

# AFTER '89: SEEKING A GLIMMER OF THE ESSENTIAL AN INTERVIEW WITH WANG HUI

This interview was the keynote address of an exhibition curatorial workshop, *Theater of the World: Art and China*, coorganized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing. It was held at the CAFA Museum on March 14, 2017. Translated from Chinese by Harlan Chambers and Benjamin Kindler.

**Alexandra Munroe:** Thank you, Wang Hui, for joining us today. Wang Hui and I first met through Cai Guo-Qiang, who invited him to contribute an essay to the catalogue for his 2008 exhibition at the Guggenheim, *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*.

Professor Wang, your analysis of the intellectual history of modern China and your critique of the 1990s have been extremely influential. They have articulated problems at the core of our understanding of this period, which for our purposes today we are bracketing between 1989 and 2008. I think you are aware of our reasons for selecting 1989, as for us it is a global marker: the year marking the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the invention of the Internet at CERN, and the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, which could be seen as the end of the bipolar world order, together with the end of apartheid in South Africa. There are many cultural as well as political markers, because the 1990s also witnessed the rise of postmodernism, which had been around since the 1960s but took hold as a dominant intellectual and cultural trend in the '90s. Could you share with us your reasons for using 1989 as a definitive marker in Chinese intellectual history as well?

**Wang Hui:** In the first case I feel that the periodization 1989–2008 is a good one. Yet 2008 does not resemble 1989 in the sense of being a moment of rupture; instead, it resembles an explosion in slow motion. This period was highly important as a stage of transition for China and the whole world. The year 1989 witnessed a series of dramatic transformations in every part of the world, but of these, the most important was the disintegration of the socialist system. This system was the greatest experiment of the twentieth century, and it might be said that it was the greatest experiment of this scale in the whole of human history. This experiment was different from the history of capitalism. The latter's history was one in which capitalism spread through colonialism and commerce; the experiment of socialism was a response to this capitalist history. I have spoken at length about the successes and failures of this experiment, but we must nonetheless recognize the tremendous importance of its existence. Without this experiment, we cannot ultimately understand the twentieth century. With 1989 being a sign of the collapse of the international socialist system, China played an important role in this process. I have my own views on the subject. In the first place, the events of 1989 actually began in China, through the events at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The events that followed 1989 all carried an "unpredictable character." Among these events, the first affair that could not have been predicted was that, despite Tiananmen, at this point no one imagined that the whole of the socialist system would witness a large-scale disintegration. Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to China on May 13 marked the first meeting between heads of state following the Sino-Soviet split. It also signified the renewed harmonization

of the two biggest socialist states. I myself believe—but no one could have imagined it—that it was exactly this affair, the demonstrations at Tiananmen, that led to the “breakup of the Soviet Union.” I myself was a participant, with my own feelings, but we could not have imagined that such an event would come to pass; this was an event that could not have been anticipated.

In the second place, following the repression of the Tiananmen movement, countless people predicted the collapse of China. For instance, Liu Binyan was a famous literary figure of the 1980s, and after 1989 he fled to the United States. Whatever he said received a great deal of attention. At that time, he predicted that China would probably collapse within three months, and then he said five months, and later a year, and then even three years. And then, within five years, well, people began to talk about China’s rise! Therefore this too was something beyond the horizon of predictability. A problem that emerges here is that, with China having clearly encountered a massive crisis over the course of these events, why was it that China did not collapse in the same way as other socialist states? I find that there were various factors, and I can only raise a few of the most central ones here.

First, there is the political dimension. The formation of the sovereignty of the Chinese state was not the same as that of Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and for that matter it was not the same as the sovereignty of states in either the West or the East. This was a matter of great importance. It would take a long excursus to understand the reasons for this, so allow me simply to state the following: most important is the fact that the Chinese Revolution of the twentieth century was a protracted revolution of the kind seldom seen in Eastern Europe. It was not a condensed revolution, such as the October Revolution in Russia; instead, the Chinese Revolution was a sustained revolutionary process that lasted from the late Qing up until 1949, even up until the end of the Cultural Revolution. In this process, each corner and each cell of society, from each village down to each family, were thrown into a process of revolutionary mobilization unlike anything seen before or since. It is difficult to imagine that such a process might take place in the conditions of rural society. If we read Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q” (1921–22) or “My Old Home” (1921), it is difficult to imagine that the countryside presented in these stories could be the same Chinese countryside where the revolution occurred. The political structure of the present, which passed through a high degree of mobilization, has a close relationship to this wide-ranging social mobilization. This is the first

point that led to a divergence between the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist parties of Eastern Europe. If there had not been this process, it would be difficult to understand why, in the 1950s, when the process of national construction had not even been underway a full decade, China began to rapidly diverge from the path of the Soviet Union. Such a phenomenon was very rare in Eastern Europe. China was not a member of the Warsaw Pact, nor was China constrained by the military system of Eastern European socialist countries. This process of national reconstruction was determined by a long history.

Apart from the political aspect there is also the economic dimension. We often say that the difference between China and the Soviet Union was that the process of economic reform in China far preceded political reform. Concerning this fact, I am reminded of Ezra Vogel, a scholar who demonstrated great perspicacity in his research after 1989. In 1990, he published an article in the Hong Kong journal *Twenty-first Century*, as at that time everyone was predicting the collapse of China. He argued that China would neither undergo collapse nor return to the old economic model. At this time, Ezra was mainly concerned with researching the township economy of Guangdong and local economic transformations. He judged, from the experiments in Guangdong and from changes in the economic structure both before and after 1989, that there would be no interruption in China’s economic reforms, because, from the late 1970s up until 1989, there had already been vast changes in China’s economic structure. Concerning the local economy of Guangdong, the degree of marketization had not receded but had become even deeper, and the events of 1989 had caused the process of economic reform and market reform not to retreat but, on the contrary, to surge forward more rapidly beginning in 1990. The important changes that emerged from 1989 were reforms that had not been completed in the 1980s. What were they? In the 1980s, as China was undergoing a transition away from the planned economy, the dual-price system was a problem of great difficulty in the shift toward a market economy. Under the dual-price system, there existed both a system of prices for the planned economy and a system of market prices. This system was one of the causes of the social movement of 1989. The dual-price system and the implementation of the contract system in 1989 led to a large-scale social crisis, and therefore, in 1989, Zhao Ziyang’s attempt to “crash through the barrier” of the dual-price system fell short, and in fact completely failed. The completion of the market system took place in September 1989—that

is, exactly three months after June 4—when the central government successfully carried out price reform. Owing to political repression at that time, there was no social resistance. If you look at the abrupt changes in 1989, it is hard to say that the process in China was a gradual one. This process has been almost completely forgotten by observers.

Concerning the development of neoliberalism, the 1990s are certainly a point of demarcation. After 1989, China was in dire straits, as the political sphere was under the shadow of the events of 1989. In the social sphere, owing to the deepening of market reform, and especially of privatization, the previous system of social protections had been almost completely abolished. Under a rapid process of marketization, the destruction of our original system of health protection in the 1990s, forty or fifty million people being laid off, and the large-scale collapse of the state-owned and collective economy all led to an intense social polarization. You all know that today China has the highest Gini coefficient in the world, and yet even in a society with this pattern of polarization there are still some other traces that force us to recognize that this process has been a complex one. The United Nations acknowledges that in recent decades China has achieved the greatest gains in poverty reduction in the entire world, with close to one hundred million people no longer living in poverty. But the other side of this are great changes in the level of social conflicts and contradictions, the ecological crisis of which we speak so often, ethnic and religious contradictions, the gap between rich and poor, and official corruption.

The consequences of the neoliberal turn have been wide ranging. I understand the political consequences of this process in terms of the “statification of the party”; that is, the statification of the governing party in the political arena. The political parties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were organizations with a high degree of political values and ideological content, with close relations to social movements; therefore, their capacity for political representation was founded on the basis of expansive social movements. Yet even though the governing party of China has greatly expanded, its political content has in actual fact undergone a great decline. It has even turned into a pure instrument of state power that is basically equivalent to the state, becoming directly involved in the model of state administration. Therefore, today we can witness Wang Qishan announcing, during the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and the National People’s Congress, that there is no distinction between

the party and the government, and that there is only a division of labor between party and government. This is a classic demonstration of the statification of the party, and this statification of the party in the arena of politics demonstrates that the logic of the state is ascendant.

I have termed this process a “decline of representation.” What is this decline of representation? It can be expressed according to two different meanings. The first of these is from the perspective of politics, whereby political organizations, political parties, and social movements no longer have a socially representative character, a lack of representation. When we speak of the failure of representative democracy, it is because it no longer has links with social movements. The inability of the values of a political party to represent its social base is the primary reason for populism, because populism only becomes the primary state of expression when there does not exist a public political sphere, or a condition of representation, and where social resistance has no definite direction. It is unpredictable, because it can be to the Left or the Right, expressing itself in different ways, but it does not resemble a representative politics in having a clear political character. This is what we might call a decline of representation at the political level. The second aspect is due to a failure of expression. That which we term *representation* consists of the continuous expression of the self, and so what we mean here by the failure of expression is in fact the failure of ideology, because it is no longer possible to call into being a system of values that is coherent, continuous, and possessed of a clear political character. I have observed that the decline of representation in this sense has taken place in every country, but, each country having different social conditions, this means that in China there has been quite a unique phenomenon that goes back to the distinctive character of 1989 itself. That is, every other socialist country collapsed in 1989, so their decline of representation involved the collapse of an ideological system, whereas in China, on the other hand, the decline of representation was bound up with and took place within the traditional socialist system. As a result, the criticism undertaken in Chinese society toward these phenomena, whether in the field of art or in the field of intellectual thought, had no means by which to really come to grips with the contradictory character of contemporary developments, and the reason for this lay precisely in the role of political continuity in the decline of representation. We have no ways of understanding the contradictory nature of social conflicts. This was one of the great difficulties and challenges that 1989 posed for us.

**Alexandra Munroe:** For many of the artists in our show at the Guggenheim, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, 1989 signaled an ideological collapse as well. You have written about the collapse and failure of China's New Enlightenment movement and the heroic humanist and Western modernist ideals that shaped it, which, as we know, also had a direct effect on China's 1985 New Wave. Many of the artists in our exhibition were shaped by the attempts to internalize those ideas. You have written that these aspirations were "emptied out" with Tiananmen and the rapid mobilization of neoliberal global capital as endorsed by the Chinese state. We're interested in modernist, experimental art as it related to the individual and subjectivity, so could you comment on how the concept of subjectivity and the individual was affected by the changes that you're describing? A filmmaker friend once described the 1990s as an "ideological junkyard," which would seem to be a sentiment that many of our artists would agree with, as they respond not only to the trauma of 1989 and the betrayal of the New Enlightenment movement but also to the lack of any ideological value system. Our artists are engaged in a critique of the emptying out of the individual self in this ideological junkyard. Could you comment on this idea, and on how changes in the 1990s affected ideas of subjectivity?

**Wang Hui:** The focus of what I described just now was on this epochal transformation. It was a way to analyze an impasse in intellectual thought, and I believe this has also been the predicament of art. In fact, while efforts in the fields of art and thought have yielded new elements, these elements never seem to take us a step forward. They are just as quickly swept up in new transformations. This has been the most salient phenomenon of these past twenty or thirty years. You just mentioned "emptiness" as an especially important issue; coming to know this emptiness has been very important. It seems that every effort has been caught up in a process with little drive for substantive change. Let's take, as a relatively familiar comparison in China's intellectual field, the debate you just alluded to on humanistic spirit. Why was it that, probably around 1995, amid that debate, the discussion was unable to develop and failed? It was because those debating humanistic spirit, those who were attempting to excavate several possibilities from European humanism as their primary intellectual resource, realized that the initial wave of marketization had ushered in totally new problems. These problems were due to an opposition, created in 1989, between the state and the market. Even today this opposition is quite pervasive. In fact, this relation between state and market developed

without a basic critique of its significance. And so, amid all of this, the question of the human was raised, but the fundamental starting point of this question was still located in a critique of pre-1989 relations between the political system and marketization. The debates on humanistic spirit were a bit like the relation between Protestant ethics and capitalism described by Max Weber. This is to say that marketization, like Weber's capitalism, was never cast into doubt; instead, it was only we who were understood to be lacking a sense of ethics. But in today's capitalism, where a wave of neoliberalism is sweeping the world and where any sense of ethics has been demolished, this old discourse on European humanism has become powerless.

I feel that our only comparison for contemporary art is with art of the twentieth century or other periods exhibiting a high degree of politicization, indeterminateness, and individuality. These works are different from artworks prior to the '60s and '70s. Strictly speaking, they are also different from those of China's 1985 New Wave. The clear direction of the 1985 New Wave was to construct subjectivity. While the '90s appeared to follow this precedent, it seemed no longer possible to build subjectivity. With the '85 New Wave, at least as I see it understood in contemporary discourse, it would seem that postmodern thought had actually come in during the 1980s. This was because Nietzsche and Heidegger had already been translated into Chinese, and these translations made their influence felt. However, within the general discourse of the time, they were connected to the wave of the New Enlightenment and not understood within the trend of postmodernism. When postmodernism appeared in the 1990s, it no longer had the totalizing ideology of early deconstruction in China structuralism; rather, it was an expression of the fragmenting ideology of individualism. This individualism increasingly became a condition of postmodernism, integrated within the market system. So instead of saying that postmodernism was a weapon of deconstruction, it would be better to say it was a sign of the crisis of marketization; indeed, it was a symptom of an ideological crisis.

Until now, all efforts to seek out a subjectivity have taken place as part of this symptomatic process. If there were an exhibition capable of drawing out the truly creative elements in contemporary art, that would be of utmost significance. As far as I'm concerned, the generalized critiques of contemporary art don't have any real meaning. It's the same case everywhere in contemporary thought. Today we need to seek out, among the shards of these ruins, a glimmer of the truly essential.

Sometimes art and thinking are not the same. At times, the sensitivity of artists can touch upon things that the artists themselves are unaware of and, in this way, give them expression. I think this is of great importance.

**Hou Hanru:** What intrigues me is that, after '89, especially in recent years, within the art scene there seems to have been an increase of the fragmentation you discussed. What have been some of the new ideas raised in the discussions of art historians and art theorists about this period? More broadly, what new possibilities have emerged from China's intellectual sphere for critical approaches to this period?

**Wang Hui:** It's tricky to say how we should go about analyzing modern thought. I remember in 1992, I went to the Guggenheim for the first time and saw an exhibition of Soviet modernism (*The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*). At that time, I was very shaken, because when I first went into the Guggenheim, an entire section was devoted to Soviet utopian art, from before the October Revolution through the 1930s. After that, I went on to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and visited the modern art galleries there, and I felt completely powerless. That experience was a great lesson for me. You see, the modernist views that our generation in China took in during the '80s were almost completely postwar European. We never truly understood the relationship between early modernism's origins and Russian art.

Only then did I realize that the few Russian artists who had been singled out for respect in the West were inadequate to truly reflect the whole history of Russia's art movement. Of course, this is a problem of interpretation caused by the hegemony of Western art history. As a person with shallow experience in art history, I felt very moved by the Guggenheim exhibition. Given the uncommon power it had to influence and stir me, I'd say that it was a real discovery. The following year I went to Russia, and only then did I see another side of the story. In Russia, looking at works by Vasily Surikov or Ilya Repin, which were not modernist pieces, I once again realized that this dimension of Russian art was relatively well known in China, specifically via connections to our National Art Gallery. We had been cloistered, however, from the modernist works like those in the Guggenheim exhibition. That was when I finally arrived at an interesting problem: how is the individual understood by socialist art?

**Hou Hanru:** It seems to me that Russian utopianism was the earliest and highest expression of Communist

art, but it became replaced by the most conservative form of what was deemed realist propaganda. From our generation on, we have sought to understand the historical process of modernism but never reckoned with the earlier, Russian avant-garde's search for the world of the new human.

**Wang Hui:** Contemporary art, like contemporary thought, has run into another major problem. In general, it has neglected the genealogy of China's own revolutionary development, skipping over it in order to seek out a genealogy from elsewhere. This is not a question of right or wrong, but it is a phenomenon that needs to be reconsidered today. What was the genealogy underlying these historical developments? How were they produced? These questions all need to be reconsidered, and I would like to share a few related thoughts that I have been developing lately.

I know that you would like to discuss contemporary problems, but at present I have been concerned with questions like: How was the twentieth century born? What is the place of the twentieth century in Chinese history? Because the twentieth century was China's first century. Before that, the "century" did not exist in China. In China, all centuries, as categories, extend out from the twentieth century. History was also developed out of the twentieth century, such that the twentieth century in Chinese history brought with it a totally new character; the century's significance was not produced as a natural extension of what had come before. Without the twentieth century, it would be impossible for us to discuss modernity in China. The general use of this category began in 1901, which saw the appearance of several major works. In Japan, the scholar Shūsui Kōtoku wrote the book *Imperialism: Monster of the Twentieth Century*. In 1903, Liang Qichao, while visiting America, wrote an important article entitled "Genie of the Twentieth Century: The Trust." At this time, a new organizational form was produced; in other words, the character of nations transformed during the imperialist period. A nation was no longer like nations of old: now it was an economic polity, a political form that took finance and economics as its center.

Several global issues served as the major driving forces behind this paradigm of the twentieth century. The first issue was America, owing to the Spanish-American War as well as the problems in the Philippines and Cuba. The imperialism of the past was that of a bygone era; the new imperialism, firstly, meant that political form was not fixed. In the case of the Spanish-American War, it signaled that promises of the Declaration of

Independence to not attack and subjugate oppressed peoples were broken, eroding the social ideals put forth by those awakenings of the eighteenth century, the French and American Revolutions. The second issue was England's Boer War breaking out in southern Africa, which was also an attack on two republics. Prior to even the Industrial Revolution, nineteenth-century England was already, in no uncertain terms, an Asian empire. But from 1900 on, the character of British imperialism underwent a major transformation, as its economic motives also changed. The third issue was that, in 1900, Germany surpassed England as Europe's leading economic power. Around that time, several major works on imperialism were published. Shūsui Kōtoku's work on imperialism actually appeared a year before John A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study*. Hobson's work, published in 1902, was taken by everyone to be the most important theoretical treatment of the topic. Other works included Rudolf Hilferding's *Finance Capital* in 1910, Karl Kautsky's *Ultra-imperialism* in 1914, and Vladimir Lenin's 1916 *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The key point to emerge from this theorizing of imperialism was a discourse of the global epoch. These three issues triggered efforts to seek out new social forms. These social experiments, concerned with the entirety of ontology and social theory, raised key problems over the course of the twentieth century. These experiments were a fundamental form of resistance, and such forces of internal antagonism were perpetually produced within the modern world. Ultimately, it was China's revolution and socialist movement that were able to unify and order these antagonistic forces within its interior structure.

Yet the 1980s marked the conclusion of this totalizing process. It also marked the definitive start to a process of refragmentation. In this sense, the twentieth century served as a central point, in which all fields of knowledge produced the historical subject via the axis of politics. Discussing what we call the "subject" in fact also entails discussing the formation of the "political" and how this "political" was constituted within these fields of knowledge. By the 1990s, the gradual disintegration of this process was complete, ushering us into a new phase. In the past decade, different fields have taken varying approaches, seeking out resources to reevaluate the past. Among these efforts, a fact of great importance has been that the naissance of twentieth-century China also demanded the creation of China's own "prehistory": this was also the time when its own nineteenth century and eighteenth century were created. This is really interesting to examine, because the process of China creating its own prehistory in the

twentieth century was also one of transforming other world histories into its own, making them a part of its own historical process. Throughout this period, there was a clear demand to discuss China's future, for which it was necessary to consider the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the American Revolution, and Turkey's revolution. What were these events? It was also necessary to discuss territorial sovereignty, parliamentary politics, party politics; each and every political issue demanded looking at these nations' political practices for the enlightenment and meaning they could afford us. In this way, these local histories became a part of Chinese history, which created a totally new historical imagination. Today, it seems necessary to narrate anew the process of this very genealogy, and in so doing turn our connections to the outer world back into part of our own history. It seems very difficult at present to accomplish this once more. The current period is more globalized than any other, and yet such a mode of reappropriating history has become all the more impossible.

A unique feature of Chinese politics is that its expression, and of course all its forms of representation, have a complex relationship to the actual ensemble of political institutions. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that during India's peasantry movement, which was organized through the conceptual category of the "proletariat," there was in fact no proletariat—no working class in the European sense. So Chakrabarty calls this use of "proletariat," in the words of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, a historical recurrence; indeed, Marx has similarly remarked that history always repeats itself. The proletarian revolutions in India and China were repetitions of European revolutions, but each of these historical repetitions embodied different connotations, and therein lies their narrative. But in my view, the twentieth century was not a site of recurrence through a singular category. Rather, the "twentieth century" was the category structuring all recurrences; it was the birth of a universal category. The twentieth century was itself a universal category. Originally, China had no notion of the twentieth century. It began by taking up this category, and then, when seeking to determine the character of this "twentieth century" and "China," it could only resort to making other histories into its own prehistory. This was the act of creating one's own modern category amid the process of creating one's own history. If the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and Turkey's revolution are also part of Chinese history, then you must use a universal category in order to describe these distinctive histories. In addition, it is an interesting phenomenon that, among

all major historical events of the twentieth century, the most important has been revolution. These events all have connotations stemming from their distinctive historical traditions and realities, but every political occurrence was necessarily produced within a universal framework; former categories were no longer possible. This is to say that, in the twentieth century, the universal had already become your destiny. So you could not simply say, "Oh! In this region there was a peasant uprising." What was the peasant? The very concept of the peasant only came into existence in the twentieth century. Originally, there were other terms, but not "peasant." "Peasant" and "the peasant class" are wholly modern ideas, just like the modern notion of the laborer and the signification of the laboring class. These modern concepts encompassed the political undertakings of the peasant class, the politics of the intellectuals, the politics of soldiers. Each political occurrence required its modern category, and the internal logic of each event, within its modern category, was produced from its own, concrete historical circumstances. This is a very distinctive feature of the twentieth century: twentieth-century politics relied, to a very high degree, on the capacity for expression. There are no politics without representation. And there are also no politics without re-representation.

The Chinese Revolution involved the intensive transfer of various elements from abroad, and it was the Communist International that created the Chinese Communist Party; however, the true core of modern Chinese politics was the experience from the failure of the Second Chinese Revolution in 1927 through its years in the base camp, established following the Long March in 1935. Twentieth-century China had several unique political creations, chief among them what Mao Zedong later called People's War. The most important point of People's War being that it was more than a typical military battle: through the course of a military campaign, it strove for a relationship between military battle and land reform, between the peasants undergoing this land reform and a political party. This process also included seeking out a relationship between People's War and the state, because an important difference between China's revolution and previous revolutions was that, by 1931, the Chinese Revolution had already established its own independent soviet, which endured through the establishment of its own, new state founded on the basis of People's War. It was a new republic, which was developed over a period of protracted expansion through 1949. This expansion was maintained and completed through the process of People's War. This led to a whole

series of transformations: owing to the Chinese Communist Party's experience and People's War, the very foundations of society and the social body were transformed. In this sense, the interior structure of the Chinese Communist Party was markedly different from any other Communist Party on earth, but it was still a Communist party. This was a distinctive relationship between the universal and self-creation, precisely what was sought throughout the twentieth century.

**Alexandra Munroe:** You have touched on the concept of a story line in several of your answers. Our exhibition at the Guggenheim will seek to create a story line, one in which artists, with their provocations launched toward the West, are also part of *our* history too: they are not only part of the history of the Chinese avant-garde but belong to a wider story of culture over this 1989 to 2008 period. We are using theories of globalization and postmodernism to trace the contributions of Chinese artists. Do you have any comments on that in light of your skepticism toward postmodernism in China?

**Wang Hui:** There are really so many divisions in modern art, so let's begin from the perspective of cultural politics. We can see several major tendencies. One part would end with the 1990s. I remember the first time that the artist and curator Lu Jie planned to discuss his work with Qiu Zhijie, the *Long March Project* (2002). At that time, the *Long March Project* was an important sign of renewing the discussion on twentieth-century modernism as a tradition. The move from Political Pop art against modern politics to the *Long March Project* was not about looking back to the past; instead, it was a new beginning. We could trace a relationship here based on a set of intimate connections. Ultimately, however, with the end of the revolution itself, and our entry into a postrevolutionary period, there has been a turn among artists toward satirizing the revolution, along with their attitude toward pop art.

A second genealogy, related to what I just described, is Gao Shiming's earliest work, *The Asia Project*. This was also an important work, as his was the first wave to draw from the Euro-American imaginary, alienating it from its context as a means of reevaluating the world, such that it seems like another world. It was also rather interesting that, around that time, Xu Bing traveled to Kenya and launched his *Forest Project*. No one doubts that Euro-America was at the heart of twentieth-century modernism, especially that of the 1980s. But there suddenly appeared in geopolitics the beginning of "Asia" as a category. Of course, in contemporary politics they are starting to discuss anew the Asia-

Africa–Latin America connections, or in certain terms accept the Bandung Conference tradition of so-called nonaligned countries in the mid-1950s. The global south and its relationships have never been very visible in America, and I believe their newfound importance is also a sign, marking a major distinction between the 1980s and 1990s. One further sign has been China’s rediscovery of its own tradition. The first wave of this discovery actually occurred under a Western gaze. You could call it a cultural nationalism, but I have recently found that many traditional elements do not seem to completely fit under this moniker. This subject of this self-seeking, or the elements sought out by these questions, are not wholly part of nationalism. This is to say that the mobilization of intellectual and cultural resources seems to have exceeded the nationalist categories of the 1980s. But one always needs to find a form of expression, even in the process of overstepping these boundaries. Take, for instance, the trend among the 1980s avant-garde to maintain their vanguard and critical attitude, which continues through the political experiments of today, like those of Ai Weiwei. In these new explorations, politics (and by using this word, I mean “politics” as they are presented in art) can incite all kinds of discussions and debates when the politics themselves are not clear. How do we ultimately give them expression? How do we finally show the relationship between this kind of exploration and the modern world? This lack of clarity in itself is of significance. But if we want to think about politics today, then I fear that any clear answer is not a true answer. So I don’t think Ai Weiwei’s politics are an answer. His politics are fundamentally given; their attraction is that they can be mastered. I firmly believe that, in the contemporary world, all political criticisms that we are able to raise with clarity are already in the realm of stereotype. In the case of art, an exhibition needs to excavate possibilities that always dwell in the realm of ambiguity. This would be worthwhile.

**Alexandra Munroe:** Thank you so much.