

**Unmasking the Canon:**  
**The Role of the Uli Sigg Collection in the Construction of the Contemporary  
Chinese Art Canon**

**By**  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role of private collections in the construction of the art canon. Private collectors have played one of the most influential roles in the dissemination of what is now understood as the contemporary Chinese art canon. The Uli Sigg Collection was one of the main catalysts behind the canon's development, primarily due to its presence at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999 and the "Mahjong" international touring exhibition (2005-ongoing).

This research traces the development of the Sigg Collection which both determined Sigg's collecting practices and the collection's position to the canon. Using the idea that repetitive exposure is a mechanism of canon formation, I argue that the collection's presence at the Biennale and "Mahjong" functioned as manifestations of the contemporary Chinese art canon according to Sigg, and contributed to its influence on other private collectors: a cultural trend which has subsequently been coined as "The Mahjong Effect".

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## Introduction

“Collecting is a way of taking possession of the world” (Didier Maleuvre)<sup>1</sup>

The Uli Sigg Collection based in Lucerne, Switzerland, lays claim to being the largest and most systematic collection of contemporary Chinese art in the world. It currently numbers more than 2000 works by over 250 artists, and consists of paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, installation works, and video pieces spanning four decades.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, curator Bernhard Fibicher of the Kunstmuseum in Bern described the collection as a one “of scope and quality unparalleled anywhere.”<sup>3</sup> This thesis is concerned with the role the private collection of Uli Sigg played in the formation of the contemporary Chinese art canon, primarily through its dissemination in exhibitions. Considering the canon as a cultural construct created through exposure and repetition, I argue that the Sigg Collection of contemporary Chinese art is one of the main catalysts behind the canon’s development. The specific character of the collection as being one of the largest, most “unique” and “representative” of the world is a result of both the social and historical developments that were occurring in China during the time that Sigg acquired the majority of the works (1990-2000) and Sigg’s position of privilege in China.

The thesis begins by mapping the rise of contemporary art in China that produced the cultural climate in which Sigg collected. Within this historical context, private

<sup>1</sup> Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories* (Stanford: Stanford California University Press, 1999), 115.

<sup>2</sup> “Mahjong Contemporary Chinese art from the Sigg Collection.” Press release for exhibition at Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, 10 September 2008- 4 January 2009.

<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/press/release/TXT0224> (accessed 23 July 2009).

<sup>3</sup> “Mahjong Contemporary Chinese art from the Sigg Exhibition.” Press release for exhibition at Kunstmuseum, Bern, June 14-October 16 2005. [http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14\\_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/](http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/) (accessed 29 May 2009).

collectors were one of the main mechanisms in canon formation. It then examines the ways in which the Sigg Collection was formed, and how it influenced and continues to influence how contemporary Chinese art is understood, presented and disseminated by not only collectors but also its international audiences. The last section of the thesis analyzes the Sigg Collection's positioning in exhibitions, focusing on the inclusion of Chinese contemporary art at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999 and "Mahjong", the ongoing touring exhibition since 2004. The central argument here will be that the collection's repetitive methodology in its selection of works and themes at each event has effectively contributed towards the construction of a canon.

This thesis' theoretical framework takes as its starting point the premise that canons are culturally constructed and created largely through repetition and exposure. Private collectors have played an important, yet largely unacknowledged role in shaping the canon by following the methodology of repetition and exposure when publicising the artwork in their collections. In order to approach and expand on the consideration of the role of the private collector, contemporary Chinese art is a necessary example because private collectors have played an important, yet largely unacknowledged role in shaping the world's conception of China's contemporary artwork. A more in-depth analysis of this variable within the canon will broaden an understanding of the dissemination and reception of art generally, but also focus specifically on the new ways canons are formed in a contemporary context. To determine the impact of the Sigg Collection on canon formation in Chinese contemporary art, the following factors are examined: the cultural climate in which the collection developed, its methodology, its influences, its manifestation in exhibitions, and its specific character.

In China, private collectors like Sigg have been the nation's most active patrons of contemporary art. The ease with which private collectors acquired contemporary Chinese artworks was a reflection of the cultural climate of the time. Generally speaking, contemporary Chinese art, particularly from 1979 to 1999 garnered little support. It was seen by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and government officials as "Western pollution"—exhibitions were shut down or denounced and artists were subject to harsh penalties for showing their work.

In spite of a lack of support from Official China (the CPC and other government agencies), Chinese artists continued to produce and exhibit in "non official" spaces, such as in underground exhibitions and embassies, rather than in state-run museums.<sup>4</sup> These spaces both provided access to an encouraging audience and facilitated the support of a particular market that constituted almost exclusively of a handful of private collectors, the majority of whom were foreign. However, once the remains of China's socialist command economy became the world's premier manufacturer and trader after three decades of impressive growth, China became an important influence on global politics and global economy, and provoked international audiences to be curious about what was happening in China's art scene.<sup>5</sup> Thus many of the artworks that were acquired by private collectors went on to being exhibited (late 1980s to the present day) in exhibitions

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<sup>4</sup>At the time, some of the most significant art museums were The National Art Museum of China, China's National Academy at Hangzhou, the Shanghai Art Museum, Guangdong Art Museum and the Sichuan Academy of Art. According to governmental authorities, if the artworks were exhibited elsewhere, all public exhibitions must be held in registered exhibition spaces and approved by authorities. This meant that the government had unlimited power in closing down whatever exhibition it wanted. Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>China's economy is now considered to be a forging of socialism and capitalism. For more on the economic rise of China and how it reshapes world politics, see: James Kynge, *China Shakes the World* (New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary art from China was introduced far beyond its borders, which made those outside of China more informed about its contemporary art scene than those inside China.<sup>7</sup>

After 1999, China's significant shifts in the domestic and global economic, social, and political sphere resulted in a loosening of party regulations on art. This change occurred because the Chinese government realized the international attention on contemporary art could be used as a form of cultural diplomacy in order to rebuild China's image abroad. While the first art collections belonged largely to private foreign collectors, in the early twentieth century national museums, Chinese institutions, and Chinese independent collectors took steps towards supporting contemporary art in China by acquiring their own works. Guan Yi, who holds one of the largest private collectors of contemporary Chinese art in China, felt compelled to begin because "No one Chinese was collecting contemporary Chinese art....I realised that the whole system for collecting contemporary art in China was organised for foreign buyers, everything was going abroad."<sup>8</sup> Guan also realized that the government had not developed a practice of systematic collecting or protection for art created in the past thirty years. Even today,

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<sup>6</sup> One of the first times that Chinese artists were exhibited alongside other international artists was in 1989, when several Chinese artists were invited to participate in "Magiciens de la Terre," an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. They were among selected artists from usually overlooked countries such as Nepal, Nigeria, Madagascar and New Guinea. Their works were then displayed alongside paintings and sculptures by some of the most respected figures in Western art. The exhibition was considered controversial, in part because it was argued that curators were treating Western and non-Western art as if all the art was the same, and that visual appearance matter more than intention. Niru Ratnam, "Art and Globalization," in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, eds. Gill Perry and Paul Wood (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2004), 276-313.

<sup>7</sup> There had been few attempts at contemporary art exhibitions in China before 1989 and shortly after. The largest impact by far on contemporary art culminated in the opening and almost immediate closure of the "China/Avant-garde" exhibition held in Beijing in February 1989 four months before the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre. After 1989, curator Johnson Chang put together "China's New Art Post-1989" which first exhibited in Hong Kong in 1993 before moving to exhibit in Australia and the United States.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Gill, "Meet China's Top Collector of Contemporary Art," *The Art Newspaper*, July-August 2008, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Meet-China-s-top-collector-of-contemporary-art/8658> (accessed 29 September 2008).

according to Guan, national museums in China are still not collecting the art very seriously.<sup>9</sup>

As Sigg has claimed, his collection supported contemporary Chinese art when China's national institutions did not:

My main reason to collect was I thought here is the biggest cultural space in the world, yet there is a gap of about 20 years. Normally a museum or institution would document this period, but Official China has ignored contemporary art, but for a few exceptions with a small section of academic paintings associated with the official artist associations.<sup>10</sup>

The word “gap” is used here by Sigg in relation to China’s national collection as if it were a single unit, or, in other words, as if it were something concrete or objective. A collection is neither. It is formed, changed and maintained by the values and choices of the collector or those with power within institutional settings.<sup>11</sup> The other implication here by Sigg is that in filling this “gap”, the Sigg collection largely represents the canon of contemporary Chinese art spanning a twenty-year period. But can one collection represent the canon in its entirety? How is the canon defined? And moreover, who defines it?

For the purposes of understanding canon formation within the context of this study, put simply, a “canon” is a group of works that are widely accepted as the greatest in their field.<sup>12</sup> The word canon, however, has meant many things over the years. The original word “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which means reed, rod or ruler

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sigg used the term “gap” in reference to China’s collection of contemporary Chinese art while being interviewed in Buinessweek Magazine. Frederik Balfour, “A Mirror to China’s Art Scene,” *Businessweek Magazine*, [http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jun2006/gb20060601\\_423033.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jun2006/gb20060601_423033.htm) (accessed 29 October, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Jones, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.

and was the standard by which things were measured.<sup>13</sup> The canon then appropriated religious overtones, and became the officially accepted works that formed the biblical ‘Scriptures’. Today, with the rise of academia and academics, the canon is generally associated with non-secular works, used to refer to collections that represent the greatest achievement in the fields of literature, art and music.<sup>14</sup> As Griselda Pollock notes, “Repositories of transhistorical aesthetic value, the canons of various cultural practices establish what is unquestionably great, as well as what must be studied as a model by those aspiring to the practice.”<sup>15</sup>

Art historically, there has never been one single permanent canon. Marginalised artists are often rediscovered, revalued and canonized largely by influential academics and institutions. Thus the canon must be considered a web of complicated values and mechanisms that are constantly in flux. With this in mind, one of the main objectives of this thesis is to determine how the contemporary Chinese art canon was formed primarily by private collecting practices instead of by China’s national institutions. However, a canon does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Thus in order to crystallize the practices of the private collectors, it must also be understood that there undoubtedly exists a number of shared characteristics between the two.

Though the contemporary Chinese art canon (1989-present) remains largely understudied given it only emerged twenty years ago, the Chinese have a long history of writing about their art history and canon. This thesis, however, was limited to assessing English language texts on the topic and Western perspectives on contemporary Chinese

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<sup>13</sup> James A. Coriden, *An Introduction to Canon Law* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

art in order to focus on the complications of this perspective. In order to produce a richer analysis, works written by Chinese scholars and curators in English were used, including those that have been translated from Chinese to English.

The earliest surviving scholarly work of art history is *Zhang Yanyuan's Record of Famous Painters of All Dynasties* from 847 A.D. This text establishes the canon of Chinese painting up to that time and succeeding centuries and dynasties would update the list on a regular basis. There have been a number of studies written about the Chinese art canon after China came into contact with the West. Craig Clunas introduces Chinese art to his readers in his work *Art in China* by explaining that Chinese elite definitions of art are very different from the way in which Western museums have validated the art and that, like all other categories of art, “Chinese art” should instead be considered as one that is constantly in flux.<sup>16</sup> In his work *Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art*, Clunas demonstrates how this is so by recounting the history of institutional framing of “Chinese art” in Britain.<sup>17</sup> Clunas argues that the Chinese elite categorizations of arts were excluded in the display context of the nineteenth century British museum.<sup>18</sup> Jane C. Ju’s *Chinese Art, The National Palace Museum and Cold War Politics* discusses the role official museums in Taiwan and the Nationalist government have had in shaping the modern conception of Chinese art.<sup>19</sup> She argues that the government identified the literati as the foundation of Chinese art in order to secure its identity as the “true” Chinese

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<sup>16</sup> Craig Clunas. *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Craig Clunas, “Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art,” in *The Anthropology of Art*, ed. Morgan Perkins and Howard Murphy (Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 186-208.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jane C. Ju, “Chinese Art, The National Palace Museum and Cold War Politics” in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 155-79.

state.<sup>20</sup> According to Ju, this was done at the same time they began defining their country in terms of a true-modern state.

Part of the larger project of rethinking the art canon since the mid 1990s includes studies such as Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon*, which, in a feminist reading of art history, provides an important theoretical context for the re-interpretation of the canon.<sup>21</sup> She writes that canons are "the active process of exclusion or neglect operated by the present day makers of tradition" and are not an objectively situated measure that we are meant to believe they are.<sup>22</sup> Though the canon assumes the qualities of having natural and universal value, it works instead to justify the privilege of inclusion and the denial of selectivity. The choice of artworks in canons can sometimes appear so natural that the inclusion of some and exclusion of others is portrayed as being beyond question for the general audience. Freeland argues that canons are described as 'ideologies' that pretend to be objective when they actually reflect power and dominance relations, such as the relationship of colonizing forces to the canon.<sup>23</sup> But a careful re-examination of these power relations at play in the canon bring up the unavoidable questions of who represents what, to whom and why. As Pollock argues in her work, though canons are

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<sup>20</sup> In 1949, when the Communists won the civil war, the defeated Kuomintang (KMT) party retreated to Taiwan and separated the island from Mainland China. The party claimed it as an independent, democratic nation that was, in fact, the "True China." The debate as to whether to reunite Taiwan to China is ongoing. Christopher Hughes, "Post-nationalist Taiwan" in *Asian Nationalism*, ed. Michael Leifer (London: Routledge, 2000), 63-81.

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Other major sources on canons include: Gillian Perry and Colin Cunningham, eds., *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York : Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), Paul Lauter "Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon," *Feminist Studies* 9.3 (Fall 1983): 435-63, and William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Pollock, 3-21.

<sup>23</sup> Cynthia A. Freeland, *But is it Art?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 133.

often aesthetically inscribed with colonial relations they can also offer a glimpse of imperial mentality.<sup>24</sup>

Anna Brzyski's *Partisan Canons* is an anthology of essays that, together, argues against the idea of a singular, universal canon. Each essay is a case study that ranges from the seventeenth century to the present in geographic locations worldwide in order to demonstrate that the content of a canon is both historically and culturally specific.<sup>25</sup> Bryzski in particular argues that even though non-Western art has since been incorporated into the domain of art history, the Western art canon continues to function as an implicit measure of the category of "art" which, she opines, "means we are still experiencing the consequences of the initial segregation."<sup>26</sup> Michael Camille, Zeynep Çelik, John Onians, Adrian Rifkin, and Christopher B. Steiner's *Rethinking the Canon* is a roundtable discussion in *Art Bulletin* that, through a number of specific case studies, considers the social structure of the canon and how it functions by a particular process of inclusion and exclusion, which does not necessarily mean it includes "great" works of art. For example, Michael Camille argues that the majority of medieval art works that are in the canon are there not so much because they are worthy, but due their ability to be reproduced.<sup>27</sup> For Camille, ease of reproduction is a key part to understanding the mechanisms behind canon formation.

In addition to the literature on canons, Mieke Bal's arguments on cultural imperialism and canon formation using semiotics were particularly useful to the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Brzyski, ed. *Partisan Canons* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Anna Bryzki, "Canons and Art History" in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Bryzki (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Camille, Zeynep Çelik, John Onians, Adrian Rifkin, Christopher B. Steiner, "Rethinking the Canon," *The Art Bulletin*, 78: 2 (June 1996): 198-217.

theoretical perspectives of this study. In Bal's analysis of the museum she has asked some of the penetrating and enduring questions about the nature and chief characteristics of canon formation.<sup>28</sup> Bal devotes a portion of her discussion to understanding the dissemination of art around the world and investigates the processes of selectivity and repetition in canon formation. Using the Rothko legacy as an example, Bal contends that when an artwork appears in museums and exhibitions all over the world, a particular universalist understanding of art is imposed.<sup>29</sup> For Bal, the repetition involved in this act is, in a semiotic sense, a realization of cultural imperialism. I use Bal's concept of repetition in particular to frame my discussion of the behaviour and implications of the Sigg Collection when it participates in the exhibitions "Mahjong" and the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

For the study of collections, this thesis analyzes collectors as understood by Asian anthropologist Pieter ter Keurs (University of Ethnology in Leiden). In his work *Colonial Collections Revisited*, Keurs defines collectors by arguing that truly committed collectors are obvious by "their desire to always press forward to their logical extension towards completeness and closure."<sup>30</sup> According to a psychological evaluation of collectors by psychiatrist Frederick Baekeland, this sort of dedication to a collection may be so extreme that it becomes their world. As Baekeland explains "[The collector] may sacrifice everything else to his desire to enlarge and improve his collection."<sup>31</sup>

In doing so, collectors are usually revered for their philanthropy, and thus when collections are exhibited the finer details – such as the limitations of their private

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<sup>28</sup> Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: the Subject of Cultural Analysis*, 75-78.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Pieter ter Keurs ed., *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden: CNWS Publication, 2007), 29.

<sup>31</sup> Fredrick Baekeland, "Psychological Aspects of Collecting" in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, 206 (London: Routledge, 1994).

collections – tend to be overlooked.<sup>32</sup> The result of this process is that the collector has assumed a discreet and yet powerful presence in the history of art. Recent scholarship would suggest that more consideration of the large role that the collector plays is necessary in order to understand all of the variables involved in the construction of a canon as well as the formation of taste and construction of aesthetic value.<sup>33</sup> Anthropologist Susan Pearce contends that scholars and curators have begun to realize that studying the history of the collector is an important part of identifying the nature of collections and the assumptions and values that they embody.<sup>34</sup>

The only detailed examination of collectors of contemporary Chinese art available is the DSL (Dominique and Sylvain Levy) Collection’s *A Private Research on Western Collectors*.<sup>35</sup> This analysis highlights the top Western collectors of contemporary Chinese art—including Sigg—and characterizes their collections, including their strengths and weaknesses. The DSL Collection argues that the early methodology behind large and important collections like Sigg’s have influenced and hindered the current development of contemporary Chinese art by directing it towards an emphasis on commercial production.

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<sup>32</sup> Clunas, “Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art,” in *The Anthropology of Art*, ed. Morgan Perkins and Howard Murphey (Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 186-208.

<sup>33</sup> Major sources on collectors and collecting include: Philipp Bloom, *To Have and To Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995), Susan M. Pearce, ed. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting, An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) and John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Sylvain and Dominique Levy are the founders of the DSL Collection, which is a large collection of contemporary Chinese art that began in 2005. Their website provides a study of the top Western private collectors of contemporary Chinese art, the only study of its kind. “A Private Study on Collectors,” DSL Collection, <http://www.nps.gov/abli/> [http://www.g1expo.com/fiche\\_home?id=18](http://www.g1expo.com/fiche_home?id=18). Publications (accessed 30 April 2008).

General sources on the study of collections and collectors include studies by Pearce who has published essays on the subject of collecting such the important essay *The Urge to Collect*, establishing the major theories behind collecting behaviours, such as the motives behind collections.<sup>36</sup> According to Pearce, one of the main distinctions between possessing and collecting is that the ladder implies order, system and “even completion.”<sup>37</sup> James Clifford’s chapter “On Collecting Art and Culture” in his work *The Predicament of Culture*, which argues for the necessity of understanding collecting practices and the discriminations behind particular collections.<sup>38</sup> For example, he outlines a broad ideological and institutional system in which cultural productions and meanings circulate.<sup>39</sup> This system is important to analyze, Clifford argues, as it demonstrates “how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artefacts circulate and make sense.”<sup>40</sup>

The objective of this thesis is to expand on the field of art history by exploring the ways in which private collections have a part in the process of canon formation, which is a role that has not yet been sufficiently studied.<sup>41</sup> With only a thirty year history and only a handful of major scholars and experts in the field (Wu Hung, Gao Minglu, Julia Andrews, Britta Erickson) who have written about it extensively, contemporary Chinese art lacks readily available information, and not all facets have yet been examined,

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<sup>36</sup> Susan M. Pearce, “The Urge to Collect” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Susan M. Pearce, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994), 157-174.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>38</sup> James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215-54.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 223-4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>41</sup> Chinese art historians have been writing about contemporary Chinese art for at least the past two decades. According to author Martina Köppel-Yang, the first of its kind was Zhang Xiaoxia and Li Xiaoshan’s *History of Modern Chinese Painting* (*Zhongguo xiandai huaihua shi*) which detailed the history of Chinese art since the May Fourth Movement (May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919). Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004), 31.

especially in the context of its collections.<sup>42</sup> There has been extensive scholarship on collections of Shang through early Qing works of art, but only within the past decade has an interest in collections of contemporary Chinese art developed.<sup>43</sup> As outlined, because publications dealing specifically with collections or Chinese art have not included any discussions of collections of contemporary Chinese art in general, aside from catalogues of other private collectors, I have drawn upon other sources dealing with contemporary Chinese art and Asian art in general to situate my evaluation of the Sigg Collection in its proper cultural context.<sup>44</sup>

John Clark's seminal work, *Modern Asian Art* (1998), is interested in modern and postmodern Asian art, including a focus on the modern art from China. Through a series of "empirical micro-histories," Clark recounts the types of relations between discourses that have occurred in Asia and gives a comparative view in which he rightly identifies the international prominence of Chinese art in the 1980s and early 1990s as not necessarily a

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<sup>42</sup> Examples of scholarly literature on the history of contemporary Chinese art include such important work as: Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998); and Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004). Melissa Chiu has written in particular about the work of Chinese artists outside of China during this time who struggled with issues of cultural identity, see: Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (New York: Charta, 2006). Other important sources are exhibition catalogues which contain seminal essays by established art historians in the field, and includes the exhibition catalogues by Gao Minglu, ed. *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Britta Erickson, ed. *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004); Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, eds. *A Century in Crisis: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> For examples of works on early Chinese art collections, see Julia M. White, *Pathways to the afterlife: early Chinese art from the Sze Hong Collection* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1993); Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Richard M. Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and William Watson, *The Arts of China after 1620* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> For examples of recent catalogues of contemporary Chinese art collections, see: Jeff Kelly, *Half-Life of a Dream: Contemporary Chinese art from the Logan Collection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) and Britta Erickson, *China Onward: The Estella Collection-Chinese Contemporary Art, 1966-2006* (Louisiana: Louisiana Museum of Art, 2007).

Chinese phenomenon, but also as an Asian one.<sup>45</sup> In an anthology entitled *Understanding International Art Markets and Management*, Ian Robertson explores the place of the Chinese contemporary art market and its mechanisms within the emerging East Asian art market. In comparison to other East Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, Robertson correctly argues that despite the rapid development in Beijing and Shanghai art markets, China's indigenous markets' tones are set for foreigners alone.<sup>46</sup>

There exists a burgeoning historiography on the study of the rise of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s. Key issues in the study of contemporary Chinese art include questions of globalization and identity, and understanding how contemporary Chinese art practice expands and exists beyond geographical and regional boundaries. In the 1990s, numerous studies positioned the production, mediation, and reception of contemporary Chinese art in terms of “official art” (art produced in the academic setting) versus “non official art” (experimental art produced outside of the academic or official settings). In Chinese art critic Hou Hanru’s collection of essays and interviews entitled *On the Mid Ground*, he argues that towards the end of the 1990s, a compromise occurred between official art and unofficial art.<sup>47</sup> Hou blames the birth of a new nation/state culture in China “which is based on the compromised consensus between official and unofficial cultures, on a new ideology generated from the reconciliation between market values and

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<sup>45</sup> John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Ian Robertson, *Understanding International Art Markets and Managements* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Hou Hanru, “Towards an Unofficial Art: De-ideologialisation of China’s Contemporary Art in the 1990s” in *On the Mid Ground*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Hwei (Hong Kong: Time Zone 8, 2002), 24-39. Hou Hanrou is a Paris-San Francisco based critic and curator, the Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs and Chair of Exhibition Studies and Museology at San Francisco Art Institute. Hou is one of the first curators to look at postmodern issues of artists of diaspora, hybridity, globalized mobility and what he calls “in-betweenness.” Hou has curated over 50 exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art.

fundamentalist nationalism” for a legitimisation of the new system and the sentiment of commercialization amongst the artists involved.<sup>48</sup>

In the notable/groundbreaking catalogues *Transience: Chinese Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* and *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, Wu Hung writes about trends in contemporary Chinese art, internationalization, and the changing world of Chinese museums and exhibitions in the 1990s.<sup>49</sup> As a curator and art historian, Wu writes from the perspective of both a participant and observer in his mapping of the people and institutions involved in the production of contemporary Chinese art. In these catalogue essays, he focuses on a survey of exhibition practices in China and a selection of material from Chinese artists who found new and different ways to work within the evolving system. Wu connects the variety of exhibition spaces that have appeared in China as a response to its socio-economic transformations. The shift in production, circulation, exhibition and collection of artworks is, Wu argues, closely related to China’s new economic system and globalization.

Recent works by Karen Smith and Thomas J. Berghuis also informed this thesis. Smith’s *Nine Lives, The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* tells the story of her version of the leading protagonists from the first wave of avant-garde art in the 1980s and through the 1990s that is informed by her residency in China since the early 1990s.<sup>50</sup> Insights on the role of art collectors and how the private gallery system developed during Deng Xiaoping’s era of opening and reform are of particular interest.<sup>51</sup> By evaluating the

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Scalo Publishers: Zurich, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> In late 1978, Communist leader Deng Xiaoping tentatively re-opened China’s doors to the world under the title “Open Door Policy” as part of an economic reform plan that was to help finance the modernization

increase in value of their work and their representation at biennales, triennials and other international exhibitions, Smith argues that Chinese art clichés have accompanied the surge of foreign interest.<sup>52</sup> Berghuis' *Performance Art in China* is one of the first books that offers a comprehensive account (1979-1999) of the emergence of performance art in China, placing its development within a larger cultural, political, and economic context.<sup>53</sup> Most importantly for this project, Berguis contextualizes this account by discussing what was happening generally in China's artistic development on the international stage. Continuing the discussion begun by Wu Hung and Hou Hanru on the distinction and collaboration between 'official' and 'non-official art', Berghuis' book provides a detailed insight into how collectors and international exhibition mediated the reception of contemporary art in 1990s, which has been particularly useful for this study.

### ***"The Mahjong Effect"***

Over the past decade, selections of artworks from the Sigg Collection have been shown in numerous formats, from global exhibitions (ARTSingapore, 2007) and exhibitions around the world ("Guangzhou Cantonese Artists in the Sigg Collection", Kunstmuseum, Bern, 2006; "Art from China - Collection Uli Sigg", Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2007; "The Year of the Golden Pig - Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection", Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork University College, Cork, Ireland, 2007; "RED Aside - Chinese Contemporary Art of the

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of the mainland Chinese economy. Deng introduced to China aspects of the capitalist system, market incentives, and trade with the West. Judith F. Kornberg John R. Faust, *China in World Politics* (Boulder, C.O.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2005), 65-73. The Open Door Policy also gave artists in China the chance to learn about modern art as information about Western concepts of art began to arrive in China.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2007).

Sigg Collection, Fundacio Joan Miro, Barcelona, Spain, 2008), to the international travelling exhibition of the collection, which is a major focus of this study, entitled “Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection.”<sup>54</sup> “Mahjong” has exhibited in both Europe and North America in five different institutions (Museum of Fine Arts Bern and Holderbank in Bern, Switzerland, 2005; Kunsthalle in Hamburg, 2006; Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria, 2006; Berkeley Art Museum, 2008; and The Peabody Essex, Salem, 2009).

To date, exhibitions of the Sigg Collection have had considerable success in generating interest in contemporary Chinese art. Its most important participation in an exhibition, however, was the collection’s contribution to the prestigious 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, which has been credited with launching contemporary Chinese art onto the world stage. Curator Harald Szeemann borrowed works by several Chinese artists from the Sigg collection and relied heavily on Sigg’s knowledge of the art scene. By contributing in this way, Sigg helped popularize contemporary Chinese art in the West. The study of the Sigg Collection’s influence on this exhibition is therefore very important to the field of contemporary Chinese art.

The “Mahjong” exhibitions have been both successful and influential. In Switzerland, after the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum (2005) generated record numbers,

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<sup>54</sup> Beginning with the Pompidou's "Magiciens de la Terre" in 1989, "global exhibitions" began to take "globalization" itself as their main theme. The global exhibition model is one that can take place all over the world, and brings together artists from wide-ranging geographic and cultural points. It is hosted by a city or a nation and curating team usually consists of multiple nationalities. For more on the global exhibition model, see: Tim Griffin, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Artform* 42:3 (November 2003): 152–167. International travelling exhibitions are usually composed of artworks on loan from numerous institutions and/or from a private collection that travel and cross borders as a full package, more or less. Institutions host the exhibitions and curators from the host institution will usually organize the show. Robert Mac West and Christian E. Runge, "Travelling Exhibitions: Rationales and Strategies for the Small Museum" in *Handbook for Small Science Centre*, ed. Cynthia Yao (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006), 135-136.

the subsequent proclivity of Swiss collectors to purchase contemporary Chinese art was identified as “The Mahjong Effect.”<sup>55</sup> In 2008, at the time of the exhibition’s stop at the Berkeley Art Museum, the influence of the Sigg Collection on the global perception of contemporary art from China was boasted in the museum’s press release:

A very few years ago, artists included in the exhibition would have been known only to specialists in the field, yet today a good many of them are recognized broadly both in China and throughout the United States and Europe. Much of this recent recognition can be credited to the Swiss businessman and art connoisseur Uli Sigg and his persistent attempts to encourage Chinese artists and present their works on an international stage.<sup>56</sup>

The most complete information on Sigg and his collection can be found in the two “Mahjong” catalogues that accompanied the exhibition. The first catalogue *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* was used at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Hamburg Kunsthalle, and at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg Mönchsberg and includes discussions between Sigg and the curators, and Sigg with the artists in the exhibition.<sup>57</sup> These conversations offer insight into collecting trends in China in general, as well as Sigg’s own personal reflections about his collecting history and habits.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> With more than 40 000 visitors, it was the largest exhibition in the history of the Kunstmuseum. Franziska Koch, “Whose display? The role of the collector in the canonization of Contemporary Chinese Art: Uli Sigg and ‘Mahjong’”, CAA Conference, Los Angeles, California. February 2009. For more information on the Swiss penchant for Chinese art, see: “Swiss drive interest in Chinese Art,” *Swiss Info*, <http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/archive.html?siteSect=883&sid=7377748&ty=st> (accessed 10 November 2008).

<sup>56</sup> “Mahjong Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection.” Press release for exhibition at Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, September 10 2008- January 4 2009. [http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14\\_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/](http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/)

<sup>57</sup> Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, ed. *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection* (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> The catalogue includes a forward by Matthias Frehner (curator of Kunstmusem Bern) and Christoph Heinrich (curator of Hamburg Kunsthalle), conversations between Sigg and the curators in “Uli Sigg in Conversation with Matthias Frehner”, and discussions between Sigg and the artists in “Chineseness”—Is There Such a Thing? A Letter from Uli Sigg to the Artists Taking Part in Mahjong—and Their Responses.” A number of Chinese artists and art critics also write essays for the catalogue. In her catalogue essay “Contemporary Chinese Art: A Market Report”, Estele Bories considers the Chinese art market today, which addresses the issue of the lagging mainland collector in China. In “The Multiple Predicaments and

The second catalogue, *Mahjong: Art, Film and Change in China* published in 2008, accompanied the exhibition at University of California at Berkeley Art Museum, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.<sup>59</sup> It includes acknowledgements to the Siggs by curators Julia M. White and Lucinda Barnes (curators at Berkeley Art Museum), and the conversation between Sigg and Matthias Frehner from the original catalogue, but here it has been adapted into an essay format. There are other essays by Julia F. Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, and James Quandt, but they primarily concern contemporary Chinese art in general rather than the specifics of the Sigg Collection or the exhibition.

The works from the Sigg Collection can also be found listed in the catalogue for the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, curated and written by Harald Szeemann, *La Biennale di Venezia: 48a Esposizione internazionale d'arte: Dapertutto*.<sup>60</sup> The catalogue offers an introduction—a poem—by Szeemann that is suggestive of his picture of contemporary Chinese artists as being “reactionary” or “dissident.” The remainder of the catalogue has illustrations and short descriptions on each artist exhibited in the Biennale—including those that belong to the Sigg Collection.

In addition to these catalogues, information for the thesis about the collectors, their collection, and the exhibitions were obtained from newspaper articles. The articles are typically brief, though some contain interviews with Sigg where he openly discusses

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Upturns of Contemporary Chinese Art” Ai Weiwei, artist and personal friend of Sigg, writes about both the problems and encouraging developments in Chinese contemporary art today. At the end of the essay, Ai discusses the history and significance of Sigg’s collection and considers the important questions of its affect on China. The rest of the essays concern more general information about the rise of contemporary Chinese art, which has also been useful to contextualize the Sigg Collection and its role in Chinese art history.

<sup>59</sup> Julia M. White, ed. *Mahjong: Art Film and Change in China* (University of California: Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Harald Szeemann, Paoo Baratta and Cecilia Liveriero, ed., *La Biennale Di Venezia: 48a Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte* (Italy: Marsilio, 1999).

the development of his collection. In general, these articles portrayed the Sigg Collection as holding the most important collection of contemporary Chinese art. In doing so, the personal history of Sigg is often mentioned, including a small amount of information on people of significance with whom Sigg was in contact while collecting, insights into the methodology behind his collecting, and future plans for the collection and “Mahjong”.

Revealing insight also gleaned from journalistic interviews. For example, in 2005 the contemporary Chinese art critic and author Barbara Pollack published an interview with Sigg in the *New York Times* which addressed and critiqued the first “Mahjong” exhibition in Bern, giving an account of Sigg’s personal collecting history and practices.<sup>61</sup> Recently, *ArtZine China* published an interview (2008) with Sigg denying responses to reports his collection was going to be donated to a museum in Shenzhen in China.<sup>62</sup> In the interview, Sigg identified why he did not believe that the cultural climate in China was ready to have the Sigg Collection in its national institutions, and reveals future plans for the exhibition “Mahjong” after its stop at the Peabody Essex in Salem.

Aside from the catalogues of “Mahjong” and the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale which provided information on the inner-workings of the exhibition such as artists exhibited, themes, and groupings, other sources of information about the exhibitions came from press releases, exhibition reviews. The website [www.chineseart.com](http://www.chineseart.com) was an excellent source for a thorough discussion about the portrayal of Chinese artists at 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale as it was produced during the beginning of the Chinese art boom. The now off line website included essays by curators (Francesca Dal Lago and Monica Dematté) that

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<sup>61</sup> Barbara Pollack, “A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China,” *The New York Times*, 15 August 2005, late ed.: section E, page 1, column 3.

<sup>62</sup> “A Letter from Uli Sigg,” *ArtZine China*, [http://www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid664\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid664_en.html) (accessed 11 November 2008).

critically address the construction of Chinese art at the Biennale and its positioning along with the work of other international artists, which resulted in their acceptance into the global mainstream.<sup>63</sup> Revealing insights on contemporary Chinese art exhibitions in the past twenty years came from the surge of books written over the past decade on the subject by curators and academics, including Gao Minglu, Wu Hung and Britta Erickson.<sup>64</sup> These typical catalogues contain essays from both curators and artists in the exhibition that discuss the cultural and political concerns that the artists were exploring in their work, and their reactions to the relationship between China and the West.

Because very little has been published that addresses the Sigg Collection in any depth, my three oral interviews and two email correspondences with Sigg between February 2008 to January 2009 have played an important part in my research. His commentaries and answers to my questions provided perspective on his collection, its history, and how “Mahjong” came together. Sigg’s personal account of the collection also established an understanding of the discriminations behind his collection, the role others have played in its construction, and his understanding of the important and influential role he has played in the formation of a canon of contemporary Chinese art. For “Mahjong,” an interview with Dr. Heinrich (the curator of the exhibition while it was in Hamburg) provided both a curatorial perspective of the show and a personal account of Sigg’s role and involvement in the exhibition. The discussions took the form of both formal interviews and more causal conversations into general topics. It was from these

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<sup>63</sup> “Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium,” *Chineseart.com*, <http://www.chineseart.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Post89/post89.htm> (accessed 26 January 2009). Website is now off-line.

<sup>64</sup> Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press: 1998); Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, ed., *Between Past and Future* (University of California: Smart Museum Of Art, 2004); Britta Erickson, *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese artists encounter the West* (Stanford, California: Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, 2005); and Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese art* (Beijing: Timezone 8), 2006.

discussions that I was able to develop a more comprehensive history of Sigg, his collecting habits, and participation in “Mahjong”.

### *Outline of Chapters*

Chapter One places the project within the history of the rise of contemporary art in China. Specifically, it analyzes the cultural climate from which the Sigg Collection emerged. By briefly outlining the organizational structures and ideological frameworks that governed Chinese artists in its history after Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in 1978, the chapter provides context for understanding the challenges that the collecting community in China faced due to a lack of institutional structures and ideological uniformity. This chapter also introduces the discreet presence of the Sigg Collection at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999. While the Siggs, Uli and his wife Rita Sigg, are credited as lenders to the Biennale and acknowledged for their expert advice among other colleagues of Szeemann, recognition of their relationship to the exhibition was understated. This chapter argues that private Western collections were a large catalyst in the international art scene’s formal recognition of contemporary Chinese art, as well as a significant influence on the formation of a Chinese art canon. To assess the extent of private collections’ contributions to the canon, this chapter will also discuss the contemporary Chinese art canon, including what constitutes the canon, what are the variables involved in canon formation, and how it has received and reacted to private collections of its art.

Chapter Two thoroughly examines the specific character of the Sigg Collection and the process by which Sigg acquired his art. It then compares Sigg’s collection to other collections in contemporary Chinese art. By using psychologist James Cutting’s

theories on “mere exposure,” I will argue that the Sigg Collection’s frequent circulation is similar to the process of the canonization of artworks, evolving over time to become an institution itself.<sup>65</sup> The chapter provides an overview of the roles and relationships of other major players of the Chinese art scene – gallerists, curators, museums, artists, and favoured consultants – to the collection in order to analyze how they informed it and vice versa. To establish how Sigg’s position in China made his collection unique, Sigg’s history as an insider – both as a businessman and an ambassador to China – in terms of broader global cultural politics of citizenship is briefly considered. The chapter also elaborates on the nature of the collection, by outlining its goals, marketing strategies, influences on other collectors, and responses to it.

Chapter Three examines Sigg’s collection and its culmination in the form of the “Mahjong” exhibition. It considers how “Mahjong” is a manifestation of the contemporary Chinese art canon that was established at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. The chapter begins by describing how each exhibition came together, their themes, marketing and exhibition strategies, as well as the contributors’ roles and Sigg’s ambiguous role at each the show. It will discuss the ways in which the collection functioned in both the Biennale and in “Mahjong” to inform the audience as to what the canon of contemporary Chinese art entails. The chapter then addresses why the “Mahjong” has largely maintained the same exhibition scheme during the course of its five-year international tour and how the collection and collector’s role is not very different from when they were at the Biennale. It considers what the implications of this finding are for the reputation of the collection on the art market and its effect on the canon. Finally, by using both Mieke

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<sup>65</sup> James Cutting, “Mere Exposure, Reproduction and the Impressionist Canon” in *Partisans Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durhum, N.C: Duke University Press, 2007), 79-95.

Bal's and James Cutting's theories on repetition, I discuss the ways in which this exhibition strategy on the part of the Sigg Collection also speaks to how canons are cultural constructs created through repeat exposure. This thesis is concerned with the role the private collection of Uli Sigg played in the formation of the contemporary Chinese art canon, primarily through its dissemination in exhibitions. Considering the canon as a cultural construct created through exposure and repetition, I argue that the Sigg Collection of contemporary Chinese art is one of the main catalysts behind the canon's development.

## Chapter One

### Collecting patterns of contemporary Chinese art

In 1999, Swiss independent curator Harald Szeemann invited twenty experimental artists from China to participate in the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale after being introduced to their work by Swiss collector Uli Sigg.<sup>66</sup> So strong was Szeemann's interest in bringing attention to this "new discovery," that the total number of Chinese artists in the Biennale exceeded the number of Italian and American artists represented. Afterwards, the Biennale was aptly nicknamed "China's Biennale," as Szeemann's curatorial vision brought contemporary Chinese art to a wider international consciousness.<sup>67</sup> The 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale is now considered one of the main catalysts in the international art scene's formal recognition of contemporary Chinese art.<sup>68</sup> It also demonstrated two unique aspects of canon formation in contemporary Chinese art. First, the discreet influence that private collectors, like Sigg, had in supporting the rise of contemporary Chinese art in China (1980s through the 1990s) and disseminating the art outside of China, when

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<sup>66</sup> Szeemann is most recognized for the landmark and controversial exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" (1969) which exhibited all of the avant-garde arts of the time, such as: arte povera, minimal art, land art, and conceptual art. Some claimed it was garbage while others praised its radicalism. Jane Blocker, *What the Body Costs: Desire, History and Performance* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 84-6.

<sup>67</sup> Katherine Don, "China Pavilion at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale," *Redbox Studio*, <http://review.redboxstudio.cn/2009/06/china-pavilion-at-the-53rd-venice-biennale/#more-1929> (accessed 24 June 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Thomas J. Berghuis describes the exhibition as "the first major repositioning of Chinese experimental artists" in his work *Performance Art in China* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2007), 154. Wu Hung lists the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale as being one of four main factors in constructing global context of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s (the others include the diplomatic community in Beijing, foreign media interest, international curators coming to China, and Chinese artists living and exhibiting abroad) Wu Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), 39-40. Additionally, from 1979 to 1989, experimental art was labeled "avant garde art" because it was denied official recognition in China, and then throughout most of the 1990s it took an underground format. According to Berghuis, it was only after the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale that experimental art in China was accepted by officials and assumed into the mainstream. It thus shed the title "avant garde" for "contemporary art" instead. Berghuis, 154-5.

Official China – meaning government and government officials – would do neither; and second, the important role of peripheral and non-official spaces for the dissemination of contemporary Chinese art, even though national museums and public exhibitions are usually where the process of exclusion and domination in canon formation occurs.

Cultural critic Sheldon Lu describes the lack of support for Chinese artists in China in the 1990s as follows: “The general attitude [towards contemporary Chinese art] ranged from rejection, disapproval, censorship, and intolerance to indifference. Artists received little support from the state.”<sup>69</sup> The result of which, Lu argues, is that primary artistic activities moved elsewhere: “the production, exhibition, and reception of Chinese avant-garde art happens mostly in either transnational, global contexts, or in private, nonofficial, foreign owned galleries within China.”<sup>70</sup> This chapter reflects upon how the canon began and demonstrates that, if not for a small group of collectors throughout the 1990s in these non-official spaces, a significant part of the history of contemporary Chinese art would have fallen between the cracks.

### ***The Unmasking of the Canon***

It has been argued that canons are “a body of works...traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study.”<sup>71</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines canonical works as “accepted as being authentic, accurate, and authoritative.”<sup>72</sup> For the Western art canon, its origins are in the works of the sixteenth century artist-biographer

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<sup>69</sup> Sheldon Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 143.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Anna Brzyski, “Canons and Art History” in *Partisans Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>72</sup> “Canonical, a.” *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*. 2009. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/canonical?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/canonical?view=uk) (accessed 24 June 2009).

Giorgio Vasari, whose canon traditionally defined “great art” as the expression of individual Western male genius. There began the long tradition of gender and Western bias in the canon, which laid down the guiding principles of conventional “taste”. The canon then, has traditionally been formed by a process of selectivity and exclusion with the consistent omission of women and non-Western artists from the history of art.<sup>73</sup> As several scholars have pointed out, the most popular art history textbooks today still carry many of the same male artists from Vasari’s original canon and the work of women rarely occupies more than ten to twenty percent of the illustrations.<sup>74</sup> Thus how are canons formed? By whom and why? What are the mechanics behind a canon?

According to art historian Anna Brzyski, these are questions about the canon that have tended to be largely ignored by general critiques of canonicity, “in part, because scholars have tended to accept the canon as an unproblematic given and describe it in exclusively negative terms.”<sup>75</sup> Art historian Monica Amor furthers this argument by suggesting that a confrontation on the canon’s inner workings allows for a discussion of the real issues at stake:

The opaque mechanisms (imposed by taste, professional allegiances, intuitionist conventions, nationalistic feelings, social habits, cultural assumptions, and political agendas) that arrest the expansion and mutation or displacement of the canon, operations that should come naturally to it if we consider its rather arbitrary nature—these should be confronted and not silenced, they should trigger responsible discussions about value judgment and the specificity of the positions that are taken.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Since the 1970s, women’s movements began to counter the traditionally male centered canon in order to open it up to forgotten or omitted female artists. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London, Routledge, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> J Dianne Garner, Elizabeth L. MacNabb, Mary Cherry, Rene Perri Prys and Susan Popham, eds. *Transforming the Disciplines* (London: Routledge, 1991), 41.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Monica Amor, “On the Contingency of Modernity” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (London: Duke University Press, 2008), 89.

In other words, the more we know about what is behind the canon's making, the more we will know about the standards involved in its judgements, and how they differ according to the attitudes and interests of different historical groups and individuals involved.

Collectors like Sigg, in addition to dealers, art critics and museum curators, have been important in the process of art being accepted into the canon. As art consultant András Szántó states:

Opinion forming in the ranks of artists tends to spread first to the inner-circle art world participants (dealers, curators, critics, and some collectors) and then begins by degree to the art world's outer circle (secondary dealers and collectors, auction houses, the media). Long-term confirmation is given by museums and through inscription into the official canon of art history.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the value of an artwork is not determined by the costs of its production, its marketing or even its aesthetics, but rather the opinions of experts – such as the collector – all of whom are intertwined in determining the value of the artwork.

This chapter unmasks the variable of the private collector in the inception of the contemporary Chinese art canon. It will involve a close examination of the history of the relationship between contemporary arts, collectors and government involvement in the 1990s in China compared to their roles after the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, and what this means for contemporary Chinese art in China today. Asian and African cultural theorist Jing Wang, in writing about high cultural fever in Deng Xiaoping's China, describes the difference by noting that while "in the 1990s the market usurped the elite of the new legitimate maker of public opinions,"<sup>78</sup> whereas after 1999 there was an efficient

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<sup>77</sup> András Szántó as quoted in Kevin F. McCarthy, *A Portrait of the Visual Art: Meeting the Challenges of a New Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), 65.

<sup>78</sup> Wang Jing as quoted in Berghuis, 153. Two examples that confirm this quick cultural shift are the government fully backing international exhibitions such as the *Alors, La Chine* exhibition in France in 2003, and state management coming in to run the vast gallery nexus 798 in Beijing in 2004. By

change in arts support, production and collecting on the part of Chinese government officials that were all closely related to China's new economic system. The collecting patterns outlined in this chapter by mapping this shift introduce the important role that non-official support and spaces played in fostering the rise of contemporary Chinese art. Specifically this provides insight into China's relationship with its contemporary art canon, which has, for the most part, been created outside of official space. It is not what is in or out of the canon that is of concern here, but rather how it came to be. Further considerations of how the canon was then disseminated by private collectors follows, with a focus on the Sigg collection.

### *History of contemporary art collecting in contemporary China: Losing and Saving Face*

Historically, art collecting has had a long tradition in China and was pursued by the elite – mostly by the wealthy, royalty or merchants who were trying to elevate their status, and was one of the ways in which the newly rich elevated their status in seventeenth-century Chinese society.<sup>79</sup> The focus of this work, however, is the particularities of the collecting phase in China that began in the early 1990s and extends until today. This phase came about as a result of – or in combination with – two critical events, both of which transpired in 1989: first, the opening and then immediate closing of the seminal “China/Avant-garde” exhibition held in Beijing in February (fig. 1.1) and second, the tragic ending of the student movement at Tiananmen Square on June 4th. Both of these

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comparison, in the 1990s, the government looked as though it had lost complete control over the arts in China. Berghuis, 153.

<sup>79</sup> James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 11.

events were the culmination of China's realization that after re-opening its doors in 1979, its relationship with the world had changed.

After 1979, China had entered an era in which globalization was a strong and significant force that began to break down national boundaries – on economic, social and cultural grounds.<sup>80</sup> This encounter gave way to more complex patterns of interdependence based on the notion that the local and international are unavoidably intertwined. China was no longer a closed nation state whose institutional form excluded all other possibilities.<sup>81</sup> This change manifested in artistic practice as well.

The 1980s are regarded fondly by older generations of contemporary Chinese art, who name it “the decade of the critic.”<sup>82</sup> It was essentially a time of fruitful discourse and debate for artists as they engaged enthusiastically with new artistic information from the West in attempt to deconstruct their previous formal art training. It was also a decade of artistic exchange. Art groups flourished (The No Name Group, April Photographic Society, the Stars Group, Scar Art, also known as the main participants in the New Wave '85 Movement) and even though they were regarded with speculation and trepidation by authorities, their exhibitions were, for the most part, permitted.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Lu, 143.

<sup>81</sup> After the Communist victory of 1949, and with the founding of the People's Republic of China dramatic changes occurred. Under Mao, China instituted a series of reforms and stirred national animosity towards the West, and subsequently closed its doors to the outside world. It would remain this way until China found rapprochement with the United States in the early 1970s in a period called “ping pong diplomacy,” in reference to the ping pong players that were exchanged between China and the United States which thawed relations and paved the way for Richard Nixon to visit in 1972. Richard L. Edmond, *The People's Republic of China after 50 Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>82</sup> Philip Tianari, “Political Pop and Post Tiananmen Trends,” Asian Art Forum, series of lectures on contemporary Chinese art attended by the author, Shanghai, November 22, 2008.

<sup>83</sup> For example, the public gallery in Beijing was open for rental, exhibitions in smaller scale institutions occurred all over the country, and even the more experimental ones were taking place in public spaces-such as “85 New Space Exhibition,” “The Northern Art Group Biennale,” and the “Earthquake” exhibition on the Great Wall.

On the other hand, it was a difficult time for the development of a relationship between contemporary art and its collectors. This was because there was not yet a market, so at best there would be occasional sales to foreigners, usually business professionals, diplomats or journalists stationed in China for a few years who wanted something they could bring home as a souvenir.<sup>84</sup> The notable exceptions here would be Johnson Chang and David Tang from Hong Kong, who first started collecting contemporary Chinese art at this time for their Hanart TZ Galley in Hong Kong (1983).<sup>85</sup>

After the June 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, a number of the nation's best known artists, intellectual figures, and writers who had participated in the event or were afraid of the ramifications of the event on intellectuals, fled the nation and met up with other Chinese scholars and artists who were already abroad.<sup>86</sup> They formed what has been called a "cultural China": a global field of intellectual debate and activity outside of the nation.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The truly committed collector can best be described by what a collector is neither merely an accumulator nor simply an art lover. The defining properties of a committed collector would be a passionate desire for actively seeking out specific kinds of art that provide pleasure and/or financial gain. This sort of loyalty is fundamental to the encouragement and support of an art scene, especially an emerging one such as contemporary Chinese art. Fredrick Baekeland, "Psychological Aspects of Collecting" in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 206.

<sup>85</sup> Even though the Hanart TZ gallery was based outside of Mainland China in the then British Colony of Hong Kong, it was the closest venue to for Mainland Chinese artists to exhibit and appeal to a wider international audience.

<sup>86</sup> During the Tiananmen square protests, hundreds of prominent intellectuals, writers and artists participated in their demand for a clean government and political reform for the two months up leading up until June 4<sup>th</sup>. In joining the protesting students and citizens of Beijing, they asked the government to negotiate new politics that would return the people's confidence in them. The result was ill fated due to the government's unwillingness to concede to social pressure. For more on the complex relationship between "official" culture (produced or supported by the government) and "nonofficial" or countercultures (especially among dissidents) and its climax in the form of the protests on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, see: Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Furthermore, artists who left China after the massacre and settled abroad largely partook in the "Chinese hype" that came as a result of the world's interest in the June 4th tragedy (Barmé, 40). In contrast to the artists who were struggling in China to gain acceptance, these artists participated in numerous exhibitions, biennales, and triennials. At the same time, these artists struggled too by being forced to "translate" their art for a Western audience in order to gain acceptance. Out of the approximate 200 artists that left, Cai Guo Qiang, Huang Yong Ping and Yan Pei-Ming are considered some of the most successful ones. For more information on the struggle and survival of overseas Chinese artists in the 1990s, see: Hou Hanru, *On the Mid Ground* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002).

<sup>87</sup> Barmé, 40.

At the same time in China, the fallout of 1989 meant that the relationship between artists and the Chinese state became increasingly adversarial: artists received little to no support, and the official position with respect to avant-garde art became one that ranged from rejection to disapproval, censorship, and intolerance.<sup>88</sup> Officials in Beijing closed the door to avant-garde art, and exhibitions were no longer approved nor allowed in public institutions. Hong Kong based curator and collector Johnson Chang, who curated and co-organized “China’s New Art, Post 1989”, the first major international exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in 1993, explains the shift in mentality the June Fourth Movement had for the artists: “In shock, artists came to a sudden realization of their impotence in the face of real politics. The idealism and utopian enthusiasm so typical of new art in the ‘80s met its nemesis in the gun barrels in Tiananmen.”<sup>89</sup>

For instance, artist Geng Jianyi was concerned about the position of the artist in China even before the tragic events of 1989. He struggled with the number of well-informed and educated artists that remained on the thrall of the omnipotent bureaucracy, hemmed in by regulations and rules.<sup>90</sup> In order to encourage suspicion of the system within which they were entrenched, Geng emphasized the concept of doubt and cynicism in his work, such as in *The Second Situation* (1987/88) (fig.1.2).<sup>91</sup> The events of June 4th encouraged this theme for Geng, and two days after the June 4th massacre, Geng vented his frustration by putting up a massive canvas in the busiest sector of Hangzhou, while protests were still occurring in Beijing. The image Geng depicted on the canvas was a copy of a foreign press photograph of Tiananmen square on June fourth: painted in all

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<sup>88</sup> Lu, 143.

<sup>89</sup> Wu,14.

<sup>90</sup> Smith, 103.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, 103.

shades of red, which served to highlight the reality of the event the government would later chose to ignore (fig. 1.3).<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, Fang Lijun, a fellow Cynical Realist artist, is an example of an artist who had been quietly pointing the finger at the government in his work for years prior to 1989. However, after Fang followed his fellow artists and students to Tiananmen square in 1989 and witnessed the protests being severely brought under control by the government, the accusations in his work became more pointed, as despite the fact that Fang's participation in the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square was limited, the State's subsequent crackdown on artists meant that his four years of academic study in the arts were immediately deemed useless.<sup>93</sup> This sentiment of futility that he felt began penetrating his paintings, such as in *Series 2* (1991-2) (fig 1.4), a group of artworks that carries a sentiment of roguish irreverence.<sup>94</sup>

Even though the 1990s began as a decade of discouraging conditions for artists and for citizens, it did not mean that contemporary art activities stopped completely. Art was continually produced after the events of 1989, though it was usually in a form that reflected the feelings of despair of the time. Contemporary Chinese art historian and critic Wu Hung explains the impact as follows: "Cynical Realism and Political Pop were invented in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident to express, among other things,

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<sup>92</sup> Though June 4<sup>th</sup> will be remembered as the most violent culmination of the movement, there were two months leading up to the protest and still protests lingering afterwards. Most notably, on June 5, 1989, one day after the Chinese army's deadly massacre of the protests in Beijing, a single, unarmed man stood before a column of tanks on the Avenue of Eternal Peace. Captured on film and video by Western journalists, this confrontation has become an icon of the event and of protests worldwide. Robert Hairman and John Louis Lucaites "Liberal Representation and Global Order: The Iconic Photograph from Tiananmen Square" in *Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence J. Prelli, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 121-140.

<sup>93</sup> Smith, 33.

<sup>94</sup> Lu, 146.

artists disillusionment with their own political engagement.”<sup>95</sup> The resulting artwork exuded a social bent towards highlighting issues and questioning the validity behind accepting them as fact.<sup>96</sup>

The artists were denied both acknowledgement and funding from authorities, which fuelled the themes of their work and prevented the public from engaging, appreciating, or even acknowledging that such works of experimental art were being produced.<sup>97</sup> In the early 1990s, avant-garde art rarely emerged publicly in China. These artists and their work appeared sporadically in exhibitions abroad and in what were called “underground exhibitions” in China.<sup>98</sup>

### ***Peripheral Spaces and Foreign Interest***

Underground exhibitions would usually be spontaneous gatherings in an artist’s home, or discreetly organized exhibitions in non-exhibition spaces – such as warehouses, parking lots, bars, parks and cellars.<sup>99</sup> Italian curator Davide Quadrio, who came to China in 1993 and founded BizArt Centre in Shanghai in 1998 (the first not-for-profit independent creative lab in China) describes the early 1990s art scene as being “more like a form of

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>96</sup> Smith, 37.

<sup>97</sup> Most tellingly represented in the Cynical Realism movement by leading cynical realist artists such as Song Yonghong, Wang Jinsong, Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun.

<sup>98</sup> International exhibitions such as in the *China’s New Art, Post 1989* (Hong Kong, 1993) exhibition and the *China Avant Garde* exhibition (Berlin 1993). Additionally, though the term “underground exhibition” had connotations of being anti-official or dissident, according to Asian cultural theorist Geremie R. Barmé, this was not the case, as China’s contemporary art at the time could not be simply classified as oppositional art. In fact, the art was so complex that it could often be spoken about as though it was a parallel or parasite culture to official art, which made it neither completely non-official nor anti-official. Thus the term “underground” is more appropriate than dissident. Barmé, xiv-xv.

<sup>99</sup> Many artists (Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, etc) also joined together to form “underground” artists villages at this time (the first one formed in the early 1990s in Beijing) in order to put on these types of events on. Officials would usually shut the exhibition down right after it began, so eventually, the artistic community disbanded. These artists would go on to form the seminal “East Village” artistic centre in Beijing a couple of years later. Berghuis, 240-55.

entertainment” than one that nurtured professional artists.<sup>100</sup> Information pertaining to the event would circulate through non-official avenues as well as by word of mouth. This form of clandestine advertising brought an audience of Chinese supporters as well as many curious spectators and a handful of foreigners, in large part because they were intrigued by the underground element of this activity. Though the art that was being produced was during a time of a persistent socialist regime in China (mid 1980s to mid 1990s) and underground spaces were legitimately one of the only spaces available to exhibit experimental art, according to Chinese art curator Karen Smith, to some extent, Chinese artists used the “strategy of equivocation” to begin their careers.<sup>101</sup> As she argues, the rebellious attitude of Chinese artists “enabled them to navigate turbid waters at home, and to build credibility abroad, encourage foreign audiences to believe the art was more political than it was at the time, and thereby delight in its illegality.”<sup>102</sup>

Foreign interest – on the part of diplomats, journalists or businesspeople living in or visiting China – is the significant variable to be highlighted in this phase of collecting. The foreign audience began in the late 1980s, when artists had shown their work to the expatriate community of Beijing in their embassies and apartments (thereby creating the term “apartment art”). The reasons for the foreign community’s willingness to attend these shows are also complex. As Smith argues, foreign response at the time swung between being tentative, condemning, excited and intrigued.<sup>103</sup> Audiences, including the foreign press, were captivated by the number of exhibition closures that served to

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<sup>100</sup> Davide Quadrio, “No Cleaning and No Money Required: The Contradictions of Showing Undecoded Art in Shanghai in the 1990s.” China On Display conference, University of Leiden, Leiden, 8 December 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Smith, 379.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Smith, 10.

highlight the ongoing repressions of personal freedom in China.<sup>104</sup> By providing the space for the exhibitions, foreigners believed they could participate and continue to support China's pro-democratic movement.<sup>105</sup>

In addition, many foreigners developed relations with artists and then introduced them into the foreign community. For example, Fang Lijun's wife Michaela Raab was a German international aid worker and would organize exhibitions for him and other artists in her apartment. Fang would accompany Raab to functions in Beijing's diplomatic compound where he would have the opportunity to promote his work. Though foreigners were watching his work closely, Fang recalls feeling very shy when interacting with foreigners at these events and a "sense of exclusion" when among the privileged environments of the foreigners.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, in bringing his work to the foreign and diplomatic community in Beijing, Raab helped launch Fang's career into the international community.<sup>107</sup>

The sorts of peripheral spaces artists like Fang frequented were where non-official support for the art began and continued to grow throughout the 1990s. The lack of official support in combination with the underground exhibition venues meant that the majority of this early work was preserved in large part due to their foreign audience. Quadrio verifies the beginnings of a foreigner collecting pattern in the early to mid 1990s,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Foreigners in China brought support and legitimization to the cause while many nations imposed a number of economic sanctions in order to show support for the pro-democracy movement that led up to the June 4<sup>th</sup> event and to condemn the way China reacted. For example, United States President George Bush announced suspension of all government to government sales, The World Bank differed consideration of development loans for China worth US\$780.2 million, and leaders of the seven major industrialist nations (USA, Japan, France, West Germany, Italy, Britain and Canada) issued together a political declaration condemning China for suppressing the pro-democracy movement. Colin Mackerras and Amanda Yorke, *The Cambridge Handbook of Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 52.

<sup>106</sup> Smith, 151.

<sup>107</sup> Smith, 133.

concluding that though a lot of work did not survive in underground exhibitions, the work that did survive was “because it had been purchased by foreigners.”<sup>108</sup>

Artists quickly became aware of the significance of their foreign audience, as purchases of their work provided the means to continue producing art. Even though the price of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s was a fraction of what it has been in the past five years,<sup>109</sup> sales of Chinese artworks to foreigners brought in a considerable amount more money than Chinese artists earned at their regular jobs. For instance, when Fang Lijun lived in the East Village artist community in 1989-1990, his position teaching at the Central Academy of Fine Arts made him 100 Yuan a month, just enough to pay his rent with a little extra left over for other living expenses, and barely any for art supplies.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, works by leading artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi at the time were making \$1000 USD (8200 Yuan) on average per artwork.<sup>111</sup> According to foreign collector Guy Ullens, Chinese artists were “ecstatic” at earning \$5000 USD at the time for their work.<sup>112</sup> To put those prices relative to today, the estimated price of a lot of ten contemporary Chinese artworks for sale (including work by Zhang Xiaogang) at a Sotheby’s auction in 2008 was between \$13.7 to \$19.2 million.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> For instance, Chinese artworks that sold in the early 1990s at \$1000 USD rose to about \$10,000 USD by 1996, and today, routinely fetch \$100,000-\$200,000. Pallavi Aiyar, “Modern Art Scene Grabbing Investors,” *Asia Times Online*, April 11 2006.

[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China\\_Business/HD11Cb05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/HD11Cb05.html) (accessed 26 July 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Smith, 142. The “Yuan” is the name of the Chinese currency that is also called “Mao or Renminbi (RMB).” In the mid 1980s one US Dollar equaled 8.2 Yuan. Smith, 470.

<sup>111</sup> Pallavi Aiyar, “Modern Art Scene Grabbing Investors,” *Asia Times Online*, April 11 2006. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China\\_Business/HD11Cb05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/HD11Cb05.html) (accessed 26 July 2009).

<sup>112</sup> Guy Ullens, as quoted in Pamela Yatsko, “Stanford Smarts in China’s Art Marts,” *Stanford Business Magazine*, February 2008. <http://gsb.stanford.edu/news/bmag/sbsm0802/feature-china-art.html> (accessed 26 July 2009).

<sup>113</sup> Scott Reyburn, “Sotheby’s Offers \$19 million Contemporary Chinese Art,” <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601088&sid=aiY0Ur4xM8kc&refer=muse> (accessed September 19, 2009).

Interactions between artists and foreigners would occur at underground exhibitions or artists would seek out rumoured collectors, usually via word of mouth. But the search for patronage was often complicated and difficult. In fact, the best opportunity for artists was to make contacts with hotel managers and businessmen, and then show their work in quickly put together salons, private viewings, and cocktail parties in the hotel rooms or apartments of foreign diplomats and journalists.<sup>114</sup> It was a frantic struggle for recognition, as a successful painter in this venue could become rich relative to Chinese terms. Art historian Michael Sullivan describes the scene as follows: "So desperate was their scramble for notice that some would not only bribe TV stations and magazines to feature their work but pay critics to attack them. Any attention was better than none."<sup>115</sup>

Though there were a few collectors to support the scene that Sullivan describes, the majority of collectors were overseas. The first notable collectors in the early 1990s can be divided into categories, according to a research study by the DSL Collection.<sup>116</sup> There were foreign collector couples (Uli and Rita Sigg from Switzerland, Baron Guy Ullens & Myriam Ullens from Belgium, the Jurgen Ludwig Fishers from Germany, Howard Farber & Patricia Farber from the USA and Kate and Vickie Logan also from the USA), individual foreign collectors (Pierre Huber from France and Sue Stoffel from the USA) and non-mainland Chinese collectors (Johnson Chang and David Tang, both from Hong Kong).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (California: University of California Press, 1996), 278.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Categories according to "A Private Research on Western Collectors," *The DSL Collection*, [http://www.nps.gov/abli/.http://www.g1expo.com/fiche\\_home?id=18](http://www.nps.gov/abli/.http://www.g1expo.com/fiche_home?id=18) (accessed 9 November 2008).

<sup>117</sup> There has been a long history of collecting art in Hong Kong. Eric Otto Wear has put together an excellent analysis this trend in his work "The Sense of Things: Chinese Art in the Lives of Hong Kong

According to Sylvain and Dominique Levy, these first collectors had a significant and negative impact on present collecting activities in contemporary Chinese art:

When the outflow of contemporary Chinese artworks started in the early 1990s the Western collectors of Chinese artwork were beginners in their level of power and experience. This earlier situation hinders the current development of contemporary art in China, which is overly concerned with commercial production.<sup>118</sup>

As the system they developed was one of the very few that guaranteed a form of validation or success for Chinese artists, they were also partly responsible for identifying for later collectors who merited the honorific term “artist” and on what basis. And yet, even if the artworks were acquired for financial speculation, each collector or collector couple amassed art according to a personal system because there were not any previous collecting patterns for them to follow in the early 1990s.

Uli Sigg describes this group of collectors – including himself – as having been a “tight, intimate group” who would share information with each other about exciting new artists and underground exhibitions at each social setting.<sup>119</sup> Consequently, collectors and art dealers adopted an underground system of private sales that revolved around studio visits and social networks.<sup>120</sup> This informal market arose because there were barely any other venues (such as art magazines, art blogs, art sections in the newspaper) to disseminate information. Galleries and foreign investment had only begun. For example, the contemporary Chinese art market began in 1992, with Chang and David Tang’s

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Collectors and Connoisseurs” in *Consuming Hong Kong*, eds. Gordon B. Matthews, Tai-kok Lui and Dale Lu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Culture Society, 2001), 173-204.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Uli Sigg, interview with the author, Shanghai, China, 10 November 2008.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

Hanart T Z Gallery of Hong Kong and Shui Yuan's Art Centre of Taiwan.<sup>121</sup> The opening of private galleries was a major change for China's art world in the 1990s as argued by curator Wu Hung, because it allowed considerably more opportunities to exhibit experimental art than the underground exhibitions had. The gallery spaces were also legal, as even though commercial galleries were not licensed "exhibition spaces," they were licensed art business, which meant they could show artworks without any additional official permission.<sup>122</sup>

At the same time, the receptiveness to contemporary Chinese art from abroad was attested by the growing number of exhibitions that featured Chinese artists, such as the aforementioned "China's New Art, Post-1989" (1993) organized in Hong Kong, "China Avant-garde" that opened in Berlin (1993), the first Chinese participation at the Venice Biennale (1993) and the 22nd Sao Paolo Biennale (1994). As a result, more foreign galleries began to open in China (Red Gate, The Courtyard, and China Art Archives and Warehouse in Beijing); these are considered the key galleries in introducing Chinese art to the West.<sup>123</sup> Although they catered mainly to foreign clients, they nevertheless helped support Chinese artists exhibit in China. Many of the owners of the commercial galleries also held and supported "non-profit" exhibitions of installations, performance art and video art. According to journalist Maryse Parant, who interviewed a number of gallery

<sup>121</sup> Johnson Chang started to represent contemporary Chinese artists at his Hanart TZ gallery, as early as 1991 when he was scouring the country for artists to have in his seminal "China's New Art Post-1989" exhibition in 1993. Barbara Koch, "In Search of Johnson Chang," *ArtZine China*, [http://www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid172\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid172_en.html) (accessed 26 July 2009).

<sup>122</sup> Wu, 167.

<sup>123</sup> Red Gate Gallery was the first privately owned contemporary art gallery and was established by Australian Brian Wallace in Beijing in 1991; The CourtYard Gallery was founded in 1996 in Beijing by Handel Lee, a Chinese-American lawyer; Hans van Dijk, collector Frank Utterhaegen and Ai Weiwei established China Art Archives and Warehouse in 1998. For more information on the first private and commercial contemporary art galleries in China, see: Edward Lawrence Davis, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 29-30.

owners in Beijing from the 1990s, these spaces should be considered precursors as “they not only sell, they also serve an educational purpose, digging a new path of art in China, shaping a market so that a new art can be seen.”<sup>124</sup>

Sigg was also among a few other Swiss at the time in China who can be considered catalysts in the development of the market in the 1990s, by playing a large role in opening the scene to other collectors.<sup>125</sup> This can be attributed to several conditions, one being that Switzerland already had a history of positive relationships with China, as one of the first countries to recognize the People’s Republic of China under Mao and one of the few European countries to secure diplomatic representation in China, which was especially important during the Cold War. After Deng Xiaoping opened the doors to the world in 1979, the reliable values of neutrality and independence of Switzerland meant the Swiss could invest economically – and perhaps then culturally as well – without alarming the Chinese.<sup>126</sup> In addition, the majority of these Swiss players on the art scene were either already friends or acquaintances back home, so one could influence another about the prospects of contemporary art in China. For instance, Urs Meile, one of the largest collectors of contemporary Chinese art today, lives right near Uli Sigg in their hometown of Lucerne, Switzerland. Both homes are filled with art from

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<sup>124</sup> Maryse Parant, “Foreigners Define Market: City Galleries to Compete to Supply Contemporary Works” *Beijing This Month*, 77 (April 2000): 42.

<sup>125</sup> Stacey Duff, “Chinese Art and The Swiss Sense,” *ArtZine China*, 2008.

[http://new.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid132\\_en.html](http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid132_en.html) (accessed 8 June 2009).

<sup>126</sup> Renat Künzi, “Chinese hold Swiss in High Esteem,” *Swissinfo*, 2008.

[http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/front/Chinese\\_hold\\_Swiss\\_in\\_highEsteem.html?siteSect=105&sid=9358218&rss=true&ty=st](http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/front/Chinese_hold_Swiss_in_highEsteem.html?siteSect=105&sid=9358218&rss=true&ty=st) (accessed 12 July 2009).

China.<sup>127</sup> As remarked in *Artforum* (June 2008), Lucerne collectors in general “are known for having a penchant for Chinese art.”<sup>128</sup>

One of the first Swiss to enter the scene was the late Manfred Schoeni (1946-2004), established the Schoeni Gallery in Hong Kong in 1992. The purpose of the gallery was to exhibit mainland contemporary Chinese art to a foreign audience, which was far more prominent in Hong Kong than it was in the rest of China. After studying art history at Shanghai's Fudan University in the 1980s and working for a gallery in Hong Kong, Swiss-born Lorenz Helbling opening up ShanghArt Gallery in 1996 in Shanghai, which was one of the first private art galleries in mainland China. "I chose to open a gallery in Shanghai rather than Hong Kong because the city was really starting to take off economically," he stated, noting however, that at the same time, it was also difficult working in an emerging market since Chinese did not yet have a tradition of collecting contemporary art works.<sup>129</sup> As Helbling puts it: "A decade ago, they didn't think it was expensive to spend thousands of Yuan on a karaoke machine. But if there was a painting, they might feel it was too expensive."<sup>130</sup>

In order to make a living, Helbling looked to gain the support of wealthy foreigners. He did so by organizing some of the first foreign-operated exhibitions of

<sup>127</sup> Nicholas Trembley, “Swiss Family,” *Artforum Diary*, June 3, 2008. <http://artforum.com/diary/id=20507> (accessed 12 July 2009).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Maggie Ma, “Lorenz Helbling’s ShanghART Gallery,” *ArtZine China*, January 2009. [http://www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid121\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid121_en.html) (accessed 8 June 2009). It need also be mentioned that private galleries and auction houses were beginning to pop up in many other places in Asia at the time (India, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and so on) as their own contemporary art markets were beginning to develop as well due to similar forces of globalization and economic prowess. The linkage between contemporary Chinese art and the wider context of contemporary Asian art is necessary to point out here in order to consider Chinese art as not having developed in a cultural vacuum. For more information on the intricacies of the Chinese and contemporary Asian art market, see: Ian Robertson, *Understanding International Art Markets and Managements* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>130</sup> Maggie Ma, “Lorenz Helbling’s ShanghART Gallery,” *ArtZine China*, January 2009. [http://www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid121\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid121_en.html) (accessed 8 June 2009).

contemporary Chinese art in Shanghai in the 1990s out of the Portman Ritz-Carlton hotel, which as the largest foreign operated establishment in the city, was an opportune place in Shanghai for Helbling to introduce foreigners to Chinese art.<sup>131</sup> In doing so, artists formed an encouraging relationship with the international art world before they did with Official China. This confirmed to artists that their artwork was not only able to survive, but flourish, without their government's support.

The rising interest abroad in Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s became obvious when the foreign media became interested in the work. Confirmation of this interest would be the widely read piece written in 1993 by Andrew Solomon of the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “Their Irony, Humour (and Art) Can Save China” that featured a handful of Chinese avant-garde artists such as Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili.<sup>132</sup> Contemporary Chinese artist Feng Boyi recalls this cultural shift as though it was a domino effect:

It was a quirky circuit: the artists, banned from showing their work in public, had to set up exhibitions in basements and invite people from their own community to viewings. This gave the exhibitions a flavour of mystery. And the more mysterious they seemed, the more foreign reporters came, and the more police would be on the lookout for anything suspicious. In turn, the police presence would attract even more foreign reporters, all of which led to art ‘happenings’, which would attract even more attention from the international media.<sup>133</sup>

The Chinese media was also writing about the art, and described the artistic events in negative terms, calling them “disgusting,” especially in reference to works such as Li

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Andrew Solomon, “Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China.” *New York Times Magazine*, December 19 1993, 42-72.

<sup>133</sup> Feng Boyi, “China Now: Fascination of a Changing World” in *China Now* (Amsterdam: Cobra Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 21.

Shan's *Rouge Flower* (1995) (fig. 1.5) with its homosexual undertones in the silhouettes of males that are strikingly similar to Mao.<sup>134</sup> It was a condemning description of Li's work, but by garnering attention in the media, it also meant that people inside China were able to read about their contemporary art.

By the mid 1990s then, a significant part of the production, exhibition, and reception of Chinese avant-garde art moved to private, nonofficial, foreign-owned galleries within China and exhibitions outside of China.<sup>135</sup> Lu has argued that when those outside of the People's Republic of China became the main supporters and sponsors of Chinese art, there was a shift in cultural production, and it moved from "National culture to a flexible notion of transnationalism, from nationhood to cultural identity."<sup>136</sup> On the other hand, there was growing concern among artists that foreign support was, in fact, not completely beneficial Chinese artists as it often had negative implications for artists' creativity. For example, as artist Zhang Peili, influential figure in contemporary Chinese art, explains:

Many of those who collected the art ended up being foreigners, such as journalists and diplomats, and this was problematic. Because artists began to emulate exactly what was being bought by foreigners in these spaces, as they were told by their teachers that to be successful they needed to copy. And so as a result, much of this period (1990s) lacked any new artistic vision.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Davide Quadrio, "The Rise of Shanghai: Experimental Exhibitions, the shift from painting to photography, video and new media. Sensation to Legitimization." Shanghai: Asian Art Forum conference. November, 2008.

<sup>135</sup> Rising foreign interest, in combination with the opening of galleries and growing popularity of the art abroad, also meant that underground exhibitions were no longer as necessary as they were in the early 1990s, though they still occurred if the work was controversial enough.

<sup>136</sup> Lu, 143.

<sup>137</sup> Zhang Peili, "Chinese Artists in a Chinese Spectacle." China On Display Conference. University of Leiden, Leiden, December 10 2007.

Like Zhang, Quadrio has argued that the new international audience initially motivated artists to become formulaic in their work because doing so provided the means to continue. This affected their work, as it resulted in a lack of local inspiration, a lack of inventiveness and problems articulating what has been called their “Chinese-ness.”<sup>138</sup> Even accomplished artists such as Ai Xuan, brother of Ai Weiwei, succumbed to the temptation of the foreign art market at the time, by reworking his signature styles that had become popular and profitable internationally.<sup>139</sup>

On the other hand, some artists were uneasy with the influx of foreign galleries, and reflected this in their work. For example, Wang Xing Wei’s critique of art for consumption in *The East is Red* (1995) and Yan Li’s *Are You Going to the Exhibition in Germany?* (1996) overtly suggest a sense of scepticism towards all the foreign curators sweeping into town. Wang Xing Wei and Yan Li’s sentiments were not common among artists – or at least, if it was, it was not expressed in their work – but these two artists in particular demonstrate that some viewed foreign interest with trepidation. A similar example of commercial awareness at the time was by the artist Wang Guangyi, who, along with other Chinese artists such as Fang Lijun and Liu Wei, developed the style known as ‘Political Pop’, recognized for its uneasy cheerful unions of communism with luxury brands such as Coca Cola and Chanel, in order to represent the hyper capitalism of contemporary China. Ironically, Wang’s ongoing *Great Criticism* series (1993 to present) such as in *Great Criticism: Coca Cola* (1993) (fig. 1.6), has set and continued to break

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid. “Chinese-ness” is an ambiguous and dynamic descriptor that is generally thought of as a particular and distinct Chinese character or identity that can take on many forms when in context of transnational flows. Andrea Louie, *Chineseness Across Borders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>139</sup> Sullivan, 278.

record prices at international auctions and made him one of the most important figures in the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Zhang argues that the opening of the art market signalled a shift in the cultural identity of Chinese artists. He summarizes the effect of the opening of the art market on the artist as follows: “Prior to the opening of the art market, this identity was still determined by the government,” he opines, “but after it was established, this identity was defined by the outside.”<sup>140</sup> He argues that the outside art market caused contemporary Chinese art not to develop a specific reference point or viewer, and as a result, “artists cannot make the art for the people in China, and the collectors within China, because for the most part they are not interested. Therefore, artists make it for two groups – The West, and Themselves.”<sup>141</sup>

According to international curator Wu Hung, some artists viewed foreign interest as a typical orientalist or colonialist practice, and accused foreigners of “coming to China to ‘pick’ works to support their own views of China and Chinese art.”<sup>142</sup> Art historian John Clark has counter-argued that “Colonial art ceased to be colonial when its forms were used for purposes other than those of the colonial ruler, when its hegemony delinked or came to an end and took different forms in different conditions.”<sup>143</sup> Evidently, as Wu rightly points out, a colonial critique is a difficult one to make, because

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<sup>140</sup> Zhang.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Wu, 161. Wu has curated many seminal exhibitions both in and outside of China, such *Transience: Experimental at the end of the twentieth century* (University of Chicago, 1999); *Between Past, Present and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago Smart Museum of Art, 2004); *The First Guangzhou Triennial* (Guangdong Museum of Art, 1999-2000); and *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000* (Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002).

<sup>143</sup> John Clark “Biennales and the Circulation of Contemporary Chinese Art.” *Yishu* 8:1 (January/February 2009): 32.

in sharp contrast to its success with foreign curators and collectors, Chinese contemporary art was still struggling, to say the least, for basic acceptance at home.<sup>144</sup>

The reality of the matter was that, for better or for worse, audiences outside of China knew more about contemporary Chinese art than those inside, especially as overseas Chinese artists had been participating in exhibitions, biennales, and triennials since the 1980s.<sup>145</sup> In combination with the reaction of foreigners and the international media, peripheral non-official spaces and exhibitions outside of China were the initial means by which Chinese artists gained sales and international recognition. Artists had been looking for an audience that would offer encouragement as an alternative to the institutional system by which they were bound. In these venues the local was able to come into contact with the global, and artists worked within an international context. The question of this impact on the canon remains but on its most basic level, the recontextualization of Chinese art on the part of foreigners – their practices of collecting, exhibiting and writing about contemporary Chinese art according to their definition of Chinese art – have strongly impacted what global audiences have come to expect from Chinese art.<sup>146</sup> How this manifested in exhibitions in particular will be discussed in Chapter Three.

After the success of Chinese contemporary artists at international exhibitions such as the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, the relationship among national culture, foreign interest, and market principles fostered a maturity of creative spirit and spurned an

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> For a historical analysis on the struggle and survival of overseas Chinese artists in the 1990s, see: Hou Hanrou, *On the Mid Ground* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002).

<sup>146</sup> Wu Hung contends that there were both Avantages and disAvantages of recontextualization of contemporary Chinese art. In looking at both sides, he argues that on the one hand, some of the most compelling works have been created in the global sphere. On the other hand, the wide circulation of art in a global audience has caused the art to be removed from its roots and erases its original and historical context. For more information on this debate, see: Wu, 22-8.

interest in collecting activity of contemporary art among Chinese collectors and national institutions in China. This shift can be in part attributed to Chinese politics in 2002, which was the first peaceful transition of leadership in Communist China.<sup>147</sup>

The handover was from President Jiang Zemin to current leader Hu Jintao and the lack of demonstrations surrounding the transfer of power indicated a confidence in the incoming government. New politics under Hu Jintao meant more economic prosperity for China, and more freedom for contemporary Chinese art. In the arts, according to art critic Philip Tianari, this constitutional change created the conditions for “capitalists to be allowed in communist party and video art to be allowed in exhibitions.”<sup>148</sup> In conflating the cultural shifts with the economic, Tianari also shows how freedoms for Chinese artists under the new politics also meant an increase in power for China.

Rather than being perceived as a threat to internal political stability, China’s contemporary culture was perceived as a form of capital and a way of asserting China’s equal status on the world stage.<sup>149</sup> National museums began hosting contemporary art exhibitions as part of their regular programming, national and regional media were permitted to report on contemporary art activities, and China was regularly on the international art scene through participation in major biennales and exhibitions.<sup>150</sup> A significant example of this shift was the governmental involvement in making the 2002 Shanghai Biennale truly international, by approving guest curators Alana Heiss of New

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<sup>147</sup> For more information on the first peaceful power transition in the CCP history, see: Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu, eds. *China's Deep Reform* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 165-175.

<sup>148</sup> Tianari, “Political Pop and Post Tiananmen Trends,” Asian Art Forum.

<sup>149</sup> “Cultural capital”, as Pierre Bourdieu refers to it as, works as a specific indicator that will identify you, or in this case--a nation--as one of a given class. For more on cultural capital and taste indicators, see: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>150</sup> Hou, 33.

York's P.S.1 and Japanese curator Yuko Hasegawa.<sup>151</sup> The landmark event both allowed the general public to become familiar with a number of Chinese who were already popular abroad and established the Shanghai Biennale on international cultural calendars.<sup>152</sup>

A year later in 2003, the Chinese government announced its plan to build 1000 museums across China by the year 2015 with every mid to large sized city having at least one comprehensive museum, according to *China Daily*, the state-controlled media.<sup>153</sup> This plan included thirty-two museums in Beijing in time for the 2008 Olympics, and 100 in Shanghai in time for the World Expo in 2010. However, at the time of the announcement, *The New York Times* opined that the government would be using a large portion of China's foreign currency reserves to fill the museums, as the country is facing what has been called "an acute art shortage."<sup>154</sup> Because the government had not yet established a practice of systematic collecting or protection for art created in the past thirty years, in comparison to private collections, China's national collections did not accurately record the development of Chinese art.<sup>155</sup> The artwork of Chinese artist Wang Jin is an example that may best demonstrate this oversight. Wang has made nine versions of his most famous work *A Chinese Dream* (1997) (fig. 1.7) a contemporary take on a Peking Opera costume considered by international curator Wu Hung to be one of the

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<sup>151</sup> Smith, 410.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Wang Shanshan and Yang Yingshi, "Experts Muse Over Museums," 22 July 2004, *China Daily*. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/22/content\\_350500.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/22/content_350500.htm) (accessed 9 November 2008).

<sup>154</sup> About \$711 billion, according to Craig Copetas, "China is Racing to Get its Art Treasures Back," October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/13/world/asia/13iht-china.html> (accessed 12 December 2008).

<sup>155</sup> Chris Gill, "Meet China's Top Collector of Contemporary Art," *The Art Newspaper*, July-August 2008. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Meet-China-s-top-collector-of-contemporary-art/8658> (accessed 29 September, 2008). Curator Carol Yinghua Lu observed this conundrum for contemporary art in national institutions in China in 2008 by observing that: "Currently, there aren't any state-run museums dedicated to contemporary art in China." Carol Yinghua Lu, "Trans-Siberian Express," *Frieze Magazine*, 29 September 2008. [http://www.frieze.com/issue/print\\_article/trans\\_siberian\\_express/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/trans_siberian_express/) (accessed 27 July 2009).

most “iconic” pieces of contemporary Chinese art. As it stands, three pieces are touring America, five have entered private collections in Switzerland and France, and one belongs to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan. Not one can be found in China.<sup>156</sup>

The case of *A Chinese Dream* is instructive because it demonstrates that, on the one hand, dealers and collectors have often led the way in shaping the perception of contemporary Chinese art outside of China, and on the other hand, their support has resulted in the lack of opportunities for audiences in China today to engage with what are considered to be their “canonical” works.<sup>157</sup> The marked absence of important works such as “A Chinese Dream” in China is the sorts of realizations curators, critics, and artists are currently dealing with in China. As international curator Hou Hanru summarizes, “In contrast to the 1990s, the official acceptance of contemporary art now seems to put everyone in an embarrassing position. Now the ‘enemy’ seems to have turned into a new ‘friend.’”<sup>158</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

In China and other developing nations, a new paradigm of canon formation has developed where its mechanisms work in a much broader global context. The confrontation of the reality of China’s contemporary canon by Official China came after the international recognition of Chinese artists, which created a significant shift in China’s recognition of their contemporary art. While Official China previously thought of

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<sup>156</sup> Wu Hung, “*A Chinese Dream* by Wang Jin,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 124.

<sup>157</sup> It also reflects larger questions on art canons and whether individuals have the right to own artworks believed to be national treasures. Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

contemporary Chinese art as something to be simply brushed aside or denied, in the early twenty first century, the art was ushered into the realm of “national culture” by the Chinese government that recognized its value to the outside world. As a result, the overall pattern of collecting contemporary Chinese art by national museums in China demonstrates both a fragmented presentation as to the history of contemporary Chinese art, and highlights the role of private collections in satisfying their discrepancy.<sup>159</sup>

Currently, even as the market for Chinese art has calmed down over the past two years (2008 and 2009), the canon appears to be divided into two opposing realms of support and influence--the initial and ongoing support of private collectors, curators and art critics--and the newcomer to the field-- official support and mainland collectors. Though China is currently trying to rectify its national collection, the variables in their canon formation emerged in China due to a lack of support by institutions and mainland collectors.<sup>160</sup> What occurred in non-official spaces and in the activities of foreign collectors serves to demonstrate that artistic canons can, in principle and practice, develop and progress without full support from the state.

In considering how the mechanics of private collectors contributed to China’s canon formation, further questions are raised. Who is speaking for China and what do the narratives of these collections inform us not only about China, but also about their owners? How have these collections influenced others in or outside of China and how are they framed? Finally, how does the Chinese art canon reflect new collecting patterns

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<sup>159</sup> Hou, 33.

<sup>160</sup> The slowdown of Chinese art sales on the market is largely attributed to the financial crisis of late 2008, though as of mid 2009 there are speculations of recovery, which suggests that that Chinese contemporary art will have a long term presence on the market. William Dowell, “Chinese Art-Not a Bust,” 23 July 2009, *Global Post*. <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/china/090722/chinese-contemporary-art> (accessed 27 July 2009).

in the global art world? These questions will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter by focusing on one of the most powerful collections of contemporary Chinese art – that of Swiss collector Uli Sigg.

## Chapter Two

### The Uli Sigg Collection of Contemporary Chinese Art

In most fields of art, the collector and institution have worked alongside each other in order to deepen the knowledge about a particular art or period, or for financial speculation. As outlined in the previous chapter, in the case of contemporary Chinese art, this relationship has thus far been a game of catch up, with private collectors in China having assumed a role of great responsibility in disseminating knowledge about the art to the outside world before most other systems were in place to do so. The most significant collection to do so was that of Uli Sigg. This chapter will demonstrate that, as one of the first and largest collections of contemporary Chinese art, the Sigg Collection has also arguably been one of the most influential on the canon.

Art historian Susan Vogel once remarked in the case of African Art, “more often than not it has been the collector who led the institution (museum or university) to become involved in African Art.”<sup>161</sup> This chapter argues that the same relationship between the collector and institution exists in contemporary Chinese art by revealing how the Sigg Collection in particular brought Chinese art to the attention of collectors and institutions around the world. The collection is discussed as being influential in the following ways: first, by pioneering the field; second, by shaping the contemporary Chinese art collections of others; and third, by exposing itself to institutions and audiences internationally. The chapter begins by considering how the Sigg Collection

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<sup>161</sup> Susan Vogel as quoted in Christopher B. Steiner, “The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness” in *Art History and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield, 133 (London: Routledge, 2002).

actively promoted and disseminated its idea of canonical works through the collection's inception, development, and circulation (aside from its participation in exhibitions, which will be the focus in the next chapter). This analysis is intended to reveal how the Sigg Collection predominantly guided the formation of taste and construction of aesthetic value in contemporary Chinese art, thereby making the private collection a considerable influence on the canon. As art historian Christopher Steiner once opined of private collections, they are "an institutional cycle responsible for the reproduction of aesthetics norms and ideals."<sup>162</sup>

### ***"Mere Exposure"***

In order for a collection to influence the canon it cannot be shy. The more the collection circulates, the more its artworks are exhibited, read and written about, the more likely they will enter the canon. James Cutting has argued for the relationship between exposure and canonization in his study on the canon of Impressionist art.<sup>163</sup> In his work, Cutting determined that the most significant variable to influence the canon is exposure or "mere exposure," which is the precise term that Cutting appropriated from work of Robert Zajonc in the field of psychology in the late 1960s. In Cutting's work, *Partisan Canons*, he explains how, through a series of experiments, Zajonc was able to prove that the more time a word, an image, or a sound was repeated, the more time the subject registered that it was good rather than bad. This worked to demonstrate the validity of

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<sup>162</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness" in *Art History and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield, 133 (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>163</sup> James Cutting, "Mere Exposure, Reproduction and the Impressionist Canon" in *Partisans Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski, 79-94 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

mere exposure effect. In other words, the more times we see something, the more times we like it.<sup>164</sup>

Cutting used this experiment in reference to the development of the Impressionists art canon and came to a similar conclusion that “repeated exposure to particular images creates and reinforces preferences.”<sup>165</sup> The canon of contemporary Chinese art, like that of the Impressionists, has also developed and been confirmed through a repeated dissemination of images, but mostly on the part of private collectors. In this chapter, Cutting’s mere exposure theory will be considered in order to assess the ways in which the Sigg Collection influenced the canon and has continued to do so by revealing its particular vision of Chinese art to the world through social and institutional connections, such as other private collectors, the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) and the “Mahjong” exhibition catalogue.

### ***Uli Sigg***

Uli Sigg regards his time in China to be “the most unique and important chapter” of his life, one he considers filled with rich and varied experiences.<sup>166</sup> Sigg (fig 2.1) was born in 1946 and grew up in a wealthy home in Switzerland. He did not have any formal art training nor did he study art professionally, and was more inclined to athletics than arts. He went on to study Law at the University of Zurich where he graduated in 1976 with a doctoral degree. After completing his studies, Sigg was briefly employed as a journalist

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>166</sup> Ai Weiwei, “The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns of Chinese Contemporary Art” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 14 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

and editor for Swiss newspapers and magazines, and it was in 1977 that Sigg had his first encounter with China.

From 1977 to 1990 Sigg worked in the Swiss company Schindler Lifts (a manufacturer of escalators and elevators) where he held positions as Area Manager for the Asia Pacific and later Member of the Group Executive Committee and Shareholders Board. In 1979, in order to secure negotiations on the part of the Schindler group, Sigg went to China as a young businessman, and had no idea what he would find: “Before I visited Beijing in 1979, as representative for the Schindler company,” he said, “I didn’t think this country, a thousand kilometres away from me, had any link with my life.”<sup>167</sup> The trip would ultimately result in the first joint venture between China and the West (1980), in large part due to Sigg’s careful negotiations with the Chinese.<sup>168</sup> Ai Weiwei considers Sigg as having played a significant role in China’s economic and cultural transformations, describing him in the “Mahjong” catalogue as “An important participant in and reliable witness to the modern reform and opening up of China...Uli Sigg has a pivotal influence on mutual understanding, communication and cooperation between the East and West in the political, economic, and cultural spheres.”<sup>169</sup> Significantly, the

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<sup>167</sup> Wang Jie, “The Collector,” 15 June 2004, *The Shanghai Daily*.

<http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/list.asp?id=73&type=&page=52> (accessed 29 May 2009).

<sup>168</sup> The business enterprise would also go on to become a model to the West, demonstrating that a Western company could invest in China without risk and even transmit the latest technology. As outlined in Chapter One, at the time China was re-opening to the world after a long period of suffocating social control instigated in the 1960s by Mao. In general, Western businesses had been hesitant to invest as they had lingering doubts that China was too unstable to invest in. Roger Strange, Jim Slater and Wang Limin, eds., *Trade and Investment in China: The European Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>169</sup> Ai Weiwei, “The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns of Chinese Contemporary Art” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 14 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

exchange also marked the beginning of Sigg's lifetime affair with contemporary art in China.<sup>170</sup>

It was during Sigg's first business trips to China in the 1980s when he began looking for a contemporary Chinese art. He decided to do so after realizing that China was a country vastly different from his own: "It was a strange one, with a very different type of art," Sigg explained about his first time in China.<sup>171</sup> But in 1980s China, this art was difficult to find, as the contemporary art movement had only started a few years before after China re-opened its doors to the world, and the work was rarely exhibited in public. Sigg noted that it was particularly complicated for him to seek out contemporary Chinese art because as both a foreigner and person of importance, he was accompanied or watched around the clock. At that time in China "one would be conspicuous everywhere."<sup>172</sup> Because he did not want to compromise the venture between the Schindler Group and China, Sigg opted not to begin collecting until he left the company in 1990.

Though he retained his seat on the board, Sigg left Schindler Lifts in order to become the Chairman of the Board of Ringer Group, a Swiss publishing group, and to serve on the boards of other global companies, including ones in China. Because these various positions meant he was no longer being surveyed by the government, Sigg found he was able to visit artists' studios with ease, and it was not long until he acquired his

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<sup>170</sup> Though the exchange was looked upon as "madness" at the time by other businesses in the West, the relationship was considered of great importance for both sides. Sigg was a formative figure in this venture, and he has said that it greatly affected his relationship with China. Sigg, interview with the author. Shanghai, China, 10 November 2008.

<sup>171</sup> Wang Jie, "The Collector," 15 June 2004, *Shanghai Daily*.

<http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/list.asp?id=73&type=&page=52> (accessed 29 May 2009).

<sup>172</sup> Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, "Access to China" in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 17 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

first piece of contemporary Chinese art – a triptych of a tulip similar to Georgia O'Keeffe and painted by a young woman artist whose work Sigg wanted to promote.<sup>173</sup>

Sigg's change of employment in combination with the growing influx of foreigners in China in the 1990s made him less conspicuous in China, allowing him to move about more freely. Visiting artists' studios was now no longer out of the question. However, accessing the art still proved to be difficult. There was limited information circulating in this decade about experimental art exhibitions, and only a few galleries or art dealers to buy from. As indicated in the previous chapter, it was difficult for contemporary Chinese artists to exhibit their work at the time, with the majority of exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art occurring in peripheral spaces, such as embassies, hotels, and homes of diplomats up until the mid to late 1990s. If not there, word of mouth would spread among the foreign compound and circles as to where the underground exhibitions would be held. Contemporary Chinese artists depended largely on the support of foreigners, and having their work exposed to a wealthy foreigner like Sigg was essential to their survival.

Fortunately for Sigg and Chinese artists, his reputation as a collector spread quickly – simply because there were not very many at the time with his dedication – and he was soon a sought-after guest at these events. With no substantial gallery system in place, the process by which Sigg acquired work was quite simple: artists who had been introduced to Sigg by friends in China would then introduce him to other artists. This resulted in Sigg's integration into the greater artistic scene in China at the time, one that was remained primarily underground, and one to which not many were privy: "I gained a

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<sup>173</sup> Helen Chang, "Why I Buy, Collectors Reveal What Drives Them," *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 January 2008. [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB11999526879881729.html?mod=googlenews\\_wsj](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB11999526879881729.html?mod=googlenews_wsj) (accessed 12 February 2009).

reputation,” he noted, “I was the only crazy person who was doing this at the time. But I was the market for quite some time, so artists would come find me.”<sup>174</sup>

Even though his reputation meant that artists started to come directly to Sigg, he still enjoyed going to see the artists in their studios or to meet with them through friends. Sigg recalls his experience in going to the artist’s studios as follows:

It was very hard, you had to mount very many staircases, but somebody had to do it. Now there is a need for complete transparency. Ten years ago, you wouldn’t know what artists were up to unless you went to visit them, because there were no internet, catalogues or anything to access the work.<sup>175</sup>

Though acquiring the work was a challenge, Sigg had the opportunity to access to China’s contemporary art while many others (foreign and Chinese) did not. The reputation of the Sigg Collection to artists in China provides an important example of the role of the cultural climate in the formation of a canon. If Sigg had not been one of the first to collect at a time when Official China was not supporting the artists and other systems like dealers and galleries were not securely in place yet, would they have been so eager to come to him? His ambition in acquiring the artwork was widely admired by many artists and resulted in the growth of his collection. Their loyalty to Sigg can be seen in the numerous portraits Chinese artists have done of Sigg over the years, such as Zhou Tiehai’s *Uli Sigg* (2002) and Chang Xugong’s *Portrait of Uli Sigg* (2005) (fig. 2.2), that depicts Sigg as a congress delegation member dressed in traditional Chinese attire.

It would not be long, though, until a new endeavour would significantly alter the way in which Sigg went about amassing his artwork. In 1995, shortly after he began collecting steadily, the Swiss federal government selected Sigg to be the Ambassador to China, North Korea, and Mongolia. Sigg had never thought about being a diplomat, but

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<sup>174</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

when the offer came to him, he said that he could not see a reason to decline.<sup>176</sup> Sigg held the position of ambassador for four years, from 1995-1999, which corresponds to his busiest collecting period. Because the position meant that he had to travel all over China for official duties, Sigg had the opportunity to cast the net far and wide.<sup>177</sup>

Initially for Sigg, the constant surveillance from Official China because of his position as ambassador hindered his collection rather than helped him. He viewed contemporary Chinese art as something that was dangerous to expose himself to in view of Official China, its government and foreign ministry. Yet as an ambassador, Sigg would have been exposed to contemporary Chinese art more than the majority of Chinese would have been. As an ambassador, Sigg visited artists outside the main city centres when he travelled to various cities in China. In order to continue collecting, Sigg took advantage of this opportunity by looking up what artists he could meet outside of work engagements, and met with hundreds of them.<sup>178</sup> Ai Weiwei has stated the following of Sigg's collecting extensive collecting habits: "This Swiss has become a very strange phenomenon in China. He has been to every corner of the country, in regions where I would never go, to put together the most complete and detailed collection of Chinese art in the world."<sup>179</sup> By contrast, the majority of Chinese and foreigners still had difficulty travelling about freely due to governmental restrictions at the time. Thus in being an

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<sup>176</sup> Pollack, "A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China," section E, page 1, column 3.

<sup>177</sup> "A Private Research on Western Collectors," *DSL Collection*, 30 April 2008.

[http://www.nps.gov/abli/.http://www.g1expo.com/fiche\\_home?id=18](http://www.nps.gov/abli/.http://www.g1expo.com/fiche_home?id=18) (accessed 28 January 2009).

<sup>178</sup> Sigg has said that he did not want to compromise Switzerland's reputation by using official trips to visit artists, no matter how tempting, so in order to access the kind of work he wanted to collect Sigg continued to visit the artists in their studios directly, but said he followed professional protocol by not doing so while on official watch. Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>179</sup> "Modern China comes to life through art," *Swiss Info*, June 2005.

[http://194.6.181.127/eng/In\\_depth/detail/Modern\\_China\\_comes\\_to\\_life\\_through\\_art.html?siteSect=107&sd=5875901&cKey=1120461540000](http://194.6.181.127/eng/In_depth/detail/Modern_China_comes_to_life_through_art.html?siteSect=107&sd=5875901&cKey=1120461540000) (accessed 8 June 2008).

ambassador, this position allotted Sigg greater access to the artistic scene than other potential collectors.

Only in the 1990s did domestic tourism for Chinese begin to be regarded by the government as both an important part of the service industry, and a vital element in the ideological switch for Chinese from rural socialism to urban consumerism.<sup>180</sup> Foreigners were limited to visit designated places in China by the government, with entry permits issued by the government only after careful checking to ensure that tourists did not go to areas that the government considered unsuitable. In 1994 travel permits were still necessary to tour China and it was only possible to visit 100 designated areas. In 1995, only 20 percent of tourists went outside the main city centres (Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an) and that was up from 11 percent in 1988.<sup>181</sup> These sorts of restrictions gradually changed with the opening up of China, though foreigners rarely went into the interior of China.<sup>182</sup>

In Sigg's view, such a restriction on travel meant that both the average Chinese and foreigner had limited knowledge about China thereby putting him in a more fitting position to collect.<sup>183</sup> However, perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the opportunity to have acquired artwork in remote areas of China meant that his collecting habits were broader than the majority of collectors at the time. For instance, collector Howard Farber built his collection in the 1980s and 1990s with the help of consultant Karen Smith, who was then considered a leading contemporary Chinese art connoisseur. Farber did not

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<sup>180</sup> Janet Cochrane, *Asian Tourism* (Elsevier Science: Netherlands, 2008), 137.

<sup>181</sup> Julie Jie Wen and Clement Allan Tisdell, *Tourism and China's Development: Policies, Regional Economic Growth and Ecotourism* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2001), 124.

<sup>182</sup> According to the same article, it wasn't until 1995 that Beijing opened itself up to tourists. Jules Quartly, "Moving Forward, Looking Back," 6 December 2007, *China Daily*.

<http://www.china.org.cn/english/LivinginChina/234517.htm> (accessed 8 March 2009).

<sup>183</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

travel much in remote areas of China and did the majority of his collecting in Beijing.<sup>184</sup>

Because both collector and expert did not travel to remote areas of China, the collection lacks Sigg's diversity.<sup>185</sup>

Sigg credits his fortune in being able to amass remote works to his reputation in China, which provided a certain tolerance of his collecting activities. For instance, Sigg's occupation meant the foreign ministry in China was aware of all of Sigg's activities: that he was going to exhibitions in non diplomatic spaces, meeting with underground artists and collecting their work—activities that were, for the most part, discouraged.<sup>186</sup> And yet Official China did not intervene. According to Sigg, this was due to his reputation of having a long-standing positive relationship with China. He describes the mutual understanding as follows:

They let me do it because I was not just an ambassador, but also a person with a reputation as a great friend of China. I brought the first joint venture company between China and the West, and supported the open door policy as early as 1980 in many speeches, when Western companies were extremely hesitant to invest or transfer technology to China. So they let me do my thing.<sup>187</sup>

“Doing his thing” meant that Sigg had the opportunity to seek out some of the first and most important works of contemporary Chinese art that were considered lost. For instance, by adding his atelier tours onto his official ones, Sigg was able to track down work from the historic and controversial 1989 “China/Avant-Garde” exhibit.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Barbara Pollack, “The Chinese Art Explosion,” *Art News*, September 2008.

[http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art\\_id=2542&current=True](http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2542&current=True) (accessed 8 March 2009).

<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, it is still to be considered a successful collection financially, as Farber's tireless visits to artists' studios in Beijing in the late 1980 resulted in an acclaimed collection of more than a 100 works that sold for \$20 million dollars at auction in 2007. *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>187</sup> Uli Sigg, “China on Display Connection,” email to the author, 12 February 2008.

<sup>188</sup> The exhibit was both important and controversial. According to art critic Li Xianting, because Chinese avant garde artists were finally allowed to exhibit their works in the most important art institution in the country (National Art Gallery in Beijing), the exhibition was viewed by artists as a significant and progressive culmination of the past decade (1980s) of artistic expression in China. However, the response

After the controversial closing of the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, the majority of artists hid or destroyed their works for fear of being punished by authorities. Sigg was confident that the work still existed and, while on business, he tracked them down in artist’s studios around China. He discovered that some of the artists in “China/Avant-Garde” had sold their work to Wang Luyan, an artist who had been in the exhibition and believed these works would one day have historic value.<sup>189</sup> That day had seemingly come when Sigg was able to convince Wang Luyan to sell the work in order to add them to his collection. Significant works from “China/Avant-Garde” that became part of the Sigg Collection include Geng Jianyi’s *The Second Situation* (1987) (fig. 1.2), a depiction of four large grimacing faces that challenges the forced happiness plastered on old Cultural Revolution posters; and Wang Guangyi’s *Behind Bars* (1986) (fig 2.3) which was one of the first satirical portraits of Mao which depicts Mao as either a warden of the state or captive.

Sigg also sought out works from China’s Cultural Revolution years (1966-1976), believing the era to be an important precursor to the history of contemporary Chinese art. To find the work, Sigg located long-forgotten Cultural Revolutionist artists in Shenyang (a centre for the production of propagandistic art during the era) where artists had been hiding their works behind their walls or under their beds since Mao’s death for fear of

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of the exhibition was not so positive. The first day of the exhibition, artists Xiao Lu and Tang Song performed their Happening, "Two Gunshots Fired at the Installation a dialogue" wherein they fired at their art piece. Both artists were arrested and “China/Avant-Garde” was shut down hours after it opened. It reopened again a few days later only to suffer the same fate when, under the guise of another Happening, a bomb threat was delivered to the local police station. Many view the shooting incident and the subsequent closure of the show as a precursor to the Tiananmen Square massacre that occurred only four months later. The strong and swift opposition to the exhibition also demonstrated that Official China was still not accepting of its contemporary art. For a further discussion on the controversial exhibition, see Li Xianting, “China/Avant-Garde Art Exhibition,” *Chinese art.com*. <http://www.chinese-art.com/volume2issue2/image100/feature/feature1.htm> (accessed August 4 2009).

<sup>189</sup> Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 16 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

condemnation or reprisal.<sup>190</sup> Sigg believed that the works from the Cultural Revolution had a formative influence on contemporary Chinese artists that grew up in the midst of it (those artists born in the 1960s), which made the work fundamental in comprehending the aesthetic strategies of contemporary Chinese artists. He thus purchased a number of Socialist Realist paintings, and began compiling what would soon be the world's largest collection of Mao propaganda posters and paper cuts, many executed by famous artists. For instance, Sigg acquired the original painting of Sun Guoqi and Zhang Hongzhan's *Divert the Water from the Milky Way* (1973-1947) (fig. 2.4) which is a Socialist Realist image that depicts people old and young valiantly striving in the snow to build an aqueduct; a poster of it once hung in almost every Chinese apartment.<sup>191</sup>

Peripheral influences also interested Sigg, particularly those in North Korea. As a result, there are a few North Korean works in Sigg's collection, such as Pak Yong Chol's *Untitled* (1994-2004)—an image of Kim Jong II, which typifies the painting style popular during the Cultural Revolution in China that is still current in North Korea.<sup>192</sup> Their addition to Sigg's collection of contemporary Chinese art is perhaps because China once shared a similar artistic style of Socialist Realism when it was under Mao (1949-1976) and shortly afterwards. According to Sigg, he collected North Korean work because it both "fascinated him as an object," and is a "document of an era that will not return."<sup>193</sup> In addition, by collecting works of social realism this meant he not only collected unofficial art, but also its official brother.<sup>194</sup> More probable though, is that Sigg's position

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Marc Spiegler, "Treasure Island." *Art Review*, November 2004, 103.

<sup>192</sup> Specific amount of North Korean art in the Sigg Collection is unknown.

<sup>193</sup> Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, "Access to China" in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 17 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

as the Swiss ambassador to North Korea (1995-1999) in addition to China and Mongolia meant that he had the opportunity to access artwork that not many could. As an art collector, this exclusiveness would be difficult to surpass.

Sigg's participation in China's economic and cultural shifts gave him governmental consent to access a part of China to collect such far ranging works that he might not have been able to otherwise. Sigg's position as a "peripheral" subject of a nation is similar to what author Aihwa Ong has coined as one of "flexible citizenship." According to Ong, flexible citizens have a significant amount of economic and imaginative agency as they engage in the construction of a nation during global capitalism. As she writes: "In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favouring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes."<sup>195</sup> Thus peripheral subjects such as Sigg may have had more opportunity to react and to take advantage of the changing political-economic condition of a changing nation – like China – than its citizens.

Indeed, the timing of Sigg's collection forming while China was emerging out of a state of long isolation is significant. In the early to mid 1990s, contemporary Chinese art galleries and auction houses were just beginning to be established and the prices of the artwork were far from the astounding heights that they would be in the next decade. This meant that Sigg was able to afford an expansive collection, one that he (and most collectors) would be financially incapable of putting together today. It was an era for

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<sup>195</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 6.

collectors in China that will never be repeated again. As Sigg opinions, “A collector has no way to do this anywhere else, and it will not be done again.”<sup>196</sup>

Today, the Sigg Collection of contemporary Chinese art consists of approximately 2000 pieces from over 250 different Chinese artists.<sup>197</sup> Beginning in the early 1990s, after almost two decades of collecting, Sigg has visited over a thousand artists in order to acquire their work. The majority of the work is avant-garde with political themes.<sup>198</sup> It is a broad selection of works, and includes sketches, videos, photographs, paintings, and a few larger installation pieces. Though Sigg will not reveal the specifics of who is in his collection for fear of his influence on the art market, highlights includes artworks by well known artists such as Xu Bing’s *Book from The Sky* (1989) (fig. 2.5), Ai Weiwei’s Map of China (2003) (fig. 2.6), Yue Minjun’s *Everybody Connects to Everybody* (1997) (fig. 2.7), Zhang Huan’s *Family Tree* (2000) (fig. 2.8), Weng Fen’s *On the Wall, Guangzhou (II)* (2002) (fig. 2.9), Wang Guangyi *Materialist (Two Women)* (1999) (fig. 2.10) and Fang Lijun’s *Untitled* (1995) (fig. 2.11).<sup>199</sup> The work ranges from the 1970s to 2004, though the predominant focus of the collection is on the early period of contemporary Chinese art (mid 1980s to late 1990s and early 2000), which means it shows a grand

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<sup>196</sup> April Austen, “China’s Irrepressible Art Scene,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 27 March 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0327/p13s01-alar.html?page=2> (accessed 29 March 2009).

<sup>197</sup> *Mahjong Contemporary Chinese art from the Sigg Collection.*” Press release for exhibition at Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, September 10 2008- January 4 2009. <http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/press/release/TXT0224> (accessed 23 July 2009).

<sup>198</sup> As explained in Footnote 3 of Chapter 1, from 1979 to 1989, experimental art was labeled “avant garde art” because it was denied official recognition in China, and then throughout most of the 1990s it took an underground format. To reiterate, according to Berghuis, it was only after the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale that experimental art in China was accepted by officials and assumed into the mainstream and thus shed the title “avant garde” for “contemporary art” instead. Berghuis, 153. Thus the description “avant-garde” for the majority of the work in the Sigg Collection means that the majority of the artwork was largely produced in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>199</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

narrative of influences and generations of contemporary Chinese artists, such as socialist paintings and paper cuts from the Cultural Revolution and even earlier.<sup>200</sup>

The influence and size of the Sigg Collection has meant that Sigg is also regarded as a powerful person in the field of contemporary Chinese art. Sigg's presence in *ArtReview's 100 Most Powerful People in Art* in 2006 and 2007 attests to his power outside of China.<sup>201</sup> Although not on the list in the past two years (he has been eclipsed by other private collectors of contemporary Chinese art, such as Guy and Miriam Ullens in 2007, the Swiss couple who are also considered to have one of the largest collections of contemporary Chinese art) he still remains at the top of the list of collectors in China.<sup>202</sup> Sigg has secured his position among them by having his collection publicly accessible both in and outside of China by participating in exhibitions worldwide and establishing the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) which has gained him considerable power inside China.

The CCAA was established in 1998, is awarded biannually to Chinese contemporary artists living in China, and has since become an institution in of itself. Uli Sigg describes the award as follows:

The purpose of setting up the CCAA was to encourage these Chinese artists who show originality and peculiar talents in artistic creation...the Association intends to enhance people's awareness and appreciation of the constructive role that Chinese artists are playing in the development of the contemporary culture.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> "A Private Research on Western Collectors," *DSL Collection*, 30 April 2008.

<http://www.nps.gov/abli/>.[http://www.g1expo.com/fiche\\_home?id=18](http://www.g1expo.com/fiche_home?id=18) (accessed 28 January 2009).

<sup>201</sup> "ArtReview Magazine: The Power 100," *ArtReview Magazine*, <http://www.artreview.com/power100> (accessed 23 June 2009).

<sup>202</sup> Along with such Western collectors as the Ullens, Americans Kent and Vicki Logan and the Swiss Urs Meile, and Chinese collectors Guan Yi, Zhang Rui and Johnson Chang "Power 100" a list of the 100 most important people in contemporary Chinese art in 2008, according to Andrew James Art, private foreign gallery in Shanghai, China. Andrew James, "Power 100," *Andrew James Art*, 2008.

<http://www.andrewjamesart.com/power100.htm> (accessed 24 June 2009).

<sup>203</sup> Uli Sigg as quoted in "Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA): Who Are the Winners?," *Arfactsnet*.

The award primarily differentiates itself from other awards of contemporary Chinese art by encouraging young artists in China itself. It is also one of only two prizes in China that is awarded on a regular basis to Chinese artists, with a mandate to foster talent.<sup>204</sup> In 2008 the CCAA began supporting young critics as well by offering a scholarship as a prize, and is open to all critics in China, both foreign and Chinese.

Though the CCAA is one of the first of its kind in China, its establishment has initiated a lasting debate on whether a foreigner has the right to judge the quality of China's art. Shanghai's daily newspaper, *Shanghai Daily*, wondered if Sigg's "outsider" status is heavy-handed by asking such questions as: "Yet doesn't the fact that one person – and a foreigner – has such a great influence on Chinese art make people uncomfortable?" and "How is it possible that one man's personal preference has led Chinese contemporary art?"<sup>205</sup> In the article, Sigg responded to the accusation by noting that at the CCAA he is surrounded by Chinese art experts.<sup>206</sup> Moreover, as Sigg put it,

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<http://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/instInfo/inst/6435/contentType/news/nID/2907/lang/1> (accessed 29 June 2009).

<sup>204</sup> For an elaboration on the CCAA mandate, see: Bernhard Fibicher, "Cultural Partnerships, May More: On the Reception of Contemporary Chinese Art in the West," in *Mahjong*, 46. The other most prestigious one being the Chinese Art Prize, or CAP, which was established by Art Scene China in 2005, a foreign run gallery in Shanghai. Like the CCAA, the award's mandate is to encourage and promote emerging artists in China. Its jury is also compromised of art experts from both in and outside of China. "Chinese Art Prize" <http://www.chineseartprize.com/> (accessed 27 July 2009).

<sup>205</sup> Wang Jie, "The Collector," 15 June 2004, *Shanghai Daily*.

<http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/list.asp?id=73&type=&page=52> (accessed 29 May 2009).

<sup>206</sup> The jury has been made up of such art experts as the art critic Yi Yang, artists Ai Weiwei and Li Zianting, and curator Harald Szeemann, Hou Hanru and Alanna Heiss. Sigg has always been present on the jury. Fibicher, "Cultural Partnerships, Maybe More: On the Reception of Contemporary Chinese Art in the West" in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 46 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

"That is overestimating my power...I am not the sole influence – fully half the CCAA jury members are Chinese curators."<sup>207</sup>

This sort of commentary appears to be concerned with critiquing and challenging colonial practice of collecting in the past.<sup>208</sup> Enticing as it is to argue that Western initiatives such as the CCAA and private collectors mirror earlier imperialistic practice, oversimplifying past and present collecting practices is problematic. Conflating understandings of historical and contemporary collecting practices reduces the complexity of the current situation and creates insensitivity to changes that have occurred in the social and spatial dynamics of collecting throughout time.<sup>209</sup>

Part of the complexity in comparing regional or ethnic specific colonial collecting to today is because contemporary art has to be considered in the context of globalization, which has produced the murky terms “international” art, “global” art, and “local” artists. For example, since the 1990s select contemporary Chinese artists have been able to go back and forth between other countries and China. In these other countries, Chinese artists would learn about Western art practices and exhibitions, which according to Wu Hung made these Chinese artists members of a global art community and many of them thoroughly Westernized even though they primarily associated themselves with China.

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<sup>207</sup> Wang Jie, “The Collector,” 15 June 2004, *Shanghai Daily*.

<http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/list.asp?id=73&type=&page=52> (accessed on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

<sup>208</sup> The critical discourse around the practice of colonial collecting includes the works of important scholars such as Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) and Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The deconstructing of various modes of arguments such as Said’s orientalism are implicit in an overall understanding of this dominance and how these infiltrate and influence cultures. While this project respects this discourse, it will not be possible to approach the issue of colonial collecting in the past in comparison to the present in full detail here. For more on the debate as to how collecting practices fit in with a modern way of knowing, see: Simon J. Knell, ed. *Museums and the Future of Collecting* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) and Bruce Althuser, ed. *Collecting the New* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994) a collection of essays on contemporary collecting and display in museums that includes a consideration of contemporary ethnic-specific collecting.

<sup>209</sup> Charles Zerner “The Fate of the Collections” in *People, Plants and Justice*, ed. Charles Zerner, 381-2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Ironically, as Wu points out, their deep bond with China was encouraged by participation in international exhibitions.<sup>210</sup> Following Wu's argument concerning the two identities of contemporary Chinese artists, a question for collections of contemporary Chinese art is not so much if they can adequately represent "local" Chinese artists rather than "global" Chinese artists, but rather how can the collection internalize these two geo-cultural identities productively?<sup>211</sup>

Additionally, ethnic-specific contemporary collections in western institutions today will not develop in the very one-sided way that they did in the past. Asian Art Historian Vishakha N. Desai argues that one of the main differences between colonial collecting of Asian art and contemporary Asian art collecting is that when large collections of Asian art were being formed by American collectors (and by extension, American art museums) a century ago, most Asian countries were not in the position to counter or combat wholesale transfers of their cultural heritage.<sup>212</sup> Today, however, with the rise in economic power in the majority of Asian countries, Asian art has a domestic market of its own, one to which she believes museums will pay closer attention when considering acquisitions for their own collections.<sup>213</sup>

And finally, author on contemporary Chinese art Sarah Miltenberger argues that although Western interest in Chinese arts is considered by some as an interference in the Chinese handling of their arts, that interest should not be aligned with colonial practice or an exertion of imperial power of the past but rather, at the least, as an opportunity to

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<sup>210</sup> Wu, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, 160.

<sup>211</sup> For a further discussion on the global/local politics of contemporary Chinese art, see: Wu, 55-62.

<sup>212</sup> Vishakha N. Desai, "Beyond the "Authentic-Exotic": Collecting Contemporary Asian Art in the Twenty-First Century" in *Collecting the New* ed. Bruce Althuser, 110 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

learn, teach, and excite the world about this emerging field of art, an important part of China's landscape.<sup>214</sup> As she explains:

Art censorship still prevails in today's China. Therefore, even today, contemporary Chinese art must rise to the challenge presented by the lack of adequate exhibition possibilities in their homeland. For this reason, Western initiatives like the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) which former Swiss Ambassador Uli Sigg created, should lead to discourse rather than be understood as a Western compromise with those in power or as a Western acceptance of Chinese art.<sup>215</sup>

However, it could also be argued that Sigg's award is motivated by his interest in maintaining and propagating his vision of contemporary Chinese art. Sigg created the biennial award as a way to introduce juries of influential curators (such as Alanna Heiss of "New York's PS1") to the scene. Indeed, whether they were acquired before or after the award, all of the artists that have won the CCAA are now in the Sigg Collection.<sup>216</sup> Here I argue that the international exposure that comes with the award –through publicity, writing about it, and exhibitions of the artworks – results in both financial gain for Sigg as well as the canonization of those particular artworks.<sup>217</sup>

Regarding the concept of exposure and canon formation, art historian Russell Ferguson has argued that "[e]very act of writing or curatorial practice, whenever it gets to the point of naming a name, is participating in a certain level of canon formation, no matter the intent of the author, no matter whether it represents a challenge to the status

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<sup>214</sup> Sarah Miltenburger, "China's Contemporary Art Scene- The Question of Collective Identities" in *Cultran, Views of Art*, eds. Arthur Engelbert, Maike Pagel, Wolf Borchers, 225 (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen and Neumann, 2005).

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> For a list of past winners (up until 2006), see: Fibicher, "Cultural Partnerships, Maybe More: On the Reception of Contemporary Chinese Art in the West" in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 46 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>217</sup> For additional information on awards and their impact on the art market, see Michael Reid, *How to Buy and Sell Art* (London: Allen and Unwin, 2005) 26-7.

quo or confirms it.”<sup>218</sup> In participating in a very public forum such as the CCAA, the Sigg Collection demonstrates a vested interest in opening the canon up to new emerging artists in order to be in control of what will become central and what will retreat into the margins. Indeed, the parameters of the Sigg Collection play a large role in determining what the centre and peripheries of the canon look like.

### ***Collecting strategies and constraints***

In the 1990s, Sigg himself did almost all of the collecting. He continues to collect today less frequently because of the rising value of contemporary Chinese art and his difficulty in housing larger works. When Sigg first began collecting contemporary Chinese art, he did not have an immediate plan worked out so looked instead for two qualities in particular: “individual works that could stir spirits even in the global mainstream”<sup>219</sup> or “works that documented the current situation in China particularly well.”<sup>220</sup> According to Sigg, he selected this criterion because he thought it would help him find works with innovation from a western point of view.<sup>221</sup> However, shortly after he began acquiring the artwork, Sigg realised that he was the only person--either foreign or Chinese, individual or institution--who was collecting contemporary Chinese art at such a grand scale. It was then that Sigg believed that his collection could go so far as to both construct the spectrum that was missing in contemporary Chinese art, and make Official China aware of their art.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Russell Ferguson, “Can We Still Use the Canon?” *The Art Journal* Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), 4.

<sup>219</sup> Uli Sigg in Conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005), 16.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 21.

Sigg contends that he had the authority to do so because he considers himself “more qualified than the average Chinese.”<sup>223</sup> His qualifications were explained to Matthias Frehner, curator of “Mahjong” at the Kunstmuseum in Bern (2005) as the following: first, a knowledge of China’s history; second, a knowledge of world art; and third, the experience of participating in China’s re-opening to the world in the 1980. According to Sigg, this knowledge and experience combined to provided him with the context to better understand the artworks than most, including the Chinese, as he explains: “I used my context and knowledge of China [to collect]. I had a much deeper knowledge due to my position [as an ambassador] than almost anyone...The Chinese couldn’t travel in the 80s and 90s, but I could, so this in combination with my knowledge of world art put me in a better position to collect.”<sup>224</sup>

Prompted by his self-described “sense of cultural responsibility,” Sigg then decided to broaden the focus of his collection and change his collecting style.<sup>225</sup> For Sigg, the quality of each work collected was no longer as important than what it had to say about Chinese society: “My intent,” he explained, “is to mirror the art production of China.”<sup>226</sup> To achieve this goal, he then began collecting a wide variety of work in order for the collection to be relevant to China’s artistic development. Sigg identified his new criteria for collecting comprehensively: the artwork must both represent what

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<sup>223</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Andreas Shiendorfer, “Chinese Art also has a Present,” *Credit-Suisse*, May 2005.

<http://emagazine.credit-suisse.com/app/article/index2.cfm?fuseaction=OpenArticlePrint&aoid=95833&lang=EN> (accessed 12 November 2007).

<sup>226</sup> Pollack, “A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China,” section E, page 1, column 3.

preoccupied artists at any rate over a certain period, and contain a certain degree of intensity, meaningfulness and formal quality.<sup>227</sup>

Despite Sigg's self described sycophantic collecting style, there are the constraints in the Sigg Collection, of which two to three will be noted here. One of the main critiques has been that Sigg's ambitious goal of collecting across China has also, in turn, limited the scope his collection. According to an analysis of the collection by the "DSL Collection," by collecting so widely Sigg had to restrict himself to collecting a maximum of one or two pieces of work by each artist selected: any more might have been both physically and financially impossible.<sup>228</sup> But, as the critique continues, by only having a few pieces of each artist in a collection, long-term investment in individual artists is practically unfeasible, as it is both difficult to observe the art in the long term, or make any case studies about the artist.<sup>229</sup>

In addition, limited investments on each artist can have profound and long-term effects on the artist on the art market. Indeed, Sigg's collection is regarded as one of the largest and most significant of contemporary Chinese art in the world, but this also means some of the lesser known artists in his collection may suffer the fate of only being remembered for the particular style that he captured them in when he acquired their work. As a result, it may be difficult for such artists to evolve past the style he collected them in, or to be inspired to do so – especially for the artists who were a part of Sigg's "Mahjong" exhibition which has toured internationally (in the U.S. and Europe) and continues to do so, at great success. In order to be successful on the art market, these

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> "A Private Research on Western Collectors," *DSL Collection*, 30 April 2008. [http://www.g1expo.com/fiche\\_home?id=18](http://www.g1expo.com/fiche_home?id=18) (accessed 18 February 2009).

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

artists may elect to continue creating in the style that they have been most recognised for after having toured with the exhibition. Sigg himself has opined of this success: “It is also obvious that from a certain date it became very worthwhile to be represented in my collection.”<sup>230</sup>

Despite all the constraints, from the very beginning the goal of the Sigg Collection was never to promote the artists individually, but rather to shed light on contemporary Chinese art as a whole. In fact, Sigg has been especially careful not to promote specific artists for fear of the effects his endorsement (one that so many value and pay heed to) may have on the art market.<sup>231</sup> In doing so, he fears this may draw attention to the art by investors rather than serious collectors, who would then compromise the long-term value of the art. Additionally, it could have been dangerous if Sigg had focused on a particular artist in his collection if, in the future, he decided to sell all their work, though it is believed that Sigg has no intention to sell at all.<sup>232</sup> A considerable risk for the artist is the possibility that the reputation of the collection outweighs that of the artist: if it is perceived that the collector is no longer interested in the artist by selling off their work, the artist’s career might suffer as a result. The famous collector Charles Saatchi had such an occurrence when he sold all six of the Italian artist Sandro Chia’s paintings from his collection in 1985. Chia subsequently accused Saatchi

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<sup>230</sup> Uli Sigg in Conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 19 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>231</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>232</sup> Barbara Pollack, a close friend of Sigg, recently wrote a letter to *Artnet Magazine* in defense Sigg for an attack against his relationship with the Chinese government by art critic Charlie Finch. In the letter, Pollack states that “He [Sigg] has never sold a single work and, as far as I know, has no plans to sell his collection.” Barbara Pollack, “Letter to the Editor,” *Artnet Magazine*, 2008.

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/news/pollock/pollock7-28-08.asp> (accessed 28 July 2009).

of having ruined his career.<sup>233</sup> Thus, by only acquiring one or two works of each artist selected in its systematic collecting methodology, the Sigg Collection avoids similar long term commitments that may be detrimental to the artist's career.

The urge to collect comprehensively, like the Sigg Collection has done, is a common symptom among collectors. It suggests the desire to achieve order, system, and even completion in their collection. According to Susan M. Pearce such a desired end result distinguishes the difference between "possessing" and "collecting", as she argues "the crucial difference...is the order and possibility of completion which collecting possess."<sup>234</sup> Completion is also a signifier of power for the collector. First of all, it speaks to the wealth, talent, and resources of the collector to be capable of acquiring art from one place, period, or style. But moreover, a "complete" collection allows the collector to assume a form of ownership over the world that is being represented in the collection.

The urge to collect comprehensively a "world" or a culture of the Other is a similar sentiment to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European Wunderkammers, or Cabinets of Curiosities, which were considered a way of taking possession of the world. James Clifford has considered such psychological strategies of collecting in the West, and has described them to be "a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity" and "an exercise in how to make the world one's own, to gather things around oneself tastefully, appropriately."<sup>235</sup> In other words, the works in the collection assume an identity in relation to the collector and his/her perception of the world. Indeed, as Sigg explains his desire to have collected systematically: "Collecting is not only a way

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<sup>233</sup> Roger Cook, "The Mediated Manufacture of an Avant Garde" in *Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture*, ed, Bridget Fowler, 170 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>234</sup> Pearce, "The Urge to Collect," 157-8.

<sup>235</sup> James Clifford, "Collecting Ourselves" in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, 260 (London: Routledge, 1994).

of accessing Chinese art, it is ultimately a way of accessing China as well...through encounters with hundreds of artists, my ultimate object of study is China.”<sup>236</sup> Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery, has commended Sigg’s goals, arguing, “Uli Sigg doesn’t just collect Chinese art, he’s deeply engaged in the entire society of China.”<sup>237</sup>

However, like all collectors that collect systematically, there are limitations to what the Sigg Collection can, or will, acquire. Most obvious are the absence of artworks by Chinese artists in the 1980s that imitated the movements of Impressionism, Expressionism, and Abstract art in hurried attempts to learn all that they had been censored from while China had been in reclusion, such as Zhang Qun and Meng Luding’s *Enlightenment of Adam and Eve in the New Age* (1985) (fig. 2.12) which combined symbolism and surrealism in an exploration of Western aesthetics. Sigg has named these artworks as characterless for their “race through the ‘isms,’” as he calls it,<sup>238</sup> and did not acquire them for his collection because he considered them to be “lacking in world status for experimental art.”<sup>239</sup>

In an interview with Sigg in the “Mahjong” exhibition catalogue, curator Matthias Frehner asked Sigg if omitting these artworks in his collection meant that the Sigg Collection is not completely representative picture of contemporary Chinese art. At first, Sigg’s response suggested that he has perhaps doubted his exclusion of the artworks in the collection by saying: “Maybe. It was at any rate necessary to fill the vacuum that the Cultural Revolution left. Perhaps that was a gap that had to be filled,” and then admits

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Spiegler, 101.

<sup>238</sup> Uli Sigg in Conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 17 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

that the artworks were indeed “precursors to a really individual view extremely important for Chinese art history.” However, Sigg then concludes his response with a final justification for his collecting choice in saying: “But those things wouldn’t impress anyone.”<sup>240</sup> Whether or not their exclusion from the Sigg Collection will affect these works’ representation in the canon is difficult to answer, but such an omission exposes both the powerful and particular choices Sigg has made over the course of the development of his collection, and the art canon as a strategy of exclusion that functions by defining what is “Chinese art” and what is not.

Regardless of representation or not, for Sigg to have collected a representative piece from each artistic movement in China would have been both physically (and possibly financially) impossible.<sup>241</sup> The collection had to establish certain parameters when bringing the artworks together.<sup>242</sup> These “rules” consist of the logical basis of the Sigg Collection and create a narrative structure within so that each individual artwork has a relationship with one another that is understood.<sup>243</sup>

### ***Influential connections***

In order to amass such an extensive amount of artwork for the Sigg Collection, Sigg has named the assistance of two women in particular who were “invaluable” and were his most reliable consultants for the collection.<sup>244</sup> The fact that they are both women is particularly revealing of gender roles in collecting practices, which will be discussed. The

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Although Sigg did express an interest in constructing the entire spectrum that was missing for contemporary Chinese art, if the Sigg Collection was only interested in doing so it would not have acquired more than one artwork from each artist in the collection.

<sup>242</sup> As stipulated, the artwork must both represent what preoccupied artists at any rate over a certain period, and contain a certain degree of intensity, meaningfulness and formal quality.

<sup>243</sup> Pearce, 33.

<sup>244</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

first consultant is Marianne Heller, Sigg's assistant then and today, who carried out the complicated logistics behind collecting in China and bringing the art back to Switzerland.<sup>245</sup> Heller has been with Sigg throughout almost his entire collecting career, and has been privy to both his business enterprises and collecting investments. Though she is not directly involved in the selection of art, Heller has seen out the acquisition of art for the Sigg Collection from the beginning.

The second consultant to the Sigg Collection is his wife, Rita Sigg. A Swiss physician, Rita Sigg came to live with her husband in Beijing in the 1990s and almost immediately took on an active role in Sigg's collecting.<sup>246</sup> Whenever possible Rita Sigg would accompany Sigg on his trips to artists studios and would be involved in the decision making as to whether or not the artwork should be in his collection. Significantly, Sigg considers Rita Sigg invaluable for his collecting endeavours, mostly because she spoke Chinese fluently --“even better than I could,”<sup>247</sup> he has said—and would often communicate with the artists for Sigg. Rita Sigg’s linguistic talents would have been invaluable at the time, as the majority of Chinese artists had a basic grasp of the English language at best. Rita Sigg has said that she preferred her time with the artists and helping Sigg with his collecting to official state duties, calling them both “stiff” and “a bore.”<sup>248</sup> She found that frequenting the artists in their studios made her feel comfortable in China—as she said, “in their studios we felt at home.”<sup>249</sup>

In art history, it is common for the wife of a collector to play a role in the formation of the collection. Frederick Baekeland has argued that collectors’ wives play

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Pollack, “A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China,” section E, page 1, column 3.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

an important role in the acquisitions of art in both a positive and negative sense. Though the collector's wife may initially be more passively involved in the art than is the collector (often viewing the collection as one of indulgence or pride), Baekeland suggests that once a collector desires an object, the decision to buy it is greatly determined by the opinion of his wife.<sup>250</sup> According to Baekeland, the collector usually discusses with his wife the object he has in mind and may also accept her objections to the purchase. If the collector's wife has better "taste" than the collector, which happens often, he might even allow her to decide if the object is worth purchasing at all. Regrettably, because outside influences are not flattering to the image of the collector, putting in question his ability to decide and his "unique" taste, the collector's wife is rarely documented in art history.<sup>251</sup>

For example, in following with the tradition of gender roles in collecting practices, the press has so far elected to highlight Sigg's achievements rather than Rita Sigg's contributions.<sup>252</sup> For instance, Rita Sigg is briefly mentioned in the "Mahjong" catalogue and in interviews with Sigg; she is rarely interviewed for her personal account of the formation of the collection;<sup>253</sup> and only in 2009 has the Sigg Collection acknowledged Rita Sigg's name in the header for "Mahjong," the collection's major touring exhibition since 2004.<sup>254</sup> Indeed, though Sigg has said he has attempted to "distance himself from his personal preferences in order to represent an objective cross-

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<sup>250</sup> Frederic Baekeland, "Psychological Aspects of Collecting" in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, 211 (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Baekeland has also questioned why there are so few women collectors compared to men. Ibid., 207-8.

<sup>253</sup> See: Rita Sigg in Pollack's "A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China," section E, page 1, column 3.

<sup>254</sup> Rita was mentioned in the title *Uli and Rita Sigg Collection* at Peabody Essex Museum 2009 and *Uli and Rita Sigg Collection* at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2008, but not in the tile for the three previous exhibitions in Europe.

section of art,”<sup>255</sup> Rita Sigg’s significant relationship to the collection attests to how difficult this is to do. While there is no disputing the fact that Sigg is the main collector of the Sigg Collection, Rita Sigg also played an undeniable and significant role in the selection of artwork.

Sigg has ambiguously revealed other reliable consultants to his collection, by describing his social network in China in the 1990s to have consisted of friends, curators, critics, collectors, artists and a few gallerists (both foreign and Chinese), without naming names. These contacts were an opportunity for Sigg both to learn and to share a vision of contemporary Chinese art. When the group got together it was a time of fruitful discourse and discoveries, with each member sharing information about new artists, something Sigg referred to as relationships of “give and take.”<sup>256</sup> The information from these contacts was a part of Sigg’s rigorous research on various emerging movements, which soon made him into a knowledgeable figure in the contemporary Chinese art world. Ai Weiwei has said, “I often feel embarrassed speaking to Uli, because I never paid such close attention to various exhibitions and movements as he did...no one else shows the same discipline.”<sup>257</sup>

In art collecting, connections like these are an essential part of being able to survive the art market. Fortunately, art collecting is typically a social activity – collectors are in touch with one another about acquisitions, or they are involved with a network of art-related professionals such as artists, curators and art dealers who share information

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<sup>255</sup> Pollack, “A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China,” section E, page 1, column 3.

<sup>256</sup> Sigg. “China on Display Connection” Email to Rosemary Marland, 28 Feb. 2008.

<sup>257</sup> Spielger, 101.

and advice.<sup>258</sup> In her work on the practices of art collectors, author Diana Crane suggests that this support network for collectors provides both “insight into the nature of the creative process through conversations with artists” and “personal satisfaction from contacts with individuals with similar interests.”<sup>259</sup> In other words, the influence of similar tastes contributes to the internal logic of a collection, in that it reinforces a person’s taste through familiarization. In addition to reinforcing the particular choices Sigg made for his collection, these functions were also an opportune space for Sigg to relay and enforce his vision of contemporary Chinese art to others.

Sigg would have had the opportunity to engage with the few other collectors at the time, which, depending on the occasion, may have included such prominent private collectors as Howard Farber from America, Baron Guy Ullens & Myriam Ullens from Belgium, Jurgen Ludwig Fisher & Eiena Ludwig from Germany and Pierre Huber from Switzerland.<sup>260</sup> Karen Smith refers to these collectors as being a “faithful, daring and visionary, handful of thoroughly modern individuals,”<sup>261</sup> all of whom held similar positions as Sigg, being either industrialists, diplomats, or “officials” as China referred to them. An untapped environment such as this (where potential collectors had not been exposed to much contemporary Chinese art) was the ideal climate for Sigg to promote his vision of the canon by discussing, recommending, and introducing collectors to the work in his collection. As James Cutting has explained, “research has shown that we cannot often express the reasons for what we like, but all evidence points to the fact that we

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<sup>258</sup> Diana Crane, “Art Collectors and the Reception of Art Styles,” in *Institution & Innovation* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1994), 13.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> “A Private Research on Western Collectors,” *DSL Collection*, 30 April 2008.

[http://www.nps.gov/abli/.http://www.g1expo.com/fiche\\_home?id=18](http://www.nps.gov/abli/.http://www.g1expo.com/fiche_home?id=18) (accessed 28 January 2009).

<sup>261</sup> Smith, 19.

likely prefer what we have likely seen before and seen more often.”<sup>262</sup> Many of these collectors have since named Sigg as an influence on their own collections.<sup>263</sup>

### ***Connections and collections***

Urs Meile, director of Galerie Urs Meile in Lucerne, Switzerland, is perhaps the most important example of Sigg’s influence on other collections, as Meile also contributed artworks to be exhibited at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Meile first came to China in 1996 at the invitation of Sigg. In 1996 and 1997 he toured with Sigg to several cities around China to get acquainted with the artists. Meile has said that the time spent in artists’ studios with Sigg convinced him that Chinese artists had “great potential.”<sup>264</sup> While Meile did not buy very much art at the time, he met most of the country’s leading artists by travelling with Sigg to the country’s largest arts areas, including Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Chengdu. “For two years, we visited hundreds of studios,”<sup>265</sup> Meile recalls, “There was an art scene but you had to go door to door.”<sup>266</sup> While Sigg amassed his collection, Meile planned exhibitions for the work he saw in China for his gallery in Switzerland. In late 1997, Meile did his first group exhibition with Chinese artists entitled “Chinese Contemporary Art” and featured Ding Yi, Liu Wei, Qiu Shihua, Wang Jin, Yang Shaobin, Zhou Tiehai, Zhu Jia and Zhuang Hui. Significantly, all of these artists are also held in the Sigg Collection.

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<sup>262</sup> Cutting, 112.

<sup>263</sup> Many of these collectors were Swiss like Sigg. For more information on the Swiss penchant for Contemporary Chinese art, for further information see: Chapter One, 17-19.

<sup>264</sup> “Chinese Art and the Swiss Scene,” *Artzine China*.

[http://new.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid132\\_en.html](http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid132_en.html) (accessed 10 March 2009).

<sup>265</sup> David Barboza, “Urs Meile Long March Into China,” *ArtZine China*.

[http://new.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid391\\_en.html](http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid391_en.html) (accessed 27 February 2009).

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

A year later, Meile devoted half of his shows in Lucerne to contemporary Chinese art. By 1998, he established another version of Galerie Urs Meile in the 798 Dashanzi Arts District in Beijing, which later became the sister gallery to Ai Wei Wei's "China Art Archives Warehouse" in Beijing (in 2003). Meile considers his projects in China to be very successful ventures, especially as when he was first interested in contemporary Chinese art, those in Western art circles told Meile that "nothing interesting was happening in China."<sup>267</sup> According to Meile, the shift in interest in contemporary Chinese art for those who had once warned him against the artwork is to be attributed to the Chinese presence at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. After the Biennale, according to Meile, everything began to change, as he recalls: "People were calling us [the gallery] asking, 'Do you have this...?'"<sup>268</sup> The influences of the Sigg Collection did not end with Meile at the Biennale, as many private collectors began to consult with Sigg about the art scene in China and for information on how to start amassing their own collections. At the beginning of the millennium, only a handful of others were still in control of the canon at the time that Sigg was still considered one of the scene's most reliable consultants.<sup>269</sup> Thus as contemporary Chinese art gained more credibility, the Sigg Collection continued to shape the canon by being among the few to expose its works to the world.

Another Swiss to credit Sigg for introducing him to Chinese art is Hans Ulrich Obrist, the current Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery in London. In 1990, Obrist was introduced to Chinese art when he moved to Paris and met the Chinese curator Hou Hanru. A fruitful dialogue ensued between the two curators and they

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<sup>267</sup> "Chinese Art and the Swiss Scene," *ArtZine China* [http://new.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid132\\_en.html](http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid132_en.html) (accessed 10 March 2009).

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Private collectors such as the Ullens, Kent & Vicky Logan and Howard Farber and dealers such as Lorenz Hebling.

decided to put on an exhibition that had a thematic focus of The Asian City in the 1990s. Both curators pooled resources to explore the artistic scene in Asia including Japan, China, Korea, and Bangkok. Because the curators were based in Paris, in order to know what was going on in China, Obrist relied on his old compatriots Lorenz Helbling and Uli Sigg who were regularly introducing him to new artists from China. The show first exhibited in 1997 in Vienna, Austria under the name “Cities on the Move” and for Sigg’s help in introducing the world to contemporary art in China, Obrist has called him an “indispensable help” and a “pioneer” in the field.<sup>270</sup>

Fritz Kaiser, a wealthy businessman from Liechtenstein who had collected American Pop in the 1990s, became interested in Chinese art in 2003 and moved his way into the collectors’ circle in China by way of Sigg. As Kaizer recalls “[my interest] all started about four years ago, when Uli Sigg, the former Swiss Ambassador in China, showed me his collection at his home in Lucerne....It really sparked my enthusiasm when I saw all the fresh ideas and the great quality of Chinese contemporary artwork.”<sup>271</sup> According to the DSL collection, Kaizer is now considered one of the top collectors. He has collected more than thirty pieces and “learned the novel view and techniques on collecting from Sigg.”<sup>272</sup>

Another example of Sigg’s influence after the Biennale is Didier Hirsch, who began collecting as late as 2005, but is also now considered one of the top collectors by having amassed more than one hundred works of contemporary Chinese art. Hirsch has said that he learnt about contemporary Chinese art by looking at catalogues and books on

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<sup>270</sup> “Chinese Art and the Swiss Scene,” *ArtZine China* [http://new.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid132\\_en.html](http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid132_en.html) (accessed 10 March 2009).

<sup>271</sup> “Collector Question and Answer: Fritz Kaiser,” *ArtZine China*

[http://new.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid516\\_en.html](http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid516_en.html) (accessed 3 June 2009).

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

the topic, specifically naming the “Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection” catalogue as his resource.<sup>273</sup> The DSL collections lists the important works in Hirsch’s collection to be works by Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Liu Xiaodong, Geng Jianyi, Li Shan, Zeng Fanzhi, Liu Wei, Yang Shaobin, Xue Song, Wang Jinsong, Zhong Biao, Li Songsong, Yu Hong and Ye Yongqing. In this list, other than the artists Zhong Biao, Yu Hong and Ye Yongqing, all artists are also in the Sigg Collection and were exhibited in exhibitions of the Sigg Collection.<sup>274</sup>

### *Effect of the Catalogue*

Exhibition catalogues, especially when they are writing or compiling images of works in a new field of art, like contemporary Chinese art, are valuable tools. They often constitute the only available analysis and writing on the artwork, acting as a primary resource. The “Mahjong” catalogue, for example (fig. 2.13) was first published in 2004 (in correspondence with its first exhibition in Bern) at a time when the field had only begun to be mapped out by Western and Chinese scholars. It is an extensive and accessible resource that recounts recent Chinese history through the lens of art in the Sigg Collection.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> “Didier Hirsh: The Art of Collecting,” *ArtZine China* [http://new.ArtZinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid271\\_en.html](http://new.ArtZinechina.com/display_vol_aid271_en.html) (accessed 3 June 2009).

<sup>274</sup> Artfacts.net lists the majority of each exhibition the artists participated in. For instance, Fang Lijun is listed as having participated in exhibitions by the Sigg Collection in “Mahjong” at Berkeley in 2008, Salzburg in 2007 and Bern in 2005; and “The Year of the Golden Pig: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection” Cork in 2007. See: “Fang Lijun, Artist Info,” *Arfacts.net*. <http://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/artistInfo/artist/20752> (accessed 8 June 2009).

<sup>275</sup> The “Mahjong” catalogue includes an interview with Sigg, essays by the curators, analyses of the artworks and general introductions to socio-political and artistic developments in China (by authors such as Hou Hanru, Pi Li, Estelle Bories, Li Xianting and Julia F. Andrews) in the past three decades. The catalogue accompanied the exhibition (2005 to 2007) in Bern, Hamburg and Salzburg before being republished in a smaller but similar format when “Mahjong” was at Berkeley and Salem. For further information on the essays, see the Literature Review of this project.

An exhibition catalogue can travel in a way that a collection cannot, and is also accessible internationally in a way that an exhibition may not be, considering how infrequently an exhibition travels. Though “Mahjong” has made five stops thus far in both Europe and America, the catalogue has circulated widely and been read by those who have not attended the exhibition. According to Sigg, private collectors throughout Asia read the catalogue even though the exhibition has not stopped on that side of the globe.<sup>276</sup> Additionally, the catalogue sits in almost any bookstore that has a contemporary Asian arts section, and any online search of the catalogue can attest to its popularity.

As one of the primary sources on contemporary Chinese art, art historians, dealers, collectors, and curators consider the “Mahjong” catalogue as a rich source of information on contemporary Chinese art. But it can also be a dangerous one. In the preface of the “Mahjong” catalogue while the exhibition was at the Kunstmuseum in Bern, curator Bernhard Fibicher states:

To the present day [this] surely [is] the most complete and important exhibition of contemporary Chinese art *whose published catalogue can be taken as the standard reference* on what appears to be the most significant Non-Western contribution to the artistic developments of the last 20 years.<sup>277</sup>

This statement suggests that the “Mahjong” catalogue is not only the most authoritative text on the subject, but that the works exhibited from the Sigg Collection in the “Mahjong” catalogue stand as being the most representative of contemporary Chinese art.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>277</sup> Matthias Frehner and Bernhard Fibicher, “Dank” in *Mahjong, Chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg*, 6 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005). Italics are mine.

<sup>278</sup> Koch, “Whose’ display? The role of the collector in the canonization of Contemporary Chinese Art: Uli Sigg and ‘Mahjong’.”

The role of the catalogue in influencing the canon is not new. According to James Cutting's theory on "mere exposure," the more frequently an individual is exposed to a reproduced image, the more likely they are to appreciate it.<sup>279</sup> Thus the more opportunities the image or the name of an image has in being exposed in print format, the greater its chance in being canonized. Exploring the role of the art exhibition catalogues, Susan M. Pearce has argued that more should be written on catalogues and their role as primary sources of material, from them "we discover a rich, almost untapped sources of study."<sup>280</sup> Pearce also points out the problematic relationship that can develop among contemporary art catalogues, the art market, and canon formation.<sup>281</sup> Christopher B. Steiner best demonstrates the effects of the catalogue on canon formation in his analysis of how private collectors changed the African art market. Steiner recounts the tale of how the wealthy Italian Giovanni Franco Scanzi began to collect some of the more elegantly formed slingshots from the Ivory Coast while Scanzi was based there in the mid 1980s. After collecting them for years, Scanzi published an elegant coffee-table book on the slingshots that contained over one hundred glossy colour photographs of the slingshots from his private collection. After that, according to Steiner, a market was born and the international African art canon now included the slingshot.<sup>282</sup>

Thus the exhibition catalogue is to be considered an excellent indicator of the process and mechanisms of canon formation. Sigg too, is aware of the relationship the "Mahjong" exhibition catalogue has had between commodity value and aesthetic value. He has said that many people—not just private collectors—have bestowed the

<sup>279</sup> Cutting, 90.

<sup>280</sup> Susan M. Pearce, "Writing about Art Exhibition Catalogues" in *Exploring Science in Museums*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, 172 (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "Rethinking the Canon," in *Art Bulletin*. Volume: 78. Year: 1996. 215.

“Mahjong” catalogue with the title of “The Bible” and consult it religiously in order to know what to purchase for their own collections.<sup>283</sup> For instance, Art China, a private contemporary Chinese art gallery located in Hamburg with no affiliation to the Sigg Collection, sells the catalogue with the accompanying description: “The book for the exhibition of the collection Sigg. The ‘Bible’ for contemporary Chinese art.”<sup>284</sup> After recognizing the impact the “Mahjong” exhibition catalogue had on private collectors and the art market, Sigg claims that he is now careful not to discuss which artists he currently collects or are in the Sigg Collection. In elucidating on the precarious relationship between the collection’s reputation and the art market Sigg notes:

[The collectors] don’t just go to the “Mahjong” bible, they also ask me. Even what I collect is not so clear unless you ask. Many media ask too, as they have no other choice. Ninety-nine percent of people ask me who to collect specifically. This question is always there: who do you like best? But I never answer this because this is dangerous.<sup>285</sup>

However, even if Sigg no longer recommends artists, the “Mahjong” catalogue still exposes, enforces, and attests to his vision of contemporary Chinese art. It also demonstrates a fundamental tension between the claim of globally accepted comprehensiveness and the fact that this vision has been selected largely according to the taste, knowledge, and financial skills of Sigg alone.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>284</sup> “Art China Gallery Art Store,” *Art China Gallery*. <http://www.artchina-gallery.de/index.php?id=105&L=2> (accessed 5 July 2009).

<sup>285</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>286</sup> Koch, “Whose’ display? The role of the collector in the canonization of Contemporary Chinese Art: Uli Sigg and ‘Mahjong’.”

### ***Conclusion***

In over two decades, Uli and Rita Sigg have amassed an impressive collection of contemporary Chinese art. Currently, the collection is still considered to be one of the largest collections of contemporary Chinese art in the world. Of course, as this chapter has demonstrated, it is important to remember that they have not amassed the collection in isolation. As Stuart Hall argues “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context, positioned.’”<sup>287</sup> To understand the collector’s position is to understand the collection’s relationship to the external world. In addition, the objects in a collection represent a matrix of relationships, which involve both people and their world. Sigg’s history has revealed that his ability to select Chinese art for his collection did not simply come from his knowledge of China’s history and experience in China, or from a trained eye. Instead, Sigg’s capacity to make aesthetic decisions in China was also influenced by social connections and professional opportunities. In mapping out these variables, it clarifies the specific relationship of private collector to a collection.

It is also important to remember that the collection is not only influenced by various factors such as social networks, political affiliations, and economic situations – but that it is also *influential*. Significant to the Sigg Collection is how far-ranging its effect has been on the creation of a canon of contemporary Chinese art. The power of the collector to the canon of art history has been discussed by anthropologist James Clifford, who has noted that “discriminations made at particular moments of collecting, constitute

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<sup>287</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Kathryn Woodward, 51 (California: Sage Publications, 1997).

the general system of the works of art” wherein “value circulates and makes sense.”<sup>288</sup> These internal relations have been significant in the movement of contemporary Chinese art into the global arena, but also demonstrate the long ranging effects of the collection. Whether the works that are in the Sigg Collection will be considered “canonical” in the long term is difficult to answer. Yet the influence of the Sigg Collection thus far is obvious by its relationship with other collectors, Sigg’s CCAA award, and the wide circulation of the “Mahjong” catalogue, each of which highlights the processes and mechanisms of canon formation. But by far the most important Western figure that Sigg influenced with his vision of Chinese art was Harald Szeemann, who Sigg brought to China in order to introduce to its contemporary art scene. The result of this visit was the exhibition of twenty artists from China at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1999) – many of whom were handpicked by Szeemann from the Sigg Collection – and a subsequent acceptance of contemporary Chinese art on the international scene. The next chapter will examine the role of the exhibition in canon formation.

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<sup>288</sup> Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” 54.

## Chapter Three

### **Manifestation of a Canon: From the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale to The “Mahjong”**

#### **Exhibition**

This chapter focuses on the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale and “Mahjong” as a case study to help determine discrete agents and relations of power. Specifically, through an analysis of both exhibitions, it argues how as exhibitions, they have played an active role in the construction of the category of contemporary Chinese art as introduced by the Sigg Collection. Beginning with the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, this chapter will identify the powerful and yet inconspicuous role the Sigg Collection played with Szeemann in presenting contemporary Chinese art to the world. I conclude that global exhibitions like the Venice Biennale and large scale touring exhibitions like “Mahjong” should be more obvious at indicating who has taken the authority to represent the art, and that the exhibitions are not representative of the whole.

Speaking of Harald Szeemann, Jonathan Napack, Asia advisor for Art Basel once declared “[He] was such a hugely key figure in Post-war art. I mean, here was a guy who really helped to invent the modern art world. So in 1999, when Harald Szeemann said, ‘Look, I’m interested in Chinese art,’ people listened.”<sup>289</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, scholars and those in the art scene describe Harald Szeemann as having launched contemporary Chinese art onto the international stage.<sup>290</sup> However, what was largely

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<sup>289</sup> Stacey Duff, “Chinese Art and the Swiss Scene,” *ArtZine China*.

[http://new.ArtZinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid132\\_en.html](http://new.ArtZinechina.com/display_vol_aid132_en.html) (accessed 3 May 2009).

<sup>290</sup> For example, author Sarah Miltenberger describes Szeemann inclusion of Chinese artists at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale as having been the “necessary, meaningful confrontation” between Chinese art and the West. Sarah Miltenberger, “China’s Contemporary Art, the Question of Collective Identities,” in *Cultrans*, ed. Arthur Engelbert, 223 (Würzburg, 2005); *Art in Asia Magazine* described Szeemann’s inclusion of Chinese artists at the Venice Biennale in 1999 as having “made a major contribution towards popularizing

unknown to the audience of the Biennale (and which has not yet been emphasized by scholars of contemporary Chinese art) is that the majority of the works selected by Szeemann were either taken from the Sigg Collection, his associates, or based on his recommendation.<sup>291</sup>

Only a few years later in 2005, Szeemann and Sigg's picture of Chinese art (or rather Sigg's collection as a canon) appeared again in an international touring blockbuster exhibition of the Sigg Collection entitled "Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection." While those in the West who had attended any of the fifteen or more large group exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art that had been held in both Europe and North America since the beginning of the 1990s would be familiar with certain aspects of contemporary Chinese art as framed mostly by Western curators,<sup>292</sup> "Mahjong" was billed as offering a "broader survey of a quarter of a century of avant-garde art (1979-2004) in a show of work that surpasses previous exhibitions in both scope and quality."<sup>293</sup> In other words, "Mahjong" sought from its inception to be far more

the Chinese avant-garde in the West." See: "53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale," *Art in Asia*, <http://www.artinasia.kr/content/view/73/31/>; and author Richard Vine described Szeemann's inclusion of contemporary Chinese artists in the 1999 Venice Biennale as "groundbreaking." Richard Vine, "Reflections in a Chinese mirror: the blend of art and commercialism surrounding the most recent Shanghai Biennale exposed the current state of visual culture in both East and West," *Art in America*, 95 (May 2007), 74-82.

<sup>291</sup> According to Berghuis, "The large majority of the works [in the 48<sup>th</sup> Biennale] came from the private collection of Uli Sigg...a fact that should have been mentioned in the exhibition." Berghuis, 154.

<sup>292</sup> There had been many exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in Europe and North America in the decade leading up to the Venice Biennale in 1999, such as: "Chinese Avant Garde Art", Barcelona, 1995; "New Art in China: Post 1989", touring the United States from 1996-97 and "Inside Out: New Chinese Art, New York, from 1998-99", as there had been afterwards, such as: "The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art," Buffalo, NY, 2006, "China: Fifty Years Inside the People's Republic," 1999-2000, Berkeley, "New York, Living in Time," 2001, Berlin; and "Alors, la Chine? (What about China?)," 2003, Paris.

<sup>293</sup> "Press Release: Mahjong Contemporary Chinese art from the Sigg Exhibition," Press release for exhibition at Kunstmuseum, Bern, June 14-October 16 2005.

[http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14\\_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/](http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/) (accessed 29 May 2009).

representative of the canon of Chinese contemporary artistic production than had been the other exhibitions.

The question of the recontextualization of Chinese art in Western and international framed settings like the Biennale and its subsequent impact on the meaning of Chinese art remains. According to Wu Hung, on the most basic level, the displacement and translation of contemporary Chinese art alters the work's significance.<sup>294</sup> The other difficulty is that international exhibitions have brought with them the propensity for Chinese artists to make their art comprehensible for a western audience, or for curators to take the liberty to do so for them. Karen Smith has argued that the definition of the museum as coined by Jean-Hubert Martin (the curator of Magicians de la Terre) of being "a collection of decontextualized objects," has lead to the indiscriminate and opportunistic framing of art, western or non-western.<sup>295</sup> This chapter will consider the ways in which Chinese art was framed in these two exhibitions as being "dissident" art, following the common curatorial strategy that all art from "repressed" countries, such as China, must be "dissident" if they are to be accepted as "genuine".<sup>296</sup>

The "Mahjong" exhibition made six stops beginning at the Museum of Fine Arts Bern and Holderbank in Bern, Switzerland (2005), and went on from there to the Kunsthalle in Hamburg (2006), to the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria (2007) and then travelled to the United States at Berkeley Art Museum (2008) and The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (2009).<sup>297</sup> The number of artworks in

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<sup>294</sup> For instance, according to Wu, when Chinese installation, performance, and site-specific artwork are displayed in large international exhibitions like the Biennale, they largely lose their meaning because they are unable to subvert established norms among similar artworks as they would in China. Wu, 21.

<sup>295</sup> Smith, 14.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Though the Sigg Collection has exhibited under other titles, "Mahjong" is the largest exhibition of the collection. Outside of "Mahjong," the Sigg Collection has also been exhibited in a smaller format at the

“Mahjong” is far larger than the selection from Sigg’s collection that appeared in the Venice Biennale, and although “Mahjong” has both added and changed works during its tour, the overall selection of contemporary Chinese artists is similar to the works that were exhibited by Szeemann in 1999. The exhibition has largely repeated its selection of works at every stop it has made on the tour by making very few changes to its curatorial concept.

According to art historian Mieke Bal, this strategy of dissemination of visual arts functions by imposing on the public (via repetition) a particular meaning of what is “art”.<sup>298</sup> “Art” here being contemporary Chinese art according to the Sigg Collection. Like Cutting’s theory on mere exposure and repetition in the act of canon formation, Bal also argues that repetition is a strategy in the canonizing of artworks. In her book, *Double Exposures*, Bal has taken the particular example of Mark Rothko’s legacy because his works were dispersed to a variety of art museums so that as many people as possible could access them. According to Bal, when Rothko’s works were disseminated in art museums all over the world, a *particular* meaning, one of aesthetic conception as to what is “art,” was repeated enough times to be imposed and consumed by a local context. This has, as she argues, resulted in an essentialist idea of artistic value that has been produced by the single gesture of repetition. This is, as she writes, a form of “cultural imperialism.” She elucidates,

Semiotically speaking, this omnipresence of Rothko sustains a certain discursive feature of cultural imperialism, namely *repetition*. Indeed by the repeated encounter with the same style or concept, the public is bound to get used to the

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following exhibitions: “A Chinese Dream: From the Sigg Collection” as part of ARTSINGAPORE 2007; “Year of the Golden Pig,” Lewis Glucksman Gallery, UCC University College Cork - Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork. Ireland, 2007; and in “Aside: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection,” Joan Miró Museum, Barcelona, 2008.

<sup>298</sup> Bal, 76.

idea the particular work represents. To be sure, this sameness or identity is, again semiotically, indispensable.<sup>299</sup>

In other words, Bal argues that when a work appears in museums or exhibitions all over the world, a particular universalist understanding of the notion of that art is imposed in a local context. The realization of this work, or technique of this work, is the cultural imperialism imposed.

The term “cultural imperialism” has links between present domination and a colonial past. But it is, in fact, a highly ambiguous term that has significant implications for the way we think about present day exhibitions. According to cultural theorist John Tomlinson, the term is a series of interwoven discourses. For example, the term “culture” is a complex whole that not only means art, but knowledge, belief, law and custom and all the capabilities and habits of members in society. Additionally, the term “imperialism” contains notions of control, power or dominium that are in between a set of economic meanings and a set of political meanings.<sup>300</sup> In its most general sense, Tomlinson argues, the term can be narrowed down to either meaning “a pattern of inherited colonial attitudes and practices, or as the practices or effects of ongoing economic relations within global capitalism.”<sup>301</sup> Because, as I have argued in Chapter Two, contemporary collecting practices are too complex to conflate with colonial collecting patterns, and that the exhibition of the Sigg Collection is highly motivated by economic benefits, this project will consider cultural imperialism realized, in a general sense, as being an affect of the global circulation of capital.

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 19.

To summarize with this definition in mind, this chapter will consider Bal's argument in examining how the Sigg Collection has used "repetition" in exhibitions as its methodology in disseminating its vision of contemporary Chinese art to the world by largely repeating the same curatorial concepts at each stop of "Mahjong". I will also argue that the exhibition's framing of contemporary Chinese art is similar to that at the 48th Venice Biennale by examining the artworks and themes of each. Both of these examples will demonstrate that canons are, as Cutting writes, "cultural constructs created, in part, through reproduction and exposure."<sup>302</sup>

#### ***48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale 1999***

Harald Szeemann was appointed late to the role of Director of the 48th Venice Biennale. The show had been fraught with persistent rumours that the exhibition would skip a year in order to coincide with the millennium festivities, but by early spring 1999 it was announced that the exhibition would go on as planned from June 13<sup>th</sup> -November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999, with Szeemann as its director.<sup>303</sup> One of the most memorable curatorial aspects of the Venice Biennale was Szeemann's decision to reinstate and curate the Aperto (or Open) section, one that he had initiated in 1980 at the Aresenale (Venice's old naval yard) but was discontinued in 1995 due to a new committee who wanted to make room for a historical centenary exhibition entitled "Identity and Otherness." The point of Aperto was to support and be open to younger or less established artists and it had often

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<sup>302</sup> James Cutting, "Mere Exposure, Reproduction and the Impressionist Canon" in *Partisans Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski, 82 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>303</sup> Jean-Marc Adolphe, "1999 Venice Biennale on Track," *Art in America*, 87: 2 (February 1999), 128.

been the most popular venue of the Biennale. The Biennale was apparently flat without it.<sup>304</sup>

For the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Szeemann not only reinstated Aperto, but also more than doubled its exhibition space and moved it beyond the shipyard to include the vast sixteenth century industrial buildings in Venice, which meant the Corderie was now connected to the Artiglierie, Tese and Gaggiandre, which added another 4000 square meters of space.<sup>305</sup> In addition, the artworks of some 99 artists that Szeemann selected for the exhibition were displayed all over the city, which shifted the balance of the exhibition from the traditional national pavilions.<sup>306</sup> Symbolically, Szeemann also changed the title from simply Aperto to “D’APERTTutto” which means OPEN to All, which referred both to the historic "Aperto" section, and to Szeemann's intent to keep the door wide open to artists from all over the world.<sup>307</sup>

However, as a surprise to critics and visitors, Szeemann appeared to be most interested in being “open” to artists from Mainland China. As outlined in the first chapter, Szeemann invited twenty contemporary Chinese artists (more than any other nationality in the exhibition) to participate with other international artists in the 48<sup>th</sup> Biennale after being invited by Sigg to China to be introduced to contemporary Chinese art. As it turned out, the decision to include a large number of Chinese artists brought Szeemann a particularly warm critical reception. The curatorial concept did not group works in one

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<sup>304</sup> For a further description on the Biennale without Aperto, see Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996), 299.

<sup>305</sup> Monica Dematté, “Chinese Art at the Venice Biennial: Chinese Art...It’s dAPERTutto!,” *Chineseart.com*, July 1999. <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Post89/post89.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

<sup>306</sup> For instance, the Italian pavilion hosted artists from other countries and Italian artists were no longer to be found exclusively in the Italian pavilion, but were instead distributed around the city.

<sup>307</sup> Monica Dematté, “Chinese Art at the Venice Biennial: Chinese Art...It’s dAPERTutto!,” July 1999. <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Post89/post89.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

national area as in the 1993 Venice Biennale, but instead scattered them around the city: eleven of the artists were in the Italian Pavilion, and nine were in the Aperto section of the Arsenal. For instance, Cai Guo-Qiang's *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1999) (fig. 3.1), an installation of 70 life-sized sculptures meant to depict class struggle, was installed at the end of the Arsenal complex.<sup>308</sup> According to Francesca Dal Lago, "the poignant visual character of the work [was] largely amplified by the suggestive space of a run-down warehouse."<sup>309</sup> But more than anything, the integration of Chinese artists among other artists brought new meaning for visitors to the participation of Chinese artists in the exhibition who considered them to be on par with other international artists.<sup>310</sup>

Western critics saw this concept as a landmark in the reception of art from China, and most visitors, who were encountering this art for the first time, were pleasantly shocked by what they saw.<sup>311</sup> Monica Dematté, writer and curator of Chinese art, described at the time the positive effect of Szeemann's curatorial decision as follows: "What many westerners...know about Chinese art is still very little, and the sudden exposure these artists are getting, partially fills a gap in the conservative and un-adventurous Italian art scene and art market."<sup>312</sup> For many, it seemed as though Szeemann had single-handedly catapulted contemporary Chinese artists from the

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<sup>308</sup> Cai Guoqiang's *Rent Collection* (1999) was awarded the distinguished Golden Lion prize at the Biennale which is handed out by an international jury,

<sup>309</sup> Francesca Dal Lago, "Of Site and Space: The Virtual Reality of Chinese Contemporary Art," *Chineseart.com*, July 1999, <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Feature/feature.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 154.

<sup>312</sup> Monica Dematté, "Chinese Art at the Venice Biennial: Chinese Art...It's dAPER Tutto!," July 1999. <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Post89/post89.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

peripheries to the centre. The 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale was considered to be the “final breakthrough” for Chinese artists to be recognised internationally.<sup>313</sup>

However, as we know, Szeemann did not act alone in introducing the world to contemporary Chinese art.<sup>314</sup> Szeemann had been invited in 1998 to China on behalf of Sigg in order to participate on the review committee for Sigg’s very first CCAA (Contemporary Chinese Art Award). As outlined, the end result was the participation of twenty Chinese artists in the 1999 Venice Biennale and Szeemann heralding contemporary Chinese art as what the art world was looking for. As Szeemann voiced at the time: "Nowadays, the most serious, talented, modest and exciting painters come from China."<sup>315</sup>

Since the Biennale, the story of Sigg bringing Szeemann to China for an introduction to its contemporary art has become over-exaggerated in character, as though they both single-handedly introduced contemporary Chinese art to the world. For instance, *The Wall Street Journal* details the history of Szeemann, Sigg and contemporary Chinese art, arguing that contemporary Chinese art is regularly found in museums and being perused by collectors “partially due to Mr. Sigg's relentless promotion of Chinese artists to sceptical curators in the 1990s.”<sup>316</sup> This is because Sigg had to “practically force the late Swiss curator Harald Szeemann to board a plane to China in 1998 to survey artists' ateliers” but resulted in the event being “still referred to as the "Chinese

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<sup>313</sup> Andreas Schiendorfer, “Chinese Art also has a Present,” *Credit Suisse*. <http://emagazine.credit-suisse.com/app/article/index.cfm?fuseaction=OpenArticle&aoid=95833&coid=139&lang=EN> (accessed 12 February 2007).

<sup>314</sup> In addition, as mentioned in Chapter One, by then Hanart TZ gallery in Hong Kong had already opened the international market (1992), and the *China's New Art, Post 1989* (Hong Kong, 1993) and *China Avant Garde* exhibitions (Berlin 1993) had already toured internationally.

<sup>315</sup> Shao Da, “CCAA: A Platform for Chinese Contemporary Artist,” *ShanghART Gallery*. <http://www.shanghارتgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/335> (accessed 12 February 2008).

<sup>316</sup> Helen Chang, “Why I Buy, Collectors Reveal What Drives Them,” *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119999526879881729.html> (accessed 9 June 2009).

biennial.”<sup>317</sup> Ai Weiwei is quoted in *ART News* as describing the relationship between Szeemann and Sigg as being: “A major factor in raising the international profile of contemporary Chinese art,” Ai believes that when Sigg brought Szeemann to artists’ studios in Beijing and Shanghai, “Szeemann ended up including more than nineteen Chinese artists...in the “aperto” section of the 1999 Venice Biennale.”<sup>318</sup> And finally, Sigg himself concurs in saying that it was that “it was *only* Harald Szeemann’s Venice Biennale exhibition in 1999 that really broke down barriers.”<sup>319</sup>

Perhaps most indicative of the sentiment surrounding the relationship between Szeemann and Chinese art is the recent work of art created by artist Li Zhanyang from Jilin Province in China. In his sculptural work *Dying a Martyr* (2007) (fig. 3.2) which is part of his larger Rent Collection (a sculptural grouping of art world figures who have been selected based on their roles in international of Chinese art), Li depicts artist Cai Guoqiang along with Samuel Keller (the former Director of Art Basel) in a powerful scene. Both protagonists are carrying a deceased Jesus Christ which, according to the description of the piece, is intended to represent Szeemann (who passed away in 2005) and thus suggestive of his role of being the saviour of contemporary Chinese art.<sup>320</sup> These mighty visual and spoken references embellish Szeemann’s actions – and thereby Sigg’s

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<sup>317</sup> Helen Chang, “Why I Buy: Collectors Reveal What Drives Them,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 January 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119999526879881729.html> (accessed 2 February 2009).

<sup>318</sup> Barbara Pollack, “A Bowl of Pearls, a Ton of Tea, and an Olympic Stadium,” *ART News*, 105: 9 (October 2006), 165.

<sup>319</sup> Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 19 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005). Italics are mine.

<sup>320</sup> Description according to Galerie Urs Meile, which currently holds Li’s artwork in its collection. “Detail ‘Rent’ - Rent Collection Yard, 2007,” *Galerie Urs Meile*. [http://www.galerieursmeile.com/nav/top/artists/works/default.htm?view\\_ArtistItem\\_OID=52](http://www.galerieursmeile.com/nav/top/artists/works/default.htm?view_ArtistItem_OID=52) (accessed 5 July 2009).

as well – with the valiant cause of having single-handedly introduced the world to Chinese contemporary art.

The presence of China's contemporary art in the international context of the Biennial undoubtedly produced a meaningful and necessary intercultural confrontation both for the Chinese artists and the international public. As described in the first chapter, the subsequent rise in interest in collecting contemporary Chinese art and the inclusion of the artists in international exhibitions in the few years after the Biennial is evidence enough of their shift from the peripheries. However, what is consistently absent from this legendary connection is the information as to exactly how involved the Sigg Collection was in the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, aside from introducing Szeemann to the art.

According to Sigg, when Szeemann decided to include contemporary Chinese artists in the Biennale after surveying China's art scene with him, Szeemann initially went to the Chinese government to involve them in the selection process. Szeemann specifically asked the government for 'experimental art,' but China's national institutions did not have such work in their collections, nor was the government very familiar with what Szeemann had requested. Instead, they offered Szeemann traditional Chinese art, not believing that the world would want to see the sort of art they had yet to come to terms with themselves.<sup>321</sup>

However, traditional Chinese art did not fit the curatorial exhibition plan that Szeemann had in mind, so he took another avenue and selected a large majority of the works for the exhibition from two sources: the Uli and Rita Sigg Collection and from the

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<sup>321</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

Swiss collector Urs Meile.<sup>322</sup> Out of the twenty mainland artists, they and their chosen medium are listed as follows: *Installation*: Ai Weiwei (in addition to photography), Chen Zhen and Wang Jin (in addition to sculpture); *Woodblock print*: Fang Lijun; *Sculpture*: Liang Shaoji, Lu Hao, and Wang Du; *Painting*: Ma Liuming (in addition to performance), Qiu Shihua, Wang Xinwei, Xie Nanxing, Yang Shaobing, Yue Minjun, and Zhou Teihai; *Video*: Ying-bo and Zhang Peili; *Photography*: Zhan Huan (in addition to performance) and Zhang Hui; *Posters*: Zhao Bandi.<sup>323</sup> Significantly, in the index of the Biennale catalogue, twelve of the twenty artists are attributed to the Uli and Rita Sigg Collection.<sup>324</sup>

With his collection having such a large role in Szeemann's curatorial selection, Sigg explains that the reason Szeemann came to his collection was because the government had not yet engaged with this art, and only did so "in 1999 after Harold came, and they found out that this art was leaving China to go to Venice."<sup>325</sup> According to Sigg, the artists selected out of his collection "weren't approved to go,"<sup>326</sup> by the government but this did not stop Szeemann from taking them. The reason he took so many works of art specifically out of Sigg's collection for the Venice Biennale was, according to Sigg, "because they weren't readily available elsewhere."<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Other sources that loaned their works to Szeemann are as listed as follows: the artists directly, the Max Protetch Gallery in New York, Vikie and Kent Logan Collection, Art & Public in Geneva, the Ringier Collection in Zurich (which, notably, belongs the Swiss media company of which Sigg was chairman). "Exhibited Works," in *La Biennale Di Venezia: 48a Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte*, eds. Paolo Baratta, Harald Szeemann, Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, 398-406 (Italy: Marsilio, 1999).

<sup>323</sup> To this group has to be added Huang Yongping (now living in Paris) who represented France exhibiting at their national pavilion. Francesca Dal Lago, "Of Site and Space: The Virtual Reality of Chinese Contemporary Art," *Chineseart.com*, July 1999. <http://www.chineseart.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Feature/feature.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

<sup>324</sup> See Appendix I: "Artists in the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale from the Sigg Collection".

<sup>325</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

Works that were also available were found in the collection of Urs Meile. Yet many of the works that Meile loaned to Szeemann are by the same artists that Szeemann borrowed from the Sigg Collection. For instance, in the Biennale catalogue, the Uli and Rita Sigg Collection is credited for one of the five in Qiu Shihua's *Landscape* (1998) (fig.3.3) series, while Galerie Urs Meile is credited for the other four; one of the four in Zhou Tiehai *Press Conference* series (1998) (fig. 3.4) is credited for the Uli and Rita Sigg Collection, one to an undisclosed private collector, and the two others are from the Galerie Urs Meile, and out of the six in Yang Shaobing's *Untitled* (1996-8) (fig. 4.4) series the Uli and Rita Sigg Collection and Galerie Urs Meile are each credited for one painting. In fact, the connection between Meile and Szeemann was quite possibly even orchestrated through Sigg because Sigg had a habit of introducing people to contemporary Chinese art, especially Swiss compatriots like Meile and Szeemann.<sup>328</sup>

Any suggestion of conflict of interest, however, was strategically absent. Despite Sigg's extensive influence in being a liaison between Szeemann, Meile and Chinese art, it is only in the opening credits of the catalogue that the Siggs are acknowledged. The names Uli and Rita Sigg are mentioned among various colleagues of Szeemann, such as curators (Carolyn Christov Bakargiev), artistic managers (Saskia Bos, Artistic and Managing Director of the De Appel Centre for Contemporary Art) and art critics (Hans Ulrich Obrist) whom Szeemann thanked for being part of a "system of free consultation...who so willingly offered their expert advice...to discuss the overall shape

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<sup>328</sup> As described in Chapter Two, Meile had been introduced to contemporary Chinese art through his self described "long time friend" Sigg, who brought Meile along to visit artists' studios throughout China during 1996-1997 while Sigg collected. Thus the majority of the artworks that Meile loaned to Szeemann for the Biennale (especially as it was in 1999 when Meile had first begun to collect) would have been informed by Sigg's personal "taste."

that the vision of the exhibition was gradually assuming.”<sup>329</sup> Thus the ambiguity in the acknowledgement of the Sigg’s role avoids the insinuation that there was a conflict of interest between the curator (Szeemann) and the dealer (Sigg) in an exhibition setting that is supposedly guided by aesthetics rather than financial motivations. As art lawyer Barbara T. Hoffman argues, if there is a need for anything in the art world “there is a need for increased transparency and accountability.”<sup>330</sup> Especially in the exhibition space, where there are so many “voices” to be heard and where, as curator and art critic Bruce W. Ferguson argues, “like all other political institutions with socially authorized voices, what they [exhibitions] do and in whose name are important to any sense of democracy, especially a democracy of representation.”<sup>331</sup>

Chinese art historian Thomas J. Berghuis believes that the Sigg Collection played too large a role for it not to have been more acknowledged. He argues that so many pieces in the Biennale came from the Sigg Collection that it should have been considered a point of contention with the exhibition theme of “open to all”. The fact that the Sigg Collection was “the primary source of the artwork” as he opines, “should have been mentioned in an exhibition supposedly intended to be an ‘open to all’ representations of contemporary Chinese art.”<sup>332</sup> Contemporary Chinese art historian and curator Francesca Dal Lago also comments on the fact two thirds of the exhibited pieces were from Swiss galleries and private collections. It is a fact she calls “curious,” and one that prompts Dal Lago to call for “further investigation behind the curatorial strategy in the selection, and

<sup>329</sup> Harald Szeemann, “APERTO over ALL in the exhibited order of its self-actualizations” in *La Biennale Di Venezia: 48a Esposizione Internazionale D’Arte*, ed. Baratta, Paolo, Szeemann, Harald, Lavelli, Cecilia Liveriero xxxi (Italy: Marsilio, 1999).

<sup>330</sup> Barbara T. Hoffman, “Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts: The Many Faces of Conflict of Interest” in *Ethics and the Visual Arts*, eds. Elaine E. King and Gail Levin, 258 (New York: Allworth Press, 2006).

<sup>331</sup> Bruce W. Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, 182 (London and New York: Routledge).

<sup>332</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 154.

its relationship to a certain place.”<sup>333</sup> Dal Lago encourages questioning what place, or rather, the ‘idea’ of a place, are the works united to depict? And furthermore, what is its relationship to the source?

### ***Szeemann and Sigg draw a picture***

In 1999, *Artnet* magazine reported on the progress of the 48<sup>th</sup> Biennale exhibition, stating that “after a long visit to China, Szeemann invited participation by fifteen Chinese artists ‘who have escaped the tradition of social realism.’”<sup>334</sup> When the selected artists came together at the Biennale months later, “escape” appeared to be the theme of contemporary Chinese art that Szeeman was looking to present to the world. According to Berghuis, the Chinese artworks that were selected to be at the Biennale conveyed the sense that the artists were a group of culturally oppressed “underground artists” whose works had not been officially recognized at “home.”<sup>335</sup> In other words, Szeemann presented artists as unofficial contemporary Chinese artists who had broken away, or “escaped” from the political oppression of the Chinese state.

The classification of the Chinese artists worked perfectly with the “d’Aperto” theme because it suggested that the Biennale, and the rest of the world, would be ‘open’ to the artwork of repressed contemporary Chinese artists. Indeed, Szeemann hints at this theme various times in his poetic introduction to the Biennale catalogue by writing such descriptions of Chinese art as: “It’s playful, the East, It’s scratching oneself as new form

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<sup>333</sup> Francesca Dal Lago, “Of Site and Space: The Virtual Reality of Chinese Contemporary Art,” *Chineseart.com*, July 1999. <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Feature/feature.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

<sup>334</sup> “Venice Unveiled,” *Artnet News*, 4 May 1999.

<http://www.artnet.sk/magazine/news/artnetnews/artnetnews5-4-99.asp> (accessed 28 April 2009).

<sup>335</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 154.

of iconography, It's what's below the monochrome, It's propaganda mocked, It's Chinese performance, It's silkworms in action, It's the suffering and rebellion of the clay peasants...<sup>336</sup> thereby making the China that audiences encounter at the Biennale as one that has re-emerged as fluctuating and changing, but still marked with tropes of the Western desire to know the mysterious Oriental "other". By comparison, the international travelling exhibition "New Chinese Art: Inside Out" that began its tour in 1998 in New York framed contemporary Chinese art as something much more complex and relevant to what was actually happening in China at the time. The intention of the curator Gao Minglu, was to organize the exhibition to look at themes of modernity and to position Chinese work as a "local elaboration on an international art scene."<sup>337</sup> In contrast to 'd'Aperto,' Chinese identity was framed as still being attached to China.

However, this theme was not entirely applicable for all of the artists who were selected to be at the Biennale. By the end of the 1990s, many of the artists (such as Ai Weiwei, Fang Lijun and Zhang Huan) had already been included numerous times in other international blockbuster exhibitions, were represented in private galleries in China, and had been acquired by many private collectors.<sup>338</sup> The artists were not so much looking to

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<sup>336</sup> Monica Dematté, "Chinese Art at the Venice Biennial: Chinese Art...It's dAPERTutto!," *Chineseart.com*, July 1999. <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Post89/post89.htm> (accessed 10 April 2009). Website now off-line.

<sup>337</sup> Jenny Liu, "Inside Out: New Chinese Art," *Frieze Magazine*, January 1999. [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/inside\\_out\\_new\\_chinese\\_art/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/inside_out_new_chinese_art/) (accessed 29 July 2009).

<sup>338</sup> Before the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, Ai Wei Wei had exhibited in numerous international shows, such as *China's New Expression*, Municipal Gallery, New York, USA (1986), *Avant-Garde Chinese Art*, Albany University Art Museum, New York, USA (1986) and had founded China Art Archives and Warehouse, Beijing, China (1997). Fang Lijun had participated in international shows, such as *CHINA!*, Kunstmuseum Bonn (traveling to Vienna, Copenhagen, & Warsaw) (1996-1997) and already had international solo shows such as *Fang Lijun*, Galerie Bellefroid Paris, France (1996) and *Fang Lijun: Human Images in an Uncertain Age*, The Japan Foundation Asia Center Tokyo, Japan (1996). Among other achievements, Zhang Huan had both participated in the famous Chinese art exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art, Asia Society*, New York, NY, PS 1 Museum of Contemporary Art, Long Island City (1998) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA (1998) and been collected by the Kent and Vickie Logan Collection, San Francisco (1999).

“escape” from the oppressive artistic hold of China, nor were they unknown in their local context. Berghuis argues that Szeemann’s theme was deployed in a “clear attempt to foreground a radical subculture of experimental Chinese artists.”<sup>339</sup>

Such a curatorial strategy when it comes to artwork from Socialist countries is not uncommon and is one that is generally well received by Western audiences. According to Karen Smith, the positioning of Chinese artists as rebellious is a consequence of the argument that Modern art originated from the West, which has created a voyeuristic appreciation of “Eastern dissident art” through Western eyes. Smith argues that because the idea of freedom of expression has been considered by the West to be an exclusive, historical achievement for Europe (and then America), a contrary way of thinking has developed for the West, wherein all art that originates from “repressed” countries (such as Russia, Cuba and China) must be “dissident” if they are to be considered “authentic.”<sup>340</sup> In reality, what is supposed to be at play in “dissident art” is a representation of the conscious opposition to a system that demands authority.<sup>341</sup> Indeed, according to Wu Hung, the positioning of Chinese artists as dissidents is a large part of why their art was accepted at the time. He argues, “ironically, such an interpretation based on Cold War Logic led to the artists’ success and changed their status in their home country.”<sup>342</sup> Dissident art is a narrow category, but it is one that has acquired romantic overtones, which makes it more attractive for curators, especially one as experienced as Szeemann.

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<sup>339</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 154.

<sup>340</sup> Smith, 14.

<sup>341</sup> For an elaboration on dissident art and its history, see Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, (New York: IconEditions, 1999).

<sup>342</sup> Wu, 22.

The positioning of the Chinese artists as “escaping” the oppressive hold of the Communist party apparatus was a theme that worked for Szeemann’s curatorial concept of “d’Apertutto” and for the cultural imagination of many. To both, an international exhibition as large as the Biennale was seen as the opportunity to rescue Chinese artists from their relative isolation. It was also a positioning that subsequently has been historicised in contemporary Chinese art. For instance, when art historian Harry Bellet wrote about Chinese artists in the context of the globalizing art world, he described the outcome of the Chinese artists presence at the Biennale as: “Szeemann experienced an epiphany with respect to Chinese art thanks to one of his friends, Uli Sigg...Szeemann’s initiative granted China – until then *terra incognita* – a foothold in the great contemporary art circus.”<sup>343</sup>

The additional result of this repositioning is that the Sigg Collection was also granted a foothold in shaping the canon. By introducing Szeemann to the art and having such a large influence on works in the exhibition, the specific taste that informed the Sigg Collection was reified. Susan M. Pearce argues that “collectors often feel that their achievements are validated by the exhibition” because they do not often have the opportunity to exhibit their collection in the museum.<sup>344</sup> According to Pearce, museums have generally ignored the activities of collectors because exhibitions of their artwork have resulted in a “degree of contempt for the bad taste and non-professional expertise of collectors.”<sup>345</sup> This is unfortunate for the private collector, because museums are

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<sup>343</sup> Harry Bellet, “Jet Set Art: Globalizing the art market” in *Passages/Passagen*. 35 (Winter 2003): 7.

<sup>344</sup> Susan M. Pearce, ed., *The Collector’s Voice* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 75.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

considered, as Pearce writes, “a key part of playing a part in the definition of “good” and “bad” art.”<sup>346</sup>

The Sigg Collection had the opportunity to be validated in the museum setting on several occasions. After the Venice Biennale, the Sigg Collection headlined exhibitions all over the world, including “A Chinese Dream: From the Sigg Collection” (as part of ARTSingapore 2007); “Year of the Golden Pig,” (Lewis Glucksman Gallery, UCC University College Cork - Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland, 2007); and “Aside: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection,” (Joan Miro Museum, Barcelona, 2008). The collection, however, has never been exhibited in China. In showing the Sigg Collection internationally, a repetition of the same idea occurred, and a canon began to form outside of its place of origin. In doing so, the Sigg Collection’s methodology of dissemination operates according to Mieke Bal’s theory of sameness, which argues that if the distribution of art in museums all over the world is repeated enough times, it is capable of imposing an essentialist idea of artistic value. According to Bal, “this unreflective self-evident repetition is the defining feature of canonicity.”<sup>347</sup> By far, the largest exhibition of the Sigg Collection to do so has been “Mahjong.” Its success is due in large part to the fact that the Sigg Collection had such a defining part in the Biennale and continued to exhibit afterward. On the outcome of bringing Szeemann to China, Sigg remarked, “These days, people listen to me more.”<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 416.

<sup>348</sup> Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China,” 19.

### ***Mahjong***

The exhibition concept of “Mahjong” refers to mahjong, the national game of China (fig. 3.5). The game mahjong originated from the Ming dynasty, and consists of 144 tiles, which are divided into different categories such as bamboo, winds, and dragon. The point of mahjong is to collect the best particular combination of tiles to gain the highest-scoring combinations. As it is explained in the preface of the exhibition catalogue, mahjong was considered the perfect metaphor for the exhibition, because:

A collection always strives for the ideal of perfection (the 144 mahjong pieces) and in the course of time forms clusters (the sets). In this exhibition the *collector's special interests* are condensed into twelve sections. Presenting a collection at several places allows and requires a number of carefully matched arrangements. The pieces are shuffled each time, and no two rounds are the same.<sup>349</sup>

Significantly, the explanation highlights that it is the “*collector's special interests*” that determine how the sections are put together.

Thus, no matter how many times the pieces are shuffled around at each exhibition, each set is imbued with Sigg's particular vision of China, and each exhibition is carefully controlled *repetitively* to tell the story that Chinese art represents for Sigg. At every stop it made on the “Mahjong” tour, the Sigg Collection repeats its particular understanding of contemporary Chinese art and the suggestion that the collection stands for the whole by consistent curatorial strategies every stop – from the themes, to the selection of artists, to the press. This consistency goes so far that many of these artists and their artworks are the same ones from Sigg's collection that were exhibited in the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

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<sup>349</sup> “Rules” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005) n.p. Italics are mine.

In “Mahjong”, each grouping of artworks suggests either an historical, political or social interpretation of the works based on the title of section. The artworks are generally united on the basis of a common style or shared thematic motives. For instance, the titles of groupings in the exhibition in Hamburg were as follows: “Heroes of the People 1966-1976”; “China Avant-Garde 1979-1989”; “Parade in Tiananmen Square”; “Qiu Shihua-Paintings”; “Wang Du- Chamber-Strategy”; “Myths of Ancient China”; “From the Country to the City”; “Xie Nanxing- Spaces”; “Department Store Bliss; Mass and Individual”; “Lucky Family”; “Script and Sign”; “Altered Tradition; Body as Matter”; “Western Art from a Chinese Perspective”; and “Mao Mythos and Mao Pop” (fig. 3.7). In general, these are the same themes that the Sigg Collection has told at every stop the exhibition has made. Even at the Peabody Museum (the smallest exhibition thus far of “Mahjong”) the thematic structure was similar to Hamburg, with the work paired down to be grouped under the following three titles: “Individual and Society”; “Urban Transformation”; “Mao and Beyond”; and “Tradition Revisited”.

The overarching themes in all of the “Mahjong” exhibitions grapple with 1) how contemporary Chinese artists make use of new artistic and personal freedoms while they respect traditional Chinese art, and 2) how they deal with the infiltration of the West while they are stifled by the Communist Party at home. Most of the groupings of art are configured to reflect the tension between socialist ideals that are officially operative and the consumerism unleashed by capital reforms.<sup>350</sup> Though the curatorial strategy here is not as definitive as the way in which Szeemann framed Chinese artists at the Venice

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<sup>350</sup> “Mahjong Contemporary Chinese Art From the Sigg Collection,” *Eflux Shows*. <http://www.eflux.com/shows/view/1906> (accessed 12 July 2009).

Biennale as being “dissident” artists, it is still a familiar one to Western audiences since contemporary Chinese art came to the limelight at the Biennale.

An accessible theme for audiences has proven to be the best financial option for museums. According to economist Richard E. Caves, “blockbuster” exhibitions need to be presented as material that is relatively well known in art circles in order to be successful. Exhibitions that are presented as scholarly or specific in nature are not as attractive to museum goers that may feel it is too sophisticated for their attendance. Even though large-scale exhibitions may not push the boundaries or offer much scholarly insights, Caves argues that they are more successful and generate more revenue for museums than scholarly exhibitions.<sup>351</sup> In other words, the public needs to feel familiar with what they may encounter before they are willing to pay admission charges to see it. For some, as it turned out, “Mahjong” was indeed familiar. Almost all the artists that were in the Venice Biennale from the Sigg Collection were also exhibited in “Mahjong”.

In total, “Mahjong” has varied from full capacity at Bern at 240 works, to 200 works at Hamburg and at Salzburg, 196 works at Berkeley, to 120 works at the Peabody. Special circumstances have varied the selection of works. For instance, in the case of “Mahjong” at Hamburg, the exhibition was modified to fit the smaller museum. Removing some of the larger installation pieces did this. The same would be true at the other stops for the exhibitions: a few select works would be added or removed depending on the capacity of the institution or the insights of the curators, including Sigg.

For instance, at Berkeley, curators Julia M. White and Lucinda Barnes wanted to add new works to “Mahjong” that Sigg had acquired in his collection since it began in

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<sup>351</sup> Richard E. Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 344.

Bern four years earlier. Artworks were added both of established artists, like Shi Guorui's *Birds Nest Stadium* (2008) and women artists, such as Liang Yuanwei's *Piece of Life* (2008) (fig. 3.8), in order to exhibit both emerging artists and a sophistication in more established artists.<sup>352</sup> As Julia M. White of Berkeley explains it: "We wanted to represent the entire collection fairly, but of course had to consider the available gallery space... We also endeavoured to bring recently created works into the mix, including several new works by young and relatively unknown women artists."<sup>353</sup> The addition of women artists also serves as a reminder that there has been a marked absence of adequate gender representation in previous "Mahjong" exhibitions, which have been almost completely composed of male artists. Even though a sizeable amount of art in the "Mahjong" exhibitions is from the 1980s, which, as Karen Smith describes, was a "man's world" in Chinese art circles, a large amount is also from the 1990s, which was when women artists began taking part in art events on a regular basis.<sup>354</sup> Thus the few women artists added to "Mahjong" at Berkeley highlights the little credence women have been accorded in contemporary Chinese art up until recently.<sup>355</sup>

And yet, other than these noted changes, the roster of artists selected from the Sigg Collection and the overall thematic groupings has not varied much from the first "Mahjong" in Bern in 2004. On the other hand, changes in the selection of artists in the

<sup>352</sup> Special circumstances have also meant that works have had to be changed in "Mahjong". For instance, when "Mahjong" was at Bern, a visitor filed a complaint with the city's district attorney over the work *Ruan* by artist Xiao Yu. The piece, which rests in a bin of formaldehyde, is compromised of the head of a female foetus, the eyes of rabbits and the body of a baby bird. The artwork was subsequently removed from the exhibit, which, according to Sigg, led him to opt out of having it in subsequent "Mahjong" exhibits, in order to avoid having the controversy of the piece take away from the rest of the artworks in the exhibition.

<sup>353</sup> "Julia White on the Sigg Collection," *ArtZineChina*.

[http://new.ArtZinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid658\\_en.html](http://new.ArtZinechina.com/display_vol_aid658_en.html) (accessed 29 May 2009).

<sup>354</sup> Smith, *Nine Lives*, 60.

<sup>355</sup> Art critic Holland Cotter recently wrote an informative piece on the emergence of female artists in China. "China's Female Artists Quietly Emerge," July 30 2008, *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/arts/design/30arti.html> (accessed 30 May 2009).

exhibition demonstrate that canons can be flexible and are ultimately changeable. Indeed, by their very nature they are not stable, as they constitute a binary opposition of unity and difference, progress and stasis.<sup>356</sup> They are not static, nor are they permanent.

However, repeating the same exhibition is the best financial option for both the collector and the curator. For the curator, travelling exhibitions are affordable because most museums cannot afford to generate several fully developed new temporary exhibitions each year.<sup>357</sup> A travelling exhibition is usually already packaged together for the host institution which makes for less preparation as they arrive ready to install, with curatorial information such as public relations materials, publications, installation, and educational materials. In addition, a previously successful exhibition ensures media attention for the museum. In the case of “Mahjong”, which carried the title of being “one of the largest exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art ever,” this effect was pronounced.<sup>358</sup> Coverage of the exhibition has been featured in such widely distributed sources as the *Art Newspaper*,<sup>359</sup> *Kunstforum International*,<sup>360</sup> *Modern Painters*,<sup>361</sup> and *Art Asia Pacific*.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Jones, 134.

<sup>357</sup> West and Runge, 135-6.

<sup>358</sup> For instance, when curator Julia M. White (curator of “Mahjong” at Berkeley) was asked if there had ever been a show this large of contemporary Chinese art in the U.S., she responded “To my knowledge, this is the largest contemporary Chinese art show to be shown in the United States.” “Julia White on the Sigg Collection,” *ArtZine China*, [http://www.ArtZinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid658\\_en.html](http://www.ArtZinechina.com/display_vol_aid658_en.html) (accessed 13 July 2009).

<sup>359</sup> Evan Hughs, “China By Numbers,” *Art Newspaper*, 16:186 (2007), 34.

<sup>360</sup> Rainer Unruh, “Mahjong: chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg,” *Kunstforum International*, 183 (Dec 2006- Feb 2007): 314-315.

<sup>361</sup> Barbara Pollack, “Culture Vultures: The Contrasting Collections of Jean Pigozzi and Uli Sigg” *Modern Painters*, 10 (December 2005/January 2006), 104-6.

<sup>362</sup> Xenia Tetmajer von Przerwa, “Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art From the Sigg Collection” *ART AsiaPacific*, 47 (Winter 2006), 82-83.

For the collector, a travelling exhibition means an increase in exposure for the collection, which validates the artwork and may increase its value on the art market.<sup>363</sup> An auction in Switzerland two years after the “Mahjong” exhibition in Bern further confirms the implications for contemporary Chinese artists on the market after “Mahjong”: Galerie Koller in Zurich held one of the first auctions of contemporary Chinese art ever outside of China (the first time in Switzerland and the second in Europe) and approximately 90 percent of the art was sold. The conviction among the art community in Switzerland was that it had much to do with the fact that the auction was on the heels of “Mahjong” in Bern, which generated one of the largest audiences at the Kunstmuseum as well as international acclaim. Journalists titled the influence of the exhibition on the auction as “The Mahjong Effect.”<sup>364</sup>

In addition, when the hosting institution does not have any other artwork in its collection of that genre to compare it against, this would, in turn, raise national press attention to the exhibition. In fact, many of the institutions that “Mahjong” visited had few – if any – pieces of contemporary Chinese artwork in their permanent collection. For instance, when asked if Berkeley had any contemporary Chinese art in its collection, curator Julia White of “Mahjong” remarked: “The museum has a few examples of Chinese contemporary art. The museum began collecting in the late 1990s. While we have wanted to continue collecting in this area, the growth of the market has made that

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<sup>363</sup> For example, as mentioned in Chapter Two, Sigg himself has said that collectors – particularly mainland Chinese collectors – now use the “Mahjong” catalogue to know what they should collect for financial benefits, and figuratively referred to it as “The Bible.”

<sup>364</sup> Isobel Leybold-Johnson, “Swiss Drive Interest in Chinese Art,” *Swiss Info China*, 10 January 2007. [http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/news/travel/Swiss\\_drive\\_interest\\_in\\_Chinese\\_art.html?siteSect=411&sid=7377748&ccKey=1168423217000&ty=st](http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/news/travel/Swiss_drive_interest_in_Chinese_art.html?siteSect=411&sid=7377748&ccKey=1168423217000&ty=st) (accessed 7 February 2009).

difficult for many museums.”<sup>365</sup> However, the popularity of “Mahjong” may have convinced other museums to consider acquiring contemporary Chinese art even in the market boom, as Christopher Heinrich, curator of “Mahjong” at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg (2006) has said, “‘Mahjong’ left the Kunsthalle with a proclivity to consider acquiring contemporary Chinese art in the museum’s permanent collection.”<sup>366</sup> Thus when private collectors lend work for an exhibition, both the museum and the collection benefit from the exposure, validation and enhanced reputation of the artworks.<sup>367</sup>

Much like at the Biennale, beyond financial benefits, Sigg also had a powerful and unassuming presence at “Mahjong”. Indeed, though there were curators for each “Mahjong” exhibition at every stop, Sigg was still heavily involved in all aspects of the exhibition. What is slightly different here from the Biennale, however, is that there is more transparency in acknowledging (a part of) Sigg’s role in the exhibition. White and Barnes acknowledge the curatorial presence of the Siggs (both Uli and Rita) in the introduction to the Berkeley “Mahjong” catalogue, writing: “From the very beginning they provided support, enthusiasm and guidance in the forming the exhibition. Their gracious hospitality made our frequent travels to see the collection a delightful experience.”<sup>368</sup> In the introduction to the “Mahjong” catalogue for three other exhibition stops, curators Frehner and Heinrich thank Sigg especially for his “tireless, stimulating involvement and his support in all stages of the preparatory work, from concept

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<sup>365</sup> “Julia White on the Sigg Collection,” *ArtZine China*.

[http://www.ArtZinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid658\\_en.html](http://www.ArtZinechina.com/display_vol_aid658_en.html) (accessed 5 April 2009).

<sup>366</sup> Christopher Heinrich. Interview with the author. Hamburg, December 13 2006.

<sup>367</sup> Robertson, 242.

<sup>368</sup> Julia M. White and Lucinda Barnes, “Acknowledgements” in *Mahjong: Art Film and Change in China*, ed. Julia M. White, 9 (University of California: Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2008).

development and selection of artists through to the hanging of the works.”<sup>369</sup> In other words, the curatorial tactics of Sigg have primarily mediated “Mahjong” at every stop on its tour.

If the patrons of the exhibition at Hamburg did not purchase the large hardcover catalogue at \$80 USD they would not have been privy to the majority of information about Sigg available at the exhibition.<sup>370</sup> Other than that, much like at the Biennale, the exhibition lacked any substantial acknowledgement about how exactly present and influential Sigg was in the making of “Mahjong”, and more importantly, what that meant for the exhibition and the Sigg Collection.<sup>371</sup> The lack of information, or self reflexivity rather, about the collection and the collector marks an important tension between the claim of “Mahjong” having globally accepted coverage of the canon and the discreetly acknowledged fact that the exhibition presents artworks selected and curated primarily according to the discretion of the collector. According to Ferguson, the relationship of the collector to the curator suggests that no exhibition is pure in any sense, rather they are, “the result of mixed desires and values from within a network of interests which run from the academic to the economic and from the semiotic to the institutional and from the professional to the amateur as a hybrid of spoken and unspoken assumptions of congruence.”<sup>372</sup>

And yet, perhaps a more obvious conclusion is that for Sigg, the curators and the institution, there has simply not been the incentive for changing the formula behind the

<sup>369</sup> Matthias Frehner and Christoph Heinrich, “Preface” *Mahjong: Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, 9 (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>370</sup> \$80 USD according to [www.artbook.com](http://www.artbook.com). As of August 2009, the catalogue is only available in hardcover.

<sup>371</sup> The relationship between Sigg and the exhibition was mentioned *outside* of the exhibition, mostly in newspapers and journals that were reviewing “Mahjong”. For example, Pollack “A Swiss Champion for the Art of a Rapidly Changing China,” section E, page 1, column 3.

<sup>372</sup> Ferguson “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 130.

exhibition because “Mahjong” has been met with great success in all its exhibition stops. At Bern, there were more than 40,000 visitors and it was considered the largest exhibition in the history of this museum.<sup>373</sup> In Hamburg, there were more than 100,000 visitors to the show (20,000 in the first fourteen days alone) and with many returning for successive visits.<sup>374</sup> In addition, a trip to China was organised that coincided with the theme of the exhibition through the Kunsthalle’s “Friends of the Museum” which subsequently sold out.<sup>375</sup>

Such an impressive audience indicates that contemporary Chinese art can no longer be considered on the peripheries of the art world as it was before the Biennale. But its success is also problematic to its canon: by repeating the same exhibition, new and current trends of Chinese art since 2005 (the date of the first “Mahjong” exhibition in Bern) do not necessarily have the same opportunity to shape the canon as do the artists that are in “Mahjong”. On the other hand, those artists that have toured with “Mahjong” might also similarly encounter difficulties. In order to be successful on the art market, these artists may elect to continue creating in the style for which they are best recognized after having toured with the exhibition. The consequences of “Mahjong” to Chinese artists are best summed up by a review in the *Boston Globe* of the exhibition while it was at the Peabody Essex, wherein the journalist encouraged audiences to see “Mahjong” because it was “a chance not just to see the recent flourishing of art in China

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<sup>373</sup> Koch, “Whose’ display? The Role of the Collector in the Canonization of Contemporary Chinese Art: Uli Sigg and ‘Mahjong’.”

<sup>374</sup> Heinrich, interview with the author, December 13 2006.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

as the fascinating historical phenomenon it is, but to try to spot the artists who really matter.”<sup>376</sup>

Though large scale international exhibitions like “Mahjong” and “Global” exhibitions like the Venice Biennale are indeed an opportunity to see the recent flourishing of art in China, each of these exhibitions, in their attempts to be all consuming and representative, do not do an adequate job of revealing how they are not, in fact, synecdochal. Instead, they speak for nations from a particular place, without revealing how they are positioned. The increase of these kinds of exhibitions since the 1980s has been occurring on an inter-national, trans-national and multi-national scale.<sup>377</sup>

Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filpovic have called this trend the “biennial phenomenon,” and argue that such large-scale international exhibitions not only reflect the cultural diversity of global artistic practices, but have become a form of institution in themselves.<sup>378</sup> According to author Judith Rugg, these exhibitions are now the main means by which contemporary art is mediated, experienced, and historicized.<sup>379</sup> It follows then that collectors, in being part of this mediation process, are increasingly dependent on the global exhibition model to validate their collections, and thereby help shape the canon.

Theorist Timothy Mitchell studies the phenomenon of the global exhibition with a concept that he calls the “world as exhibition.” In his work *Colonising Egypt*, Mitchell examines the objectification of Middle Easterners at the 1990 Paris Exposition,

<sup>376</sup> Sebastian Smee, “Character Studies,” March 20 2009, *The Boston Globe*.

[http://www.boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts/articles/2009/03/20/character\\_studies/](http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2009/03/20/character_studies/) (accessed June 29 2009).

<sup>377</sup> Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgewick, *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 16.

<sup>378</sup> Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filpovic as quoted in Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgewick, *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, 16.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.,15

considering it a significant example of nineteenth-century Europeans' proclivity to consider the "world-as-exhibition." Mitchell argues that this kind of visual objectification is part of the European colonial worldview, as he writes "Spectacles like world exhibition and the Orientalist congress set the up the world as picture... World exhibition here refers not to an exhibition of the world but to the world conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition."<sup>380</sup> For Mitchell, the world as exhibition presents a paradox for colonial modernity. According to author John Michael Archer, Mitchell believed that for nineteenth-century Europe "[The World was] based upon a split between reality, that which is pictured or modeled, and representation, the model itself."<sup>381</sup> In other worlds, how do we know what is real? And from what position are they doing the representing?

Like Mitchell's "world-as-exhibition," large, all encompassing exhibitions of art at the Venice Biennale and "Mahjong" have also claimed to stand for the whole of a nation. According to Wu Hung, they too, should be considered a paradox. Wu considers exhibitions like the Biennale as part of the murky entanglement of what defines contemporary Chinese art.<sup>382</sup> He attempts to summarize the irony of the complexities of its current status in a single sentence, arguing,

Although in general perception, contemporary Chinese art must be in some essential way be connected to China (so it can be recognised as "Chinese"), it also must require independent agency in order to entre the Global Salon.<sup>383</sup>

Indeed, in the case of "Mahjong," even though the exhibition claims to be the most representative of China's contemporary art, it has never been to China and will not

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<sup>380</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>381</sup> John Michael Archer, *Old Worlds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>382</sup> In this project I am only referring to the Venice Biennale, but of course there are numerous other Biennales that occur around the world, among them are the Biennale of Sydney, São Paulo Art Biennale, Shanghai Biennale, Singapore Biennale and the Whitney Biennale.

<sup>383</sup> Wu, 259.

according to Sigg, until China “is ready for its art.”<sup>384</sup> The uncomfortable relationships between Sigg, “Mahjong,” and China leads to the larger question of what it means to have a canon form outside of its place of origin. Even though, as outlined in Chapter One, after the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale China became more involved in supporting contemporary Chinese art by supporting such nationally-funded exhibitions as the Shanghai Biennale (2000) and the exhibitions “Living in Time” (Berlin, 2001) and “Alors, la Chine?” (Paris, 2002), and though a canon is constantly evolving, to what lengths must China go to regain control of a canon long shaped by outsiders? The constant exposure and repetition of Sigg’s vision of the canon illuminates China’s dilemma.

Indeed, the artists from the Sigg Collection that were in the Biennale have been a part of “Mahjong” on numerous occasions. Out of the twenty Chinese artists at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, sixteen of them have exhibited in at least one Mahjong exhibition. Out of these sixteen, the majority have exhibited in all five stops on the “Mahjong” tour. In addition to exhibiting their works that were in the Biennale, additional artworks from their portfolio are also being exhibited. An extensive portfolio functions as both a testament to their artistic worth (see: Appendix II: “Artists from Venice Biennale at “Mahjong””) and why these artists deserved being in the Biennale in the first place.<sup>385</sup>

The connections between the Biennale and “Mahjong” were obviously not lost on observers who had seen both exhibitions. Journalist Andrea Tognina remarked on the

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<sup>384</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

<sup>385</sup> For instance, the Sigg Collection loaned Fang Lijun’s “Untitled”, 1995 (oil on canvas) to be exhibited at the Biennale. In “Mahjong”, this piece is present alongside “SARS”, 2003, “Untitled” 1995, (oil on canvas) “Untitled”, 1998 (acrylic on canvas) and “Untitled”, 1995 (oil on canvas); Wang Jin’s “The Dream of China” 1997 was exhibited from the Sigg Collection at the Biennale, while in “Mahjong” it is exhibited alongside “Fighting in the Flood” 1994, and “My Bones”, 2000; and Yue Min Jun’s “Everybody Connects to Everybody” 1997 that was exhibited at the Biennale, is present at “Mahjong” and comes quite literally to life in the work “2000 A.D”, 2000, as the same cynically grinning men that are in “Everybody Connects to Everybody” have been recreated into twenty five life size figures that are represented three-dimensionally.

similarities between “Mahjong” and the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale while the exhibition was in Bern. She noted that:

Les œuvres présentées par le Kunstmuseum proviennent de la collection privée d'Uli Sigg, ancien ambassadeur de Suisse à Pékin. Ces pièces avaient d'ailleurs déjà été exposées lors de la Biennale de Venise en 1999, conduite par l'historien de l'art bernois Harald Szeemann.<sup>386</sup>

Arts journalist Evan J. Garza points to this disparity in his recent review of “Mahjong” while it was at the Peabody Essex in Salem (2009), arguing that: "Mahjong" isn't completely up to date. It omits some of the most critical questioning of China's future that has emerged from Beijing in the last three years — much of that in the form of performance photography.<sup>387</sup>

The observations of the journalists – that the exhibition included the same artists from the Biennale in “Mahjong” and did not include recent Chinese trends – indicate that the exhibition was not entirely representative of contemporary Chinese art. This runs counter to one of the main curatorial strategies behind “Mahjong”, which was either to promote or design the exhibition around the suggestion that the Sigg Collection is the most “complete,” “unique” and “representative” collection of contemporary Chinese art. Evidently, the Sigg Collection assumes the role of not only defining the canon for audiences, but in *being* the canon. Such a mediation of China's images is especially powerful when it is done in the exhibition space- one that is central, ambiguous and supposedly neutral.

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<sup>386</sup> Andrea Tognina, “Lorsque l'art touche aux limites de l'éthique,” *Swiss Info*, 18 August 2005. <http://www.swissinfo.ch/fre/index.html?siteSect=107&sid=6055062&cKey=1125584834000> (accessed 29 March 2009).

<sup>387</sup> Evan J. Garza, “Great Walls,” 27 February 2009, *The Boston Phoenix*. <http://thephoenix.com/Boston/Arts/77219-Great-walls/?page=2#TOPCONTENT> (accessed 2 May 2009).

The description of the Sigg Collection being “complete”, “unique” and “representative” occurred repetitively in the publicity for “Mahjong”. For instance, at the Museum der Moderne of Salzburg, the press further expanded on the metaphor of the game mahjong for the show in writing: “The exhibition not only displays the highlights of a collection, but is also a representative cross-section (and thus is a metaphor for the ideal of completeness)”.<sup>388</sup> At the Peabody Essex, the Sigg Collection was described in the press release as “the first attempt to coalesce the extraordinary artists developments that have taken place in China over the last forty years.”<sup>389</sup> In the original catalogue for “Mahjong,” the exhibition is described as “the most complete and important exhibition of contemporary Chinese art.”<sup>390</sup> And, finally, in the press release for the exhibition at Bern, the exhibition is described as having “all the leading positions and important trends are represented here by major work, many of which have achieved iconic status in the Chinese art world.”<sup>391</sup> Significantly, as contemporary Chinese art historian Franziska Koch has rightly pointed out, the omitting of the attribute “contemporary” in the latter description suggests that the Siggs’ collection stands for the *whole* artistic production of China rather than only within the period he collected.<sup>392</sup>

Additionally, at the latest stop of the “Mahjong” exhibition at the Peabody Essex, the description of the Sigg Collection was implemented by a unique curatorial direction

<sup>388</sup> “Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection,” Press Release for the exhibition at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Salzburg, July 21- November 2007. <http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/undo/pressrelease/pressrelease.pl?id=1184937040&day=1184968800> (accessed 29 May 2009).

<sup>389</sup> “Mahjong: Chinese Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection,” Press Release for the exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salaam, Massachusetts, February 21- May 17 2009. <http://www.pem.org/press/index.php?id=131> (accessed 29 May 2009).

<sup>390</sup> Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, “Access to China”, 9.

<sup>391</sup> “Mahjong Contemporary Chinese art from the Sigg Collection.” Press release for exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland. June 13 2005- October 16 2005.

[http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14\\_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/](http://www.friedmanbenda.com/exhibitions/2004-06-14_mahjong-contemporary-chinese-art-from-the-sigg-collection/) (accessed on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

<sup>392</sup> Koch, “Whose’ display? The role of the collector in the canonization of Contemporary Chinese Art: Uli Sigg and ‘Mahjong’.”

for the exhibition that suggested that the artists from the Sigg Collection have a place in the canon. The curators made the insinuation by scattering a select few of the works from “Mahjong” among Chinese works in the permanent collection of the museum. For instance, in the gallery devoted to Asian Export Art, Xu Yihui’s *Boy Reading Mao Book* (1998-9) (fig. 3.9) a porcelain bust of a boy reading Mao’s Little Read Book, is suggestively situated beside an anonymous 18<sup>th</sup> century Asian porcelains statue of a smiling boy from the permanent collection. Also, a Manchurian robe from the museum’s collection is hung beside Wang Jin’s *A Chinese Dream* (1997) (fig. 1.7) which a transparent plastic variation of the robe (of note is that it is also an artwork from the Sigg Collection that was exhibited at the Biennale).<sup>393</sup> It would not be difficult for the viewer to draw conclusions from this slight-of-hand: hanging the works from “Mahjong” alongside of those in the museum implies that these works from the Sigg Collection build on a collection of traditional Chinese works, and that their admittance into the canon is part of a natural progression.

This reshaping of the permanent collection of the museum adopts display strategies of the new museology. Artists have also partaken in such developments with permanent collections. The leading figure in doing so is the American artist Fred Wilson who, in his breakthrough exhibition “Mining the Museum” (1992, Maryland Historical Society) reinterpreted objects in the society’s collection by exhibiting them in new contexts and in powerful juxtapositions.<sup>394</sup> For instance, landscape, architectural and portrait paintings from Maryland’s plantation era were relit and relabelled in an attempt

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<sup>393</sup> Sebastian Smee, “Mahjong” exhibit reveals momentous growth in Chinese art,” 23 April 2009, *The Providence Journal*. [http://www.projo.com/art/content/wk-peabody\\_art\\_review\\_04-23-09\\_67E3UP7\\_v11.1f7dc34.html](http://www.projo.com/art/content/wk-peabody_art_review_04-23-09_67E3UP7_v11.1f7dc34.html) (accessed 2 May 2009).

<sup>394</sup> John Henry Merryman, *Imperialism, Art and Restitution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 161.

to highlight the black figures that were working the fields in the images (fig. 3.10). The idea was that by recontextualising the objects, Wilson was forcing a different way for audiences to read slavery and illustrated traditional museum practices of display that reinforced cultural stereotypes. The idea behind exhibitions like Wilson's (and at "Mahjong") is generally to restructure the institution in permanent ways that will positively affect the ways in which audiences see collections in the future.<sup>395</sup>

On the other hand, it can also be an effective way to draw attention to the works in the permanent collection of the host museum by featuring works from their own collection as an elaboration of the travelling exhibition.<sup>396</sup> Indeed, for at least the last century, the permanent collection of the museum has been considered the final resting place of an artwork before it is subsumed into the canon. As a reminder from Chapter One, author András Szántó has argued that this process starts with the collector and ends with the museum, noting that:

Opinion forming in the ranks of artists tends to spread first to the inner-circle art world participants (dealers, curators, critics, and some collectors)... Long-term confirmation is given by museums and through inscription into the official canon of art history.<sup>397</sup>

Thus aside from restructuring the ways in which audiences see collections, in placing the artworks from the Sigg Collection alongside other Chinese artworks from the museum's permanent collection, it also omits the necessary steps required to determine the value of the artwork, and if the artwork is deserved of taking its place in the canon at all.

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<sup>395</sup> For more information on display strategies of permanent collections and the new museology, see: Bettina Messias Carbonell, ed., *Museum Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>396</sup> West and Runge, 135-6.

<sup>397</sup> András Szántó as quoted in Kevin F. McCarthy, *A Portrait of the Visual Arts: Meeting the Challenges of a New Era* (California: Rand Corporation, 2005) 82.

However, there is another significant mechanism in enforcing and maintaining the canon that needs mentioning: the audience.<sup>398</sup> As historian Patricia Mainardi explains, “the audience exerts a profound influence on the kind of art history we produce.”<sup>399</sup> Though members of the general public and scholars may gain knowledge through a private study of images, according to James Cutting’s research, they are more likely to be influenced by repetitive exposure. He suggests “the more often they see or hear something – so long as it is distributed across time, rather than amassed in a small amount of time – the more they will tend to like it.”<sup>400</sup> To summarize, through mostly unconscious repetitive exposure, the audience must naturally come to believe that the artworks being exhibited are classics in order for them to be canonized, as the authority of the canon relies on the notion that certain works are more worthy of our attention than others.<sup>401</sup> From the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, a handful of successful exhibitions around the world since, to five blockbuster “Mahjong” exhibitions over the past five years (2004-2009), the exposure of the Sigg Collection has been consistent enough but not so condensed that it has suggested to audiences that the art is not a fad. Sigg has said that it is both the increase in exhibitions in combination with “the power of China” that “makes a big difference in realizing that this art will stay.”<sup>402</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Currently, audiences may have to wait for the next stop on the “Mahjong” roster to see the works from the Sigg Collection. “Mahjong” is being disassembled from its latest

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<sup>398</sup> Cutting, 12.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Jones, 20.

<sup>402</sup> Sigg, interview with the author, 10 November 2008.

exhibition stop at the Peabody Essex (February 21<sup>st</sup>- May 17<sup>th</sup> 2009). Future plans for the next stop for the exhibition are unknown, though Sigg has said he would like to “look at other options for the exhibition.”<sup>403</sup> There had been reports in the media (*ArtZine China*) that a large part of the Sigg Collection was to be donated to a museum in Shenzhen, China, but Sigg was quick to clarify that this would not be the case: “The Chinese public institutions seem to have other priorities than building comprehensive collections of contemporary art...In essence, time just does not seem ripe for commitments.”<sup>404</sup> Following the belief that art exhibitions are the primary site where the significations of artworks are constructed, it seems as though, at least for now, the particular vision of contemporary Chinese art we know has been heavily mediated and profoundly influenced by the repetitive presence of the Sigg Collection.<sup>405</sup>

The production of an art exhibition that promotes itself as representing a nation is assumed to be objective, though it is deeply implicated in power relations of many different types (here being collectors and curators) besides those of an overtly political, national, or economic nature. The exhibition site is one that attempts to be strongly committed to the organization of the space of the nation and to envision a ‘total view’ of the nation or a canon, though in reality, it is a self-fashioning site of power and authority. In both “Mahjong” and the Biennale this power play is especially marked by the discreet presence of the collector, Uli Sigg, who has drawn up his own picture of the nation based

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> “A Letter from Uli Sigg,” *ArtZine China*. [http://www.ArtZinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid664\\_en.html](http://www.ArtZinechina.com/display_vol_aid664_en.html) (accessed 7 January 2009).

<sup>405</sup> For further information on considering exhibitions as a site where artworks are constructed, see: Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996).

on his particular vision. As demonstrated, it is this picture that has been repetitively drawn the same way.

As it stands, the exact influence of the Uli Sigg Collection of Contemporary Chinese Art is not known, which makes it difficult to revise the canon, especially as the canon is constantly evolving and being refined. This chapter argued that without full disclosure is needed on what the collection entails, what exhibitions it has participated in, and who the collection has introduced to contemporary Chinese art, or it will be difficult to assess just how far ranging the influences of the Sigg Collection have been on the canon and where they will go. Developing information about role of the collection in canon formation is just one of the many projects to which scholars could turn their attention in the field of contemporary Chinese art, or any art for that matter, in the coming years. With his current clout as a member on both the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in London, we may find that Sigg's influence on the canon of contemporary Chinese art will only continue to grow.

## Conclusion

The positioning of contemporary Chinese art within China and on the global stage has evolved considerably in the past decade. Indeed, today the inclusion of Chinese artists in international exhibitions is no longer a rarity and for many curators, it has become an integral part of a global representation of art. Private collectors have assumed a central role in this re-positioning, as their collections have contributed to the development of a contemporary Chinese art canon. Not only were they the main patrons of these arts in the early years, but also by exhibiting works from their collections outside of China, they afforded access to an international audience. This contribution also drew a picture of contemporary Chinese art according to their personal aesthetic discriminations. In this way, collectors of contemporary Chinese art have assumed a role of great responsibility in what we know to be as “Chinese art” today.

This thesis has argued that as the Sigg Collection lays claim to being one of the “largest and most important” in contemporary Chinese art,<sup>406</sup> understanding its genesis, its position within broader trends of contemporary Chinese art collecting and history, and its representation in exhibitions worldwide is central to an understanding private collectors’ contribution to the formation of a contemporary Chinese art canon. By approaching the rubric of the social and cultural context in which Sigg collected, this thesis argues the following main points. First, I suggest that both the non-official spaces in China to which experimental artists were relegated and Sigg’s position of privilege as ambassador were central factors in the way in which his collection was amassed; second,

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<sup>406</sup> Matthias Frehner and Christoph Heinrich, “Foreword” in *Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Matthias Frehner and Christoph Heinrich (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005), 9.

that the Sigg Collection had a significant role in introducing contemporary Chinese art to curators such as Harald Szeemann, to collectors both in and outside of China, and to a global audience. Consequently, these relationships demonstrate the powerful and yet discreet presence the private collector holds in the categorisation of art. And third, for the Sigg Collection, “Mahjong” represents the culmination of its vision of contemporary Chinese art that began at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Drawing from Mieke Bal’s theories on cultural imperialism and James Cutting’s on “mere exposure,” this thesis demonstrates how canons are cultural constructs created through repetition.

It is likely that the consideration of the role of the collector in the development of contemporary Chinese art is more imperative than ever, already it may seem a topic addressed late: it comes after the art was received globally, and after Official China revised its stance on contemporary art. China’s national institutions must now collect via a system that has already been established years previous by private collectors such as Sigg. Still, though the mark of the collector on the canon remains, and many collections—including those of museums—are selected based on the activities of prior collectors, it is possible for this mark to be highlighted. The canon is constantly evolving, being refined, and responding to new market forces. The recent surge of China and Asia’s new collecting elite is evidence enough of this trend. It is essential that curators participate in this process by recognizing the specific histories of the individuals who form collections so that audiences can be aware of the assumptions and values that exhibited collections embody. James Clifford suggested that “it is important to resist the tendency of collections to be self-sufficient...ideally the history of its own collection and

display should be a visible aspect of any exhibition.”<sup>407</sup> In the end, this understanding may allow for a more self-conscious “filling in the gap” of a canon on the part of a more informed audience.

This thesis raises general questions that can be applied to both the contemporary Chinese art canon and the role of collectors in the canonisation of works. How has the collector mediated the production of works in their collection? How can a canon be created outside of its space of origin? How do new art market forces reflect collecting patterns and canon formation in the global art world? Where will the contemporary Chinese art canon go from here? In many scholarly projects on canons, there is a renewed interest in so-called noncanonical works and how to insert them into the canon. There are also studies that reconsider the social structure of the canon, and the ways in which it can be overthrown. The possibility of conceiving of an art history without canons, however, is remote. Nor is it necessarily useful. This work has done neither, but has instead attempted to contribute to each cause by considering how the canon is closely linked to specific variables involved in its development. An assault on the canon must begin by unmasking those players who give strength to the canon. The canon has not been overthrown; it has simply been disrobed.

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<sup>407</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 103.

**Appendix I: Artists exhibited at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale that belong to the Sigg Collection**  
**(if the artworks are indicated this means the artist was from the Sigg Collection)**

Ai Weiwei (photography and installation)  
Cai Guoqiang (installation)  
Chen Zhen (installation)  
Fang Lijun (woodblock print)- “Untitled, 1995”-Uli and Rita Sigg Collection  
Liang Shaoji (sculpture)  
Lu Hao (sculpture) “Bird Cages, 1998”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection  
Ma Liuming (painting, performance) “Baby ’98, 1998”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection “  
Qiu Shihua (painting) “Landscape, 1998”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection  
Wang Du (sculpture)  
Wang Jin (installation, sculpture) “Fighting the Flood: Red Flag, 1994”-Ringier  
Collection, Zurich (Sigg’s company); “The Dream of China, 1997”- Uli and Rita Sigg  
Collection; “The Dream of China, 1997”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection; “To Marry a  
Mule, 1996”- Ringier Collection, Zurich (Sigg is on the board of the Ringier Company);  
Wang Xinwei (painting) “History of Revolution, 1997”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection;  
Xie Nanxing (painting) “Untitled, 1998”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection;  
Yang Shaobing (painting) “Untitled. No 13, 1998”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection;  
Ying-bo (video) “Fei-Ya! Fei-Ya! 1998-99”-project realized thanks to the contribution of  
Uli Sigg and others.  
Yue Minjun (painting) “Everybody Connects to Everybody, 1997”- Uli and Rita Sigg  
Collection  
Zhan Huan (photography, performance)  
Zhang Peili (video)  
Zhao Bandi (posters) “The 32<sup>nd</sup> Day of a Certain Month, 1994”- Uli and Rita Sigg  
Collection  
Zhou Tiehai (painting) “Press Conference III, 1998”- Uli and Rita Sigg Collection  
Zhuang Hui (photography)

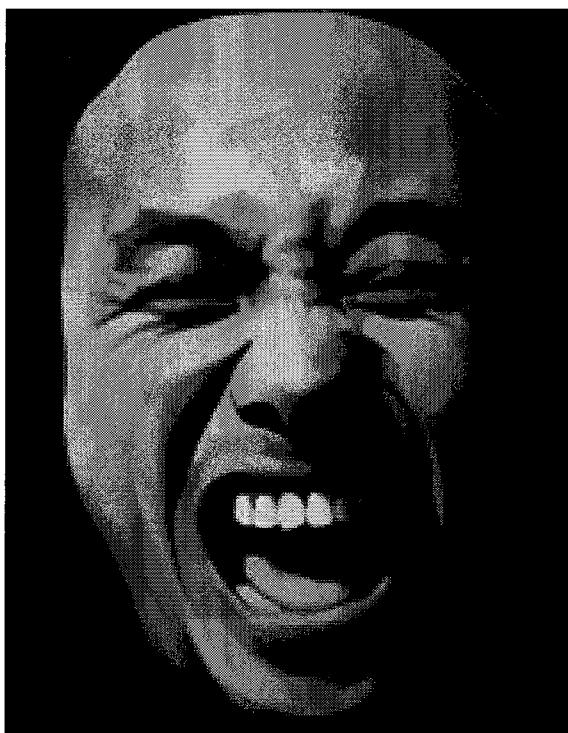
**Appendix II:**  
**Artists from the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale that were exhibited at “Mahjong”**  
**(Specific exhibitions are indicated)**

Ai Weiwei (photography and installation)- Represented at all  
Cai Guoqiang (installation)- Not represented  
Chen Zhen (installation) – Not represented  
Fang Lijun (woodblock print)- Represented at all  
Liang Shaoji (sculpture) Represented at Bern and Hamburg  
Lu Hao (sculpture)- Represented at all exhibitions  
Ma Liuming (painting, performance) Represented at Bern  
Qiu Shihua (painting) Represented at all, but Peabody (unknown)  
Wang Du (sculpture)- Not represented  
Wang Jin (installation, sculpture)- Represented at Bern  
Wang Xinwei (painting) –Represented at all  
Xie Nanxing (painting)- Represented at all, but Peabody (unknown)  
Yang Shaobing (painting) – Represented at all, but Peabody (unknown)  
Ying-bo (video)- Not represented.  
Yue Minjun (painting)- Represented at all  
Zhang Huan (photography, performance)- Represented at all  
Zhang Peili (video)- Not represented  
Zhao Bandi (posters)- Represented at all  
Zhou Tiehai (painting) – Represented at all  
Zhuang Hui (photography)- Represented at all, but Peabody (unknown)  
To this group has to be added Huang Yongping (now living in Paris), who represented France exhibiting at their national pavilion- Represented at all

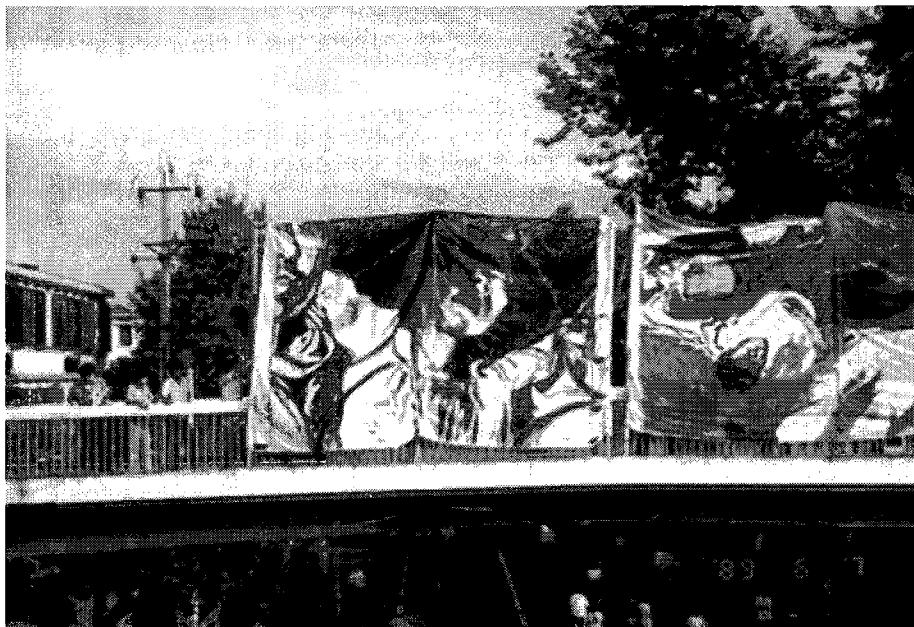
**Figure 1.1** “China Avant-Garde Exhibition,” 1989 (installation view)



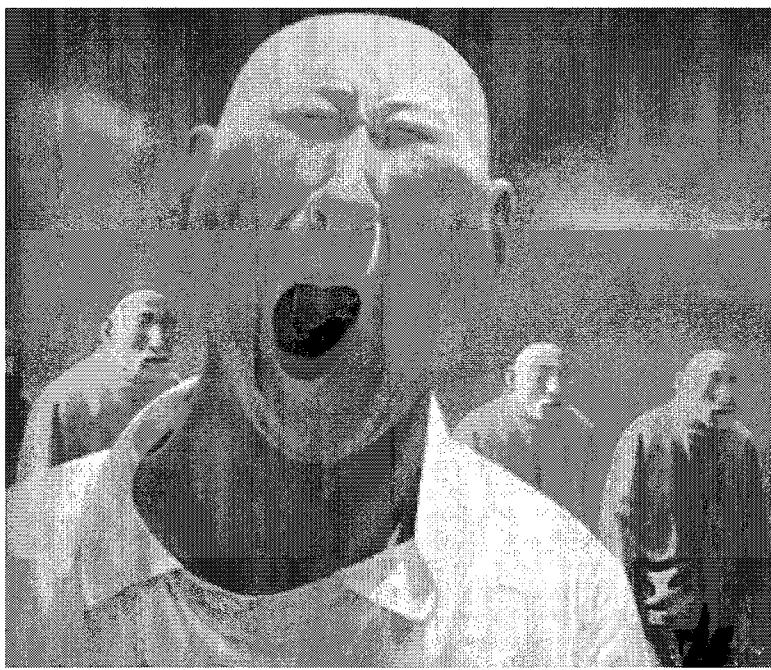
**Figure 1.2** Gueng Jianyi *The Second Situation*, 1987/88 (Detail)



**Figure 1.3 Geng Jianyi, Hangzhou, 7 June 1989 (installation view)**



**Figure 1.4 Fang Lijun Series 2, 1991-2**



**Figure 1.5 Li Shan *Rouge Flower*, (1995)**



**Figure 1.6 Wang Gaungyi *Great Criticism: Coca Cola*, (1993)**



**Figure 1.7 Wang Jin *A Chinese Dream*, (1997)**



**Figure 2.1 Mark Constantini Uli Sigg, businessman and art collector, with Yue Minjun's "2000 A.D." at the Berkeley Art Museum, 2008 (San Francisco Chronicle)**

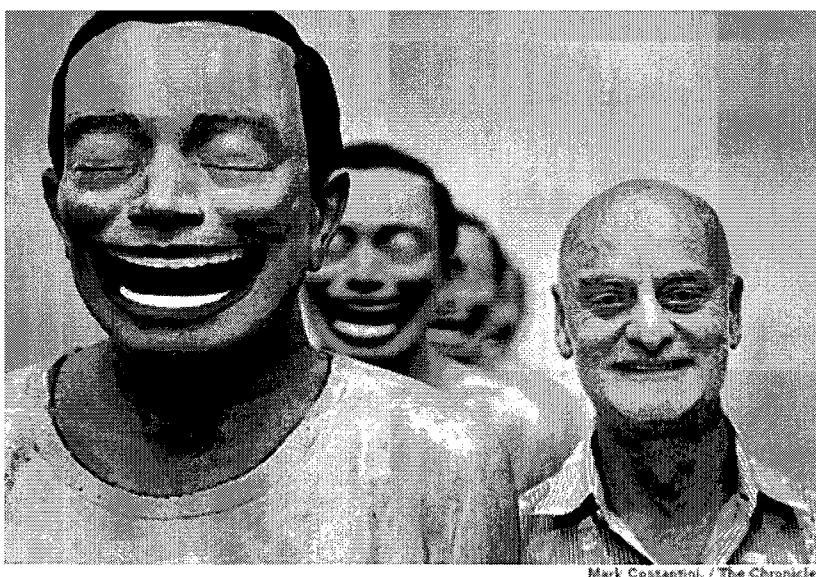


Figure 2.2 Chang Xugong *Portrait of Uli Sigg*, (2005)



Figure 2.3 Wang Guangyi *Behind Bars*, 1986



**Figure 2.4 Sun Guoqi and Zhang Hongzhan *Divert Water from the Milky Way Down*, 1973–74**



**Figure 2.5 Xu Bing *Book From the Sky*, 1989**



Figure 2.6 Ai Weiwei *Map of China*, 2003

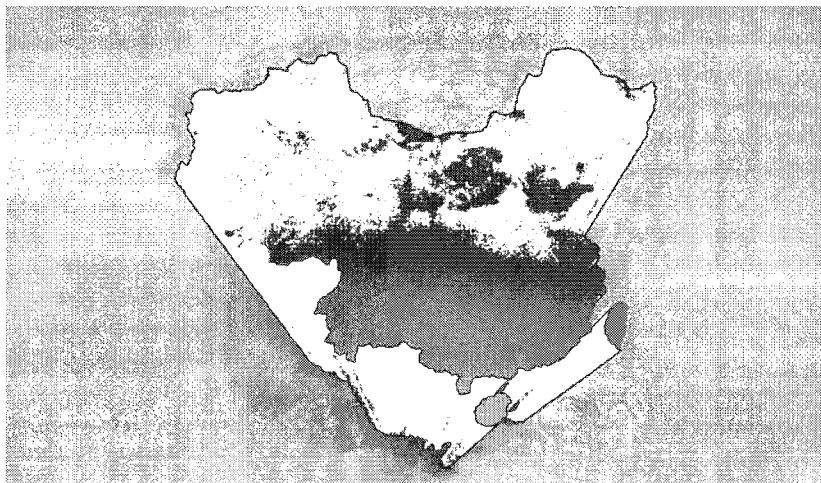


Figure 2.7 Yue Minjun *Everybody Connects to Everybody*, 1997

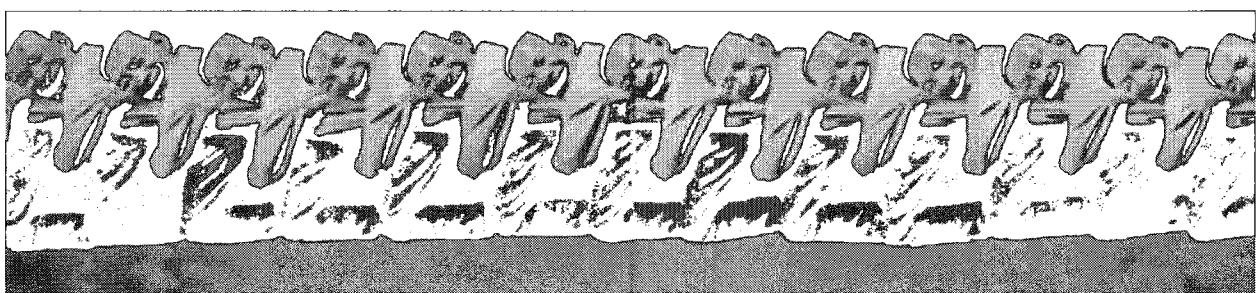


Figure 2.8 Zhang Huan *Family Tree*, 2003



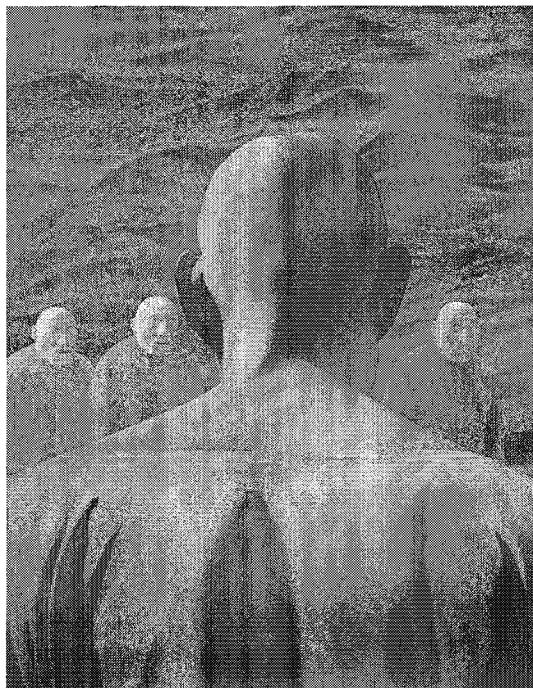
**Figure 2.9** Weng Fen *On the Wall, Guangzhou (II)*, 2002



**Figure 2.10** Wang Guangyi *Materialist (Two Women)*, 1999



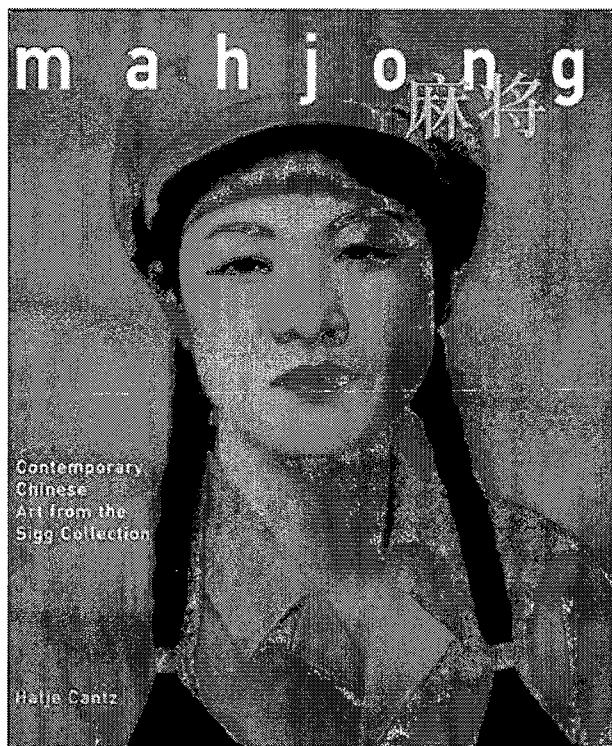
**Figure 2.11 Fang Lijun *Untitled*, 1995**



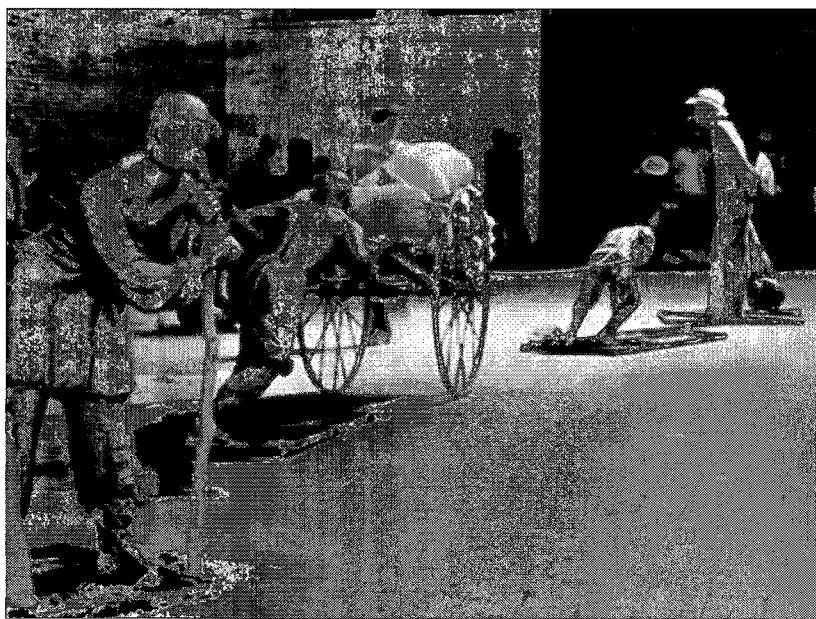
**Figure 2.12 Zhang Qun and Meng Luding *In the New World: The Enlightenment of Adam and Eve*, 1985**



**Figure 2.13 “Mahjong” exhibition catalogue, 2004 (for Bern, Hamburg and Salzburg)**



**Figure 3.1 Cai Guoqiang *Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1999 (installation view)**



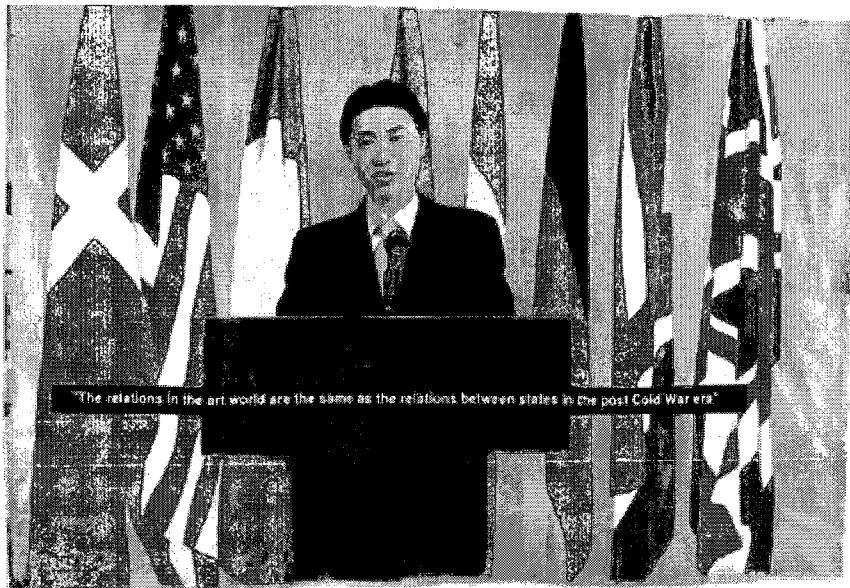
**Figure 3.2** Li Zhanyang *Dying a Martyr: Samuel Keller, Harald Szeemann, Cai Guoqiang*, 2007 (Detail 'Rent'-Rent Collection Yard)



**Figure 3.3** Qiu Shihua *Untitled*, 1998



**Figure 3.4 Zhou Tiehai Press Conference, 1998**



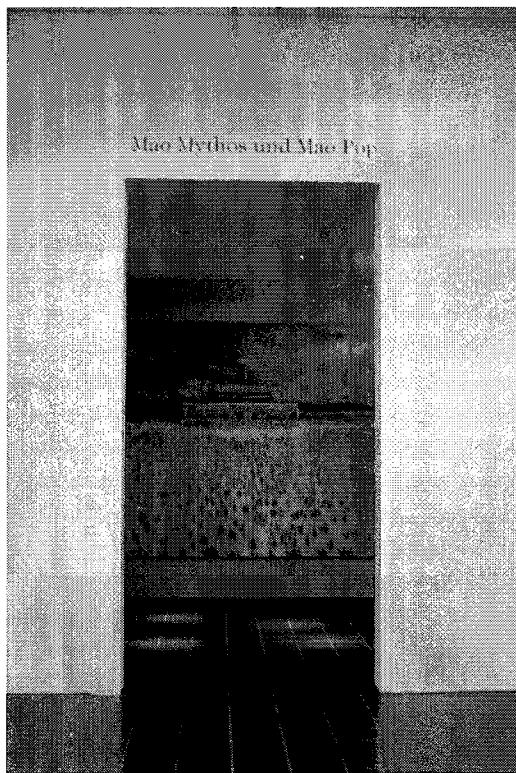
**Figure 3.5 Yang Shaobing *Untitled*, 1996**



**Figure 3.6** “Mahjong” exhibition, entrance. Kunstmuseum, Hamburg, 2006 (installation shot)



**Figure 3.7** “Mahjong” exhibition, Mao Mythos and Mao Pop theme heading. Kunstmuseum, Hamburg, 2006 (installation shot)



**Figure 3.8 Liang Yuanwei *Piece of Life*, 2008**



**Figure 3.9 Xu Yihui *Boy Reading Mao Book*, 1998-9**



**Figure 3.10 Fred Wilson “Mining the Museum” exhibition. Maryland Historic Society, 1992 (detail of installation view)**



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