion of “modernity”) as it relates to Asia, continues to be approached in a number of ways. Wu Hung characterizes the problem as “an ongoing debate concerning the so-called Chinese avant-garde: some scholars argue that historical avant-gardism was strictly a Western phenomenon; other scholars hope to apply the concept of avant-garde to Chinese art by revising the definition of this Western term.” Ultimately, Wu sidesteps the question of appropriateness for the term by favoring “experimental” instead. Wu, *Transience*, 15. In terms of gauging this “avant-garde” quality in the exhibition itself, even the organizers of the show differed in their views on whether or not it could categorically be considered “avant-garde” in nature. Li Xianting, for instance, claimed that, “for the Chinese art world this exhibition definitely did not have an avant-garde character,” while Hou Hanru definitively referred to the show as an avant-garde exhibition. Li quoted and Hou cited in Croizier, 497.
Avant-garde in English (Figs 67-69). There are a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy, most of which suggest an act of strategic labeling on both the domestic and international fronts. A title like this could, for example, attract the attention of Western audiences who were familiar with the particular connotations of artistic progression and innovation bound up in such a term. As such, interest might have been particularly piqued because such a suggestion of revolution in art would have run counter to unpalatable assumptions about the autocratic nature of Chinese culture, and may have been heralded as an indicator of inevitable democratization.

Ralph Croizier has taken up this question of dual titles as well:

In the first place, “avant-garde” in English might better attract the foreign attention that had been so important in encouraging and supporting new art movements since the late 1970s…Moreover, for Chinese audiences it smacked of the chic advertising technique that had penetrated China during the 1980s where adding some foreign words served as a sign of up-to-date modernity and novelty when selling a product. On the political front, it was a way of signifying their radical and confrontational intent in the English title without alarming veteran party functionaries.

157 Here, however, we face a preliminary problem of equivalency, as there remains debate on how the French term “avant-garde” could be synonymously expressed in the Chinese language. Richard Strassberg asserts that the term “avant-garde,” within Chinese artistic development, has in fact been equated with the Chinese term xiandai, as well as with the term qianfeng (前锋) (Strassberg, “Preface,” in Strassberg, x), while Croizier believes that a newer label in use at the time, qianwei meishu (前卫美术), can be translated more directly as “avant-garde art.” Croizier, 496. Shih Shou-chien considers: “to my mind, the term ‘avant-garde’ is similar to the Chinese term fansu. The word fan means ‘to overturn’ or ‘to overthrow,’ while the word su can be defined [in terms of aesthetics as] the accepted stylistic model of expression, ergo, the ‘orthodox.’” Shih Shou-chien, “The Orthodox and the Avant-Garde: An Historical Examination,” trans. Joy Tseng and Valerie C. Doran, in Doran, XXVII. Interestingly, in one of his essays, Gao himself uses the following turn of phrase: “Chinese Modern (Avant-Garde) Art Research Association,” indicating that, in the eyes of China / Avant-garde’s chief organizer, “modern” and “avant-garde” can be used roughly synonymously, as the terms relate to art. Andrews and Gao, 239.

158 A latent hope for rebellion against totalitarianism which might usher forth a cultural apex similar to western development might also explain the popularity of the propagandistically satirical “political pop” works which gained wide international acclaim in the 1990s.

159 Croizier, 497. Gao’s account of the political-cultural climate at the time confirms Croizier’s assessment of such anxieties. He explains that, in 1987, during early attempts to stage an exhibition along these lines in the midst of the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism campaign, the organizers “avoided using some radical terms like ‘avant-garde’…which would insult the official political sensibility.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde
So we focus, in the political explanation here, on the Chinese artists’ understanding of the avant-garde’s social insurgency, its renegade agitation. There is the sense that the intellectuals, artists, and organizers working to stage an exhibition like China / Avant-garde would have been well aware of the progressive currency carried by such a term, and it is true that the contemporary Chinese art community was well-versed in the historical meanings of western avant-gardism, and that they consciously attempted to follow suit.\(^{160}\)

Karen Smith points out, for example, that the artists working at the time were attempting to approximate an explicitly western view of avant-gardism, citing Wang Guangyi’s interest in Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Sartre, for instance. She points

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\(^{160}\)The particular formal or philosophical terms of the avant-garde invoked, however, were dispersed widely across the spectrum of western avant-gardism as it developed throughout the twentieth century. Early paintings by Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang, for instance, both display stylistic and iconographic affinities with western surrealism (see Wang’s Post-Classical Series: Madonna and Child, for example, or Zhang’s The Last Supper) (Figs. 70 and 71, respectively). There was also Huang Yongping’s Xiamen Dada movement, and many of the performance artists of the time took their cues from the 1960s “happenings” of the United States. Thus, use of the “avant-garde” in this context was subject in its translation to a certain amount of compression, in which the entire development of western avant-gardism, modernism, and post-modernism was conflated, and multifarious ideas originally developed in different times and circumstances were presented simultaneously. Such a condition accounts for assessments from historians and critics like Sullivan, who has characterized the exhibition as an assemblage of “ill-digested western modernism and post-modernism.” Sullivan, 274. Karen Smith goes farther, suggesting that “no one knew with any certainty exactly what constituted modern art…Without hesitation or inhibition, they experimented with a succession of role models, dancing recklessly across decades of evolved practise.”

Smith, 20. The Economist was rather ruthless in characterizing the artistic credentials of the Chinese avant-gardists: “The ideas [that the artists of China / Avant-garde were drawing upon], however, grew out of Europe’s philosophical crisis between the wars. In China they seem as much a transplant as the glitzy joint-venture hotels in Chinese cities.” “Get set, go,” The Economist (18 February 1989). And Tang Qingnian, another organizer of China / Avant-garde, explains that, at the time of the exhibition, “the last century of Western art from the Impressionists to the present which had developed diachronically was now synchronically displayed before the Chinese.” Tang, 6. According to Gao, western modern and postmodern theories, “and the multitemporal phenomena they described were popular among Chinese intellectuals and artists in the 1980s, but they put them to different uses without a clear temporal pattern.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 249. He says that “the joke, at the time, was that in less than a year, we saw 100 years of Western art.” Gao Minglu, quoted in Barbara Pollack, “Eastern Exposure: Curator Gao Minglu Brings the Chinese Avant-Garde West,” The Village Voice (29 September 1998), 1 <http://www.villagevoice.com/1998-09-29/art/eastern-exposure/1> (15 March 2009).
out that new philosophies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts contemporaneously espoused an understanding of the avant-garde in line with its standard western meaning.

As a matter of fact, Smith takes the personal stance that an adoption of the European concept of avant-gardism to explain the Chinese art phenomenon in the 1980s is appropriate, citing the social climate of Beijing in the 1990s as being comparable to the “nouveaux suburban” environment in the Parisian 1860s. She concludes that: “To invoke the ambience of the era in which the avant-garde emerged [in China], it is not far-fetched to look to Europe in the early 1900s.”

Perhaps such a comparable social and intellectual atmosphere, as observed by Smith, is what brings Croizier to similarly conclude that, in the 1980s, “China witnessed the birth…of a modern art movement, one that consciously assumed a role analogous to that pioneered by the historical avant-garde in the West,” going on to say that “China in the 1980s had an avant-garde movement in almost the original Saint Simonian sense of the term.”

161 Smith, 19, 31, and 21, respectively. And it has not been only art historians from the West who have drawn these connections: Li Xianting has said that a major slogan of artists at the time was: “Respond to the challenge of the Western avant-garde!” (Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in Doran, XVI), and Gao Minglu makes the observation that, in 1980s China, “we find a mixture of both modernism and postmodernism, understood according to their original Western definitions.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 247. Huang Yongping, for instance, explains that, in the 1980s, “Chinese contemporary art was fifty years behind the times compared to Western art. We believed that a reference to Western art was essential if Chinese contemporary art was to exist. So we had to take up a position in relation to Western art.” Huang Yongping, quoted in Michel Nuridsany, China Art Now (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 37. Li further describes how, at the time, there was a great amount of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century western philosophy flowing into and translated in China. This material included Nietzsche, Popper, Freud, Einstein, Eliot, Kafka, Camus, Marcuse, Borges, and Hesse. Li Xianting, “Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture,” in Fibicher and Frehner, 26. He also explains that, in the late 80s, “artists…were hopeful that Western thought could be used to salvage and help rebuild Chinese culture.” Li Xianting, “The Imprisoned Heart: Consuming Mao,” Chinese Sociology and Anthropology 28:1 (Fall 1995), 93. Thus, as Tang Qingnian concludes: “That the advances in Chinese artistic thought during the Eighties occurred in accordance with art based on Western concepts (especially the art based on the concepts of Western Modernism) is a clear fact.” Tang, 15-6.

162 Croizier, 485 and 508, respectively. He also quotes an article by Lynn MacRitchie, who, visiting China in 1993, concluded similarly that “China is one of the few places where the term ‘avant-garde’ retains its original meaning.” Lynn MacRitchie, “Report from Beijing: Precarious Paths on the Mainland,” Art in America (March 1994): 51-57, quoted in Croizier, 507.
an avant-garde is conceived of as a cultural “leading edge,” suggesting that there is a body which will follow – a wave, or after-effect, to forever divert the trajectory of cultural development. As Henri de Saint-Simon famously declared in the 19th century: “We artists will serve you as an avant-garde… the power of the arts is most immediate: when we want to spread new ideas we inscribe them on marble or canvas… What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function and of marching in the van of all the intellectual faculties!”

Thus, given that Chinese artists not only understood the connotations of the term, but even sought to emulate them, it is perhaps fitting that the questions China / Avant-garde ended up raising through its aesthetic, visual, and spatial confusion were indeed social questions, generating ideological fissures, and perhaps even constituting what Jing Wang terms “the aesthetic modern as ideology (my emphasis).” In this sense, the show could be regarded as a necessary instance of what Qin Shao terms an “exhibitory modernity,” in which, in the Chinese context, “modernity is not merely about Western institutions and values, it is also about presentation, and requires validation. To be modern is to be seen, judged, consumed and thus legitimated as modern by the public.”

In other words, it was believed that Chinese modernity needed a vehicle of display – a visual assertion, a projection to infiltrate public perception, there to sway the

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164 Jing Wang, High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 141.
165 Qin Shao, “Exhibiting the Modern: The Creation of the First Chinese Museum, 1905-1930,” The China Quarterly 179 (September 2004), 685. An understanding of this Chinese context is much more essential toward gauging the function and effect of this particular “avant-garde” than is a clarification of the semantic intention in such a term, for, as an editorial in Zhongguo meishubao in June of 1988 was correct to point out, “although there is the possibility that this avant-garde will be inevitably facing the cultural background of the whole world, the internal reasons for the happening of the new phenomena in the Chinese art world must be located in the indigenous culture.” “The Editor’s Words,” Zhongguo meishubao (June 1988), quoted in Feng, 328.
direction of cultural flow. In the late 1980s, the need for such new visualizations might have seemed particularly pressing, given the perceived ambiguity over the state of Chinese modernism. This anxiety is outlined by Wang, who suggests that there was felt to be a requirement for more explicit displays that could announce the onset of a new cultural era, a new epoch that could be legitimated as authentically modern. Wang discusses the worry over “pseudomodernism,” especially as it preoccupied Chinese literary criticism in 1988, proceeding from the question of “do we have authentic modernism?” and emphasizes that “the critique of Chinese modernism in 1988 was in fact targeted…at its formal aesthetics.”

It is conceivable then that a similar uncertainty could have fostered a reciprocal urge amongst visual artists and curators of the time to locate more radical means through which to firmly present a visual – and thus visible – declaration of modernity, one reinforcing the viability of cultural progression, and asserting that the attainment of a xiandai yishi (现代意识), or “modern consciousness,” was possible.

A sense of such an urgency might be seen in Xiao’s shooting action, which, as the artist frequently explained after the fact, was performed in order to “complete the work.” That an act of violence was deemed necessary to “complete” the art suggests an unspoken barometer against which is measured the radicalness of the new work being offered. The tandem of Dialogue / Pistol Shot therefore represents an interesting juncture.

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166 Wang, 141-2.
167 Ibid., 138.
168 See Xiao Lu, quoted in Andrews and Gao, 256. She did not arrive at this idea on her own, however. The artist explains that a Professor Song Jianming, visiting the Zhejiang Academy show, relayed his criticism to her that the work appeared “overly complete,” and that it needed to be “damaged a little;” they discussed the possibility of using a gun so that the action would leave a mark. The artist explains that, after hearing this suggestion, the idea had “tightly bitten onto the center of [her] psyche.” Xiao, “关于 1989 菏击作品《对话》的说明” (“Guanyu 1989 nian qiangji zuopin ‘duihua’ de shuoming”) (“An explanation of the 1989 shooting of the work ‘Dialogue’”), my translations.
compounding many of the “avant-garde” aims we are discussing here: in this instance, *Dialogue*’s installation format – already very new in the Chinese artistic consciousness – was somehow determined to be not enough. Such a perceived incompleteness, to borrow the artist’s terminology, indicates a similar caveat to one which Li Xianting would express, when early on he criticized some of the organizers’ willingness to compromise, and complained that the show lacked “avant-garde qualities.”

Ultimately, however, although this modern consciousness began as an aesthetic redefinition, its end result was always envisioned as a medium through which broader social changes could be expressed. Moreover, its very existence (so long as it was a visible existence) could serve as a symbol of the gestation of a modern identity, regardless of whether or not the details of such an identity had been fleshed out. Contributing to the propulsion of wider social shift was important to the artists, who believed that, “if they were to continue to work within the narrow confines of officially sanctioned art, they would be reduced to playing a conservative role while tempestuous changes were taking place everywhere else in Chinese society, and would be forever unable to develop authentic modern Chinese art. This was an absolutely unbearable thought.”

So there was an anxiety over developing forms which could be seen as authentically modern, and then utilizing these forms in the realization of a deeper social

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169 Köppel-Yang, 63. Li appears to have personally felt somewhat dubious about what the show’s stylistic impact might ultimately be: “If the show had been in 1987 as previously planned, it would have been more on time and more significant…Now the 85-86 movement has become a past memory. Most of the art works that appeared at that time were, in one way or another, imitations of Western art forms. But there are exceptions, such as Concept Art, which has shown potential.” Li Xianting, quoted in Xiang, 5.

170 As Zhang Yaojun said about a month before the opening of *China / Avant-garde*, “a country that does not possess modern art cannot be considered a fully modernized country.” Zhang Yaojun, *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* (6 January 1989): 1, quoted in Croizier, 501. And Gao says of the “Humanist” strand of the ’85 New Wave that “Humanists saw their art as an instrument for improving a backward society and for reversing its cultural degeneration.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 251.

and political modernity.\textsuperscript{172} The formal characteristics of modernism, therefore, which could be established through a discernable aesthetic revolution, were regarded as a first step in the establishment of a modern identity, and, in the case of an event like \textit{China / Avant-garde}, we can look more closely at how such a visible revolution might function in defining a so-called “avant-garde” identity in particular.

In his pivotal examination of avant-gardism, Renato Poggioli discusses the formation of avant-garde ideologies, stressing that such systems of thought are not simply the bylaws of already formed social movements. Instead, avant-garde actions help to announce the onset of a movement to begin with. By giving visual (or experiential) form to new social tendencies and attainabilities, avant-garde activities articulate societal developments which may otherwise remain nebulous, unanchored in the eddies and whirls of social discourse: “In fact, an ideology is not only the logical (or pseudological) justification of a psychic state, but also the crystallization of a still fluid and suspended sentimental condition into a behavioral code even before it has crystallized into work or action...Ideology, therefore, is always a social phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{173} The social aspects of avant-garde movements then, such as those generated by \textit{China / Avant-garde}, are instrumental in asserting the onset of a new social atmosphere, defining a break, a rupture in the state of culture which can then be filled with new societal possibility.

\textsuperscript{172} Although the modernizing revolution may have viewed aesthetic development as a beginning point for its departure with the status quo, it was always understood as being invested in more than just art. As Gao notes, “for the Chinese, modernism and postmodernism have not involved a consciousness of global historical epochs or of a global philosophy of history, but have been a matter of individual subjectivity within a cultural environment possessing a strong sense of nationalism. For the Chinese, being modern equaled a new notion of the nation.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 247. Such art movements at the time were therefore directly tied in with the solidification of a new civic identity and a new national identity. And as Li says, “artists started out dealing with questions of art and aesthetics, but in the end, no matter what kind of artistic language they experimented with, they eventually tried to apply it as a means of dealing with cultural issues rather than aesthetic ones.” Li, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” XVIII.

\textsuperscript{173} Poggioli, 4.
Also important in Poggioli’s reflection is the understanding that avant-garde surges are symptomatic of conditions outside of artistic enterprise – even more, they serve as visible enunciations of progressive tendencies, pulling fomenting revolution out of incubation, making it tangible. Such an idea is especially salient in relation to an exhibition like *China / Avant-garde*, the first ever comprehensive invocation of an “avant-garde” in Chinese society. The show, in this sense, was not a statement being made by an organized – or even recognizable – social movement, it was rather a sudden coalescing of floating, socially progressive sentiment, an attempted definition of a new social body which could be encountered corporeally, interacted with, and taken away in the audience’s memory of experience, later to form an understanding of new prospects in defining social and cultural identity on one’s own terms.

Although the specific characteristics of such identities may remain vague, or even, for the time being, non-existent, through its actions an exhibition like *China / Avant-garde* might at least suggest the formation of what Jing Wang calls a “rubric of modern consciousness,” under which more specific identificatory terms can then be imagined, actualized, and embodied. Gao Minglu himself invokes such an idea, when he declares in the preface to the *China / Avant-garde* exhibition that

> The soul of modernism is modern consciousness… This ideological revolution has led to the expansive tendencies of modern art within culture:… it has served as a matchmaker to bring together…the fragmentary experiences in people’s minds of social culture and human history to further cause them to imagine and then manufacture fixed cultural images.”

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174 Wang, 140.
The comment gets at the subscription of art to its expanded cultural framework: visuality is presented as not only that which represents culture, but that which constructs it. In this sense, *China / Avant-garde*’s assertion of an avant-garde identity even in a contemporaneous context in which the concept might have been meaningless was not a fruitless exercise: the assertion didn’t need to be a confirmation of a fully-formed identity so much as an interstitial point demonstrating discernibly that a momentum was in fact being generated, in however formative a way. Any claim that an organized social movement already existed at that time might not have been true, but it would at least have suggested the presence of the raw materials from which it could be built.

Taking all of these factors into account, we can say that – given its historiographic understanding of avant-gardes, and its attempt to emulate them within comparable social conditions – *China / Avant-garde* did in fact attempt to live up to its name. As shown, however, this intention was not quite understood in its connection to comparable historical movements, by the viewers who engaged with it. What is remarkable, then, is that, in spite of this cultural gap, or perhaps because of it, the exhibition was also, ultimately, avant-garde in its effect.

**Conclusion: politics or political pregnancy?**

What drives many of the ideas discussed here, on upsetting the rituals of display and representation, is the way in which the National Gallery of Art systematized and architecturalized culture, shaping cultural experience, and, by extension, the identity of the spectator as a cultural subject in line with hegemonic ideologies. In *China / Avant-
garde, we find an endeavor – at times systematic, at times impromptu, and at other times quite accidental – infiltrating an institution fortified by official discourse, derailing its processes from within. The resulting headway produced a conceptual terrain in which the idea of conflict became available – not just an artistic conflict with the official, but any conflict with the official. So, although aesthetically the exhibition may not have been immediately understood, its achievement needs to be read as one connected to the extended, immersive impulses of its time, and, to explore such associations, we may consider what – if anything – the exhibition had to do with the events of Tiananmen, later that spring.

In retrospect, people often consider this exhibition a political act – some officials in China go so far as to claim that it was a mini-Tiananmen square, a “Tiananmen prefigured in art,” or at least that Xiao Lu’s were the first shots fired in the political conflict to come, all of which suggests that the exhibition was a synecdochic citation of a larger political protest. And yet for all the hand-wringing by censors, very few of the artworks were explicitly political in content, and in fact would never have passed vetting, were they so. How then to best explain the suspicion of political intent, with so little visual evidence? If we are only looking at content, it is perhaps over-reaching to refer

176 Andrews and Gao, 240. See also Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 282.
177 Gao, “From Elite to Small Man,” 164.
178 Smith, 23.
179 Gauging the art on display at China / Avant-garde, The Economist reported that “the work on show now is almost devoid of political significance,” (“Get set, go,” The Economist [18 February 1989]), and Croizier similarly notes that “very few of the works at the National Gallery exhibition were recognisably political. Wang Guangyi’s grid portrait of Mao was one of the few exceptions, but even there how did one read this enigmatic portrait?” Croizier, 503. Still, despite this relative lack of explicit political material, officials were wary and anxious. Considering the Pistol Shot Incident, for example, “the Chinese authorities still thought that this event held political meaning, and most of the foreign news media indeed had reported on it as a political event.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 279-80.
to this as a “political” exhibition. But what it was amounted to a generalized atmospheric decompression, a draining out of weight held by an official construct of culture.

The importance of such discursive sways comes in the disruption of power at that micro-level of interaction, in the interstitial zones of sociability, and to relate this idea to art, or visual culture, we might refer to Norman Bryson’s observation, that

Power can also be microscopic and discrete, a matter of local moments of change, and that such change may take place whenever an image [or an action, a space] meets the existing discourses, and moves them over; or finds its viewer, and changes him or her. The power of painting [or installation, or performance] is there, in the thousands of gazes caught by [it], and the resultant turning, and the shifting, the redirecting of the discursive flow. Power not as a monolith, but as a swarm of points traversing…individual persons.¹⁸⁰

These thousands of gazes, these swarms of points, can be conceived of in the crowds of visitors pouring in and out of this official site with decades of cultural discourse attached to it – not only the discourses of the Gallery, but the larger discourses of art in the PRC, emblematized and enforced by the structure, and felt so sharply throughout recent history – only to witness, experience, and participate in, a usurpation of the space by dissident voices. As visitors encountered artists personally recoding an official space for individual purposes, their own potential to redefine cultural acceptability was revealed. As they assisted Xiao Lu in her escape from the law, they empowered themselves as subversive facilitators, enacting agency. As they crowded together in the square, in the aftermath of these events, the experiences could be recounted, solidified and transmitted, validated and added to an expanding understanding of the prospect of action.

To be certain, it takes time to unsettle deeply held perceptions and ingrained social or cultural understandings. Certainly *China / Avant-garde* could serve as only one step in that process, and so it’s important to remember that it was not itself an entirety. It was one element – not an isolated instance of artistic modernization and advance, but part of a comprehensive paradigm shift. Even at the time that it occurred, its nearness to other events challenging dominant, officially-controlled social codes would have produced a constellation of discursive entries which, when experienced together, could contribute to a collective mass, the parts of which could authenticate each other, corroborate one another’s claims of social charge. In this sense, organizers of the show produced an avant-gardism reaching beyond the art world, and we might think of the exhibition in terms of Gao Minglu’s and Julia Andrews’s assessment of Chinese performance art developing in the 1980s, when they conclude that these works were “less to express an artistic concept than to call for the liberation of human nature.”

Despite the fact that much of the work in *China / Avant-garde* was not politically oriented, many of the organizers and artists would be supporters of and participants in the student protests for democratic reform (Fig. 69), and, in considering these actions in

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181 Andrews and Gao, 251. In *China Daily*, before the show opened, the artist Ding Fang spoke more about this potential broader liberation: “I always have a sense of mission…I think there will be a holy spirit emerging in China, either in the forms of philosophy or visual art or literature, to change the apathetic state in people’s life.” Ding Fang, quoted in Xiang, 5. He was not alone in this hope: “Although considering themselves a transitional generation, most artists of the ’85 Movement believed they bore responsibility for the nation’s future, a responsibility that included an enthusiasm for social reforms.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 250. Crozier believes of the artists from this time that, “at least at the height of the ‘new tide art’, they saw a purpose for art that transcended private concerns. For a while it was possible to imagine the artist as being in the van of emancipating social, cultural and even political change.” Crozier, 508.

182 For a description of some of these affiliations, see Wu, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 16, and *Transience*, 20. Joan Cohen likewise notes that many artists affiliated with *China / Avant-garde* would march with the students in June of that year. Cohen, 106. Karen Smith describes an incident in which Geng Jianyi and some friends took an image of the Tiananmen massacre from an international newspaper, blew the scene up to a large scale, colored it red, and hung it from a bridge overlooking Hangzhou’s busiest
tandem with the exhibition, what we end up talking about goes beyond art to describe the
concept of a vanguard as applied to an all-encompassing social identity. The ultimate
function of the exhibition wasn’t to visualize a particular identity so much as it was to
force open an ideological gap in which new identities could be conceived of at all; spaces
in which palpably new approaches to culture could be made visible, spatial, experiential,
social, and thus understood and felt as being viable.

Thus the exhibition served, in many ways, as an instance of Poggioli’s
“crystallization” of movements toward social change – a visible, material, keenly
experiential statement that something new was afoot. In Poggioli’s formulation of the
appearance of avant-gardes, the avant-gardism is born of opportunity, finding its
nascence in the confluence of social factors that constitute its building blocks, and this
point is well borne in mind when we consider the impact of China / Avant-garde and its
designed or accidental significances. In this sense, I think it’s less important to look at the
exhibition as an explicit political act than as a politically pregnant act – it wasn’t an end
in itself, but an overture, a symbolic pronouncement, extending beyond the space of the
gallery, into the social fabric of the city and nation.

Importantly, China / Avant-garde was not a static display in the traditionally-
recognized sense, but experiential action. This is illustrated not only through the kinetic
street. Smith, 95. Gao himself also attended the Tiananmen protests, for which he was dismissed from his
position as editor of Meishu. Pollack, 1. Leo Lee suggests the significance of the exhibition’s temporal and
conceptual nearness to Tiananmen, saying that, a few months before the protests, “a different form of
‘demonstration’ took place in the halls of a city museum in Beijing…This was not an isolated incident but
the culmination of a series of radical cultural assaults in the Chinese Communist Party establishment which
for the first time in its history, was on the defensive, unable to exert its usual monolithic control over art
and literature,” Lee, 1.

Gao argues that “the exhibition was not a pure art show. It reflected the social circumstances of the
historical moment as a whole.” Gao, “Post-Utopian Avant-Garde Art in China,” 269. This is true, but given
the noted incomprehensibility of the event, I would suggest that, along the lines of Poggioli’s
“crystallization,” the show did more than this, working as articulation and concretization, moving to
amalgamate and assess the social circumstances of the time, above and beyond reflecting them.

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and directly interactive aspects of many of the exhibits, but also in the careful consideration of the ways these works could be presented to maximize sensational participatory impact. The show wasn’t just exhibitory but organic – a fluid experience of unpredictable shifts in dominant cultural assertions and social identities. In this sense, although occupying an official space, perhaps the show can rightly be regarded as a precursor to the experimentally-structured art shows to come in the 1990s, ones which lead Wu Hung to conclude that “an exhibition can be itself a highly inventive act.”

In the end, examining the revolutions of visuality, spatiality, and sociality emphasized by *China / Avant-garde*, we can answer a number of theoretical questions behind the impact of the show: what was the effect of asserting an artistic identity as an “avant-garde” in the National Gallery of Art, in Beijing of 1989? The rebellion was one that began as an aesthetic offensive, an assault on the standard understanding of art’s conceptual and visual confines. But this assault soon became a physical and experiential attack on the discursive arena of the site itself. The installation work given prominence by the organizers, as well as the renegade performances staged by artists, both deconstructed the usual separation between art and viewer, undercutting the regulated gaze and controlled reception typically found in the museum. The aggressive sensationalism of the show further assailed the highly charged, hallowed venue, and by experiencing, witnessing, and participating in these events the audience could understand first-hand the practicable prospect of counter-discursive response.

The *China / Avant-garde* exhibition is often regarded chiefly as the terminal point of the ‘85 New Wave, in its significance to the art historical development of

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184 Wu, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 44.
contemporary China. However, perhaps the larger consideration should focus on how its effect on the expected spatiality of this emblematic site was extended to suggest a corresponding disruption in official control on the whole, and by usurping agency from the site, redirecting it toward audience and artist, *China / Avant-garde* expanded on the imaginable limits of cultural freedom, toppling the ceremonial formalities of display, representation and authority entrenched in the structure. In so doing, it did more than simply change the content allowed and expected at the gallery; it changed the very meaning of the space itself.

So while, in aesthetic terms, the show may have proved baffling, this connoisseurial impasse did not change the fact that the wild proceedings of *China / Avant-garde* served as an editorial mockery of the site and its ideologies, contributing to a demystification of officially erected definitions of culture. Examining these links between the visual culture of the time and the social shifts affixed to them helps us to better understand the broader participation of art in its society; the ways that revolutions in visual culture are catalyzed by – and are catalysts for – the larger revolutions of their time. These functions have not only to do with new techniques and stylistic traits, but with new understandings of audience and reception, power and community, possibility,

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185 In an amusing or bemusing coda to this story, Gao Minglu recently attempted to stage a number of twentieth anniversary events and exhibitions, in honor of *China / Avant-garde* (See Figs. 73, 74). Many of these were, at the last moment, stopped by authorities (See Figs. 75, 76). Scheduled events included an anniversary celebration of the exhibition at the National Agriculture Exhibition Center; a screening at the Today Art Museum of the documentary *Seven Deadly Sins* by Wen Pulin, which chronicled the various performance actions of the original *China / Avant-garde* exhibition; and an exhibition at the Wall Art Museum consisting of original documents, photographs, correspondence, etc. related to *China / Avant-garde*, which had been collected by Gao Minglu and close associates. See Zhang Xuo, ed. “Twenty-year Anniversary of China/Avant-Garde Exhibition” (21 Jan 2009) Artintern <http://en.artintern.net/index.php/exhibition/main/html/550> (1 March 2009). Of these planned events, only the exhibition of documents was allowed to take place, the others were barred from happening, citing improper registration. See Chang. Said a frustrated Gao, “I'm not disappointed for the exhibit, I'm disappointed because our system is still so out of date, still so conservative…It's been 20 years, and it's still the same.” Gao, quoted in Chang, 1.
and agency. Now looking back on the clamorous developments that would come, we find that, in assessing the impact of *China / Avant-garde*, it matters very little whether the new aesthetic trends on view were embraced by art audiences of the time – the show was socially ambassadorial, pointedly iconoclastic, brokering the burgeoning of new expanses, in art and in society.
Fig. 1. *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, February 1989, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 2. Wang Guangyi, *Mao Zedong No. 1*, 1988, oil on canvas.
Fig. 3. National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 4. Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

Fig. 5. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States of America.
Fig. 6. Sun Zixi, *In Front of Tiananmen*, 1964, oil on canvas.
Fig. 7. First floor floorplan, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 9. Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1988, installation; photo taken after *Pistol Shot Incident*, performance, 1989, *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 10. Gao Shen and Gao Qiang, *Midnight Mass (Inflatism)*, 1989, installation, *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.

Fig. 11. Gao Shen and Gao Qiang, *Midnight Mass (Inflatism)*, 1989, installation, *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 17. Gu Xiong, *Fence Wall*, 1989, installation, *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 18. Gu Xiong, *Fence Wall*, installation with artist, 1989. *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.

Fig. 19. Gu Xiong, installation of wood and acrylic paint, 1987, Canada.
Fig. 20.

Fig. 21.

Gu Dexin, untitled (details), 1989, plastic installation.
Fig. 32. Yang Jun and Wang Youshen, √, 1989, mixed media.
Fig. 33. Background: Yang Jun and Wang Youshen, √ as installed in China / Avant-garde, 1989, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 34. Wei Guangqin, *Suicide Series*, 2007, installation, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 39. Wu Shanzhuan, vendor’s license for *Missing Bamboo*, 1993.
Fig. 40. Li Shan, *Invitation to Foot-Washing*, 1989, installation and performance site, *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 43. Xiao Lu, *Pistol Shot Incident*, 1989, performance, *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 44. Confusion at the National Gallery of Art, following the *Pistol Shot Incident*.

Fig. 45. Police arrive on scene at *China / Avant-garde*. 
Fig. 46. Gao Minglu announcing the closure of *China / Avant-garde* due to the shooting.

Fig. 47. Tang Song being arrested at *China / Avant-garde*.
Fig. 48. Tang Song explicating *Pistol Shot Incident* after being released from jail, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China, 1989.
Fig. 49. Xiao Lu, Dialogue, 1988, mixed media installation, Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, China.
Fig. 50. Huang Yongping, *The Museum Pulled Away with a Rope*, 1988, mixed media.
Fig. 51. Song Dong, *Breathing*, 1996, performance, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China.
Fig. 52. Song Dong, *Jump*, 1999, performance (video stills), Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China.
Fig. 53. Rirkrit Tiravanija and Douglas Gordon, Cinéma Liberté/Bar Lounge, 2008, installation, projection, espresso bar, theanyspacewhatever exhibition, Guggenheim Museum, New York, United States.
Fig. 56.

Fig. 57.

*China/Avant-garde* exhibition, February 1989, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 58. China / Avant-garde exhibition, February 1989, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 59.

*Fig. 60.*

*China / Avant-garde* exhibition, February 1989, National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 61. National Gallery of Art, Beijing, China.
Fig. 62. Statue of Chiang Kai-shek with kites, Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall, Taipei, Taiwan, 2008.
Advertisements for Andy Warhol exhibition, Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, Taipei, Taiwan, 2009.
Fig. 65. Xu Zhen, *Shouting*, 1998, still from video.
Police in China Close Art Show After Artist Shoots Her Work

Would-be visitors to an exhibition of avant-garde art yesterday in Beijing being confronted by a locked gate. Police closed the exhibition after artists defied a ban on performance art and a sculptor shot her work with a BB gun. She was later captured. It was not clear if the show would be reopened. At one point, two carloads of riot policemen drove into the crowd, but left immediately when their cars were surrounded by curious onlookers.

A Mover and Shaker Behind Bush For

Fig. 66. The New York Times, 6 February 1989 (my emphasis).
Promotional material for *China / Avant-garde* exhibition.
Fig. 69.

Promotional material for *China / Avant-garde* exhibition.

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Fig. 70. Wang Guangyi, *Post-Classical Series: Madonna and Child*, 1986-7, oil on canvas.
Fig. 71. Zhang Xiaogang, *The Last Supper*, 1989.
Fig. 72. Zhongguo meishubao marching on Tiananmen Square.
Fig. 73. Advertisement for twentieth anniversary events for China / Avant-garde, 2009.

Fig. 74. Xiao Lu staging a mock wedding at the opening of the exhibition of documents of China / Avant-garde, Wall Art Museum, Beijing, China, 2009.
Gao Minglu addressing an audience after twentieth anniversary events for China / Avant-garde are halted by authorities, National Agricultural Exhibition Center, Beijing, China, 2009.
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