

Imperatives Under Chinese Monochrome Art: Revisiting “Magiciens de la Terre”

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Abstract

“Les Magiciens de la Terre” has long been hailed as the first international contemporary art exhibition including both artists from Europe, Africa, Tibet, China, and other non-western places. Yang Jiechang, Gu Dexin, and Huang Yong Ping were the only three Chinese artists to participate in this exhibition. They made their debuts in front of unfamiliar overseas audiences, in which their art practices were rearranged, and Yang started his familiar series of “*100 Layers of Ink*.” My paper shifts the attention away from the single monochrome artwork of Yang’s *100 Layers of Ink* at the Smart Museum, recenters it on the original context of the inception of this series at “Les Magiciens de la Terre,” and examines the general imperatives of those three artists’ first debuts — “distinct originality” and “being well-prepared.” The heightening emphasis on originality had already surfaced on the contemporary Chinese art scene and culminated in the curatorial plan of the exhibition’s curator, Jean-Hubert Martin. On the other hand, because of the importance of the debuts, “being well-prepared” underlined every aspect of their art-making for the exhibition, including enlarging scales, complicating the artistic concepts, and increasing working time. All those factors contributed to the sudden shifts in their art practices and shed new light on the imperatives under Yang’s monochrome art and his reflections on colors.

Keywords: “Les Magiciens de la Terre”, Yang Jiechang, ink art

1. Introduction

“Magiciens de la Terre” has long been hailed as the first international contemporary art exhibition including both artists from Europe, Africa, Tibet, China, and other non-western places. Yang Jiechang, Gu Dexin, and Huang Yong Ping were the only three Chinese artists to participate in this exhibition. They made their debuts in front of unfamiliar overseas audiences, in which their art practices were rearranged, and Yang started his famous series of “*100 Layers of Ink*.” My paper shifts the attention away from the single monochrome artwork of Yang’s *100 Layers of Ink* at the Smart Museum, recenters it on the original context of the inception of this series at “Magiciens de la Terre,” and examines the general imperatives of those three artists’ first debuts— “distinct originality” and “being well-prepared.” The heightening emphasis on originality had already surfaced on the contemporary Chinese art scene and culminated in the curatorial plan of the exhibition’s curator, Jean-Hubert Martin. On the other hand, because of the importance of the debuts, “being well-prepared” underlined every aspect of their art-making for the exhibition, including enlarging scales, complicating the artistic concepts, and increasing working time. All those factors contributed to the sudden shifts in their art practices and shed new light on the imperatives under Yang’s monochrome art and his reflections on colors.

2. Background: The Mounting Demand for Originality

Gu Dexin (born 1962), Huang Yong Ping (born 1954), and Yang Jiechang (born 1956) both participated in the 1980s and saw its mixed impacts on the art scene. The discourses around art and color thus shifted along with the turbulence of the world, creating a genealogy of originality that constituted the internal logic of Chinese art

production. To fully understand and contextualize their works, I then briefly introduced the Chinese art scene preceding “Magiciens de la Terre” (1989) and the parallel imperatives underlining the exhibition.

The political climate and its affiliated art scene then embraced their sudden shift in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping initiated the Open Door policy to open up China both economically and intellectually. Deng pronounced “open to the outside” (*duiwaikaifang*) and “to be open-minded” (*jiefangsixiang*) as the two basic directions for political administration in the following years. What followed this orientation was the revival of the industry for western publications. Western philosophy, western art, and western literature arrived in China all at once, paving the way for artistic efflorescence and diversification. Deng’s emphasis on “four modernizations” (*sige xiandaihua*) in 1979 brought a new rhetorical popularity to “modern” (*xiandai*). It thus bracketed western modern art and western contemporary art and put them under the umbrella term “western modernism” (*xifang xiandaizhuyi*).

Those new imported art forms provided a new visual language for Chinese artists to reflect on, to innovate upon, and even to criticize the existing art scene. Andrews and Shen characterize this period (1979-1981) as the emergence of “unofficial art”,¹ referring to a more direct confrontation between artists and official rigid censorship. These artists found individualistic expression in the western pictorial language and voiced their own reflections through the rearrangement of those “outsider” languages. The glorified red thus carries a sense of satire in the hands of artists like Wang Keping, complicating the one-dimensional understanding of color under official discourses.

As art historian Wu Hung indicts, this antagonistic relationship culminates in the ‘85 Art New Wave movement’ starting in 1985, forcing more “neutral” artists to claim their position.² Facing the pressure of the political climate, those avant-garde artists had to resist in order to survive, which let them use distinct pictorial language to form a unified front and bid farewell to any non-vanguard visual expressions. In other words, anyone had to find their avant-garde pictorial language and present their individualism as a form of resistance. This mounting demand for originality is exemplified by the call for submissions for the famous “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition in 1989: “This exhibition will collect works nationwide. All entries must demonstrate the established artistic concept of the artist bearing his or her individual character, modernity, and novel visual form.”³ The emphasis on “individual character” symbolizes a more oppositional stance and the accelerating imperative of claiming one’s individuality and originality from 1979 to 1989.

Resonating with these domestic imperatives, Jean-Hubert Martin, the curator of “Magiciens de la Terre,” consulted with a Chinese curator, Fei Dawei, about the artistic production in China.⁴ After this primary research, he decided to visit the artist’s own studio to see “what their work meant in the context” and “find and isolate those individuals for their particular creative quality”.⁵ One strong claim he made is that “I am looking for one that is more original than the rest.”⁶ Because of the exhibition’s international scope, the imperative of originality reaches a pinnacle. Both the domestic demand and this new demand underline those three artists’ vanguard art forms and alter their specific artworks made for the exhibition, which I will analyze in detail in the following.

3. The Imperative of Originality: A Departure

Before coming to France for this exhibition, those three artists had already developed diverse bodies of work. Some are deeply engaged with Chinese tradition and speak directly to sophisticated Chinese audiences; others use everyday materials and present a clear departure from traditions, as a result of domestic demand for singularity and individualism. Not surprisingly, those three artists developed the latter category of artworks for show and clearly presented their originality compared with both their own tradition and other contemporary art from other places. In this section, I will elucidate the external pressures from exhibition, how those artists adjust their positions to meet the demand, and how these contextual imperatives challenge the conventional perception of authorship and shed new light on their artworks.

Martin’s curatorial proposal of seeking “one that is more original than the rest” had already set the tone for this exhibition — a competition for originality. This sense of competitiveness has further been amplified by its

¹ Andrews and Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, 208.

² Wu Hung, (2005). *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005), 19.

³ Minglu Gao, (2011). *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press; London In Association With China Art Foundation, 2011), 150.

⁴ Marie Leduc, (2018). *Dissidence: The Rise of Chinese Contemporary Art in the West* (Cambridge, Ma: The Mit Press, 2018), 56.

⁵ Ibid., 55-56.

⁶ Ibid., 57.

curatorial plan: the artists are assigned their own space.¹ They are either fully enclosed by four walls with a small entrance or half-enclosed by two walls that are situated in a corridor. In either case, the artist at least had one wall dedicated to his or her own works. This curatorial plan shows their respect for the artists of different cultures and provides a platform for artists to freely present their own art practices. On the other side, this plan also led to a direct confrontation between artists from different cultures, meaning that the artists now represent both themselves and their cultures. Since everyone was provided with the same material support from the exhibition, the same space, and the same attention, there was a basis for evaluating artworks and judging the quality based on comparisons. The situation here is similar to a world's fair, in which each nation represents itself, showcases the achievements of nations, and competes with each other.

As the sentiment of competition was imbued in the exhibition, the artists were fully provided with materials and time to adjust based on this new situation. The curatorial team decided to invite the majority of artists to Paris to install their works and provide them with findings and resources.² Those who hoped to produce a work in situ but were unfamiliar with the international art scene were accompanied by an assistant and generally given a month and paid per diems; those more familiar with the context were then invited for ten days.³ This plan represents a strong focus on artists from developing countries and those facing financial difficulties. It also indicts curatorial teams' desire to galvanize artists to communicate with each other and fit into the overarching atmosphere of the exhibition.

Not only the time but also the materials and supports were also under the consideration of curatorial teams, which provided new working conditions for those three artists. As Gu Dexin claims in the interview with Hou Hanru, "after arrival, they provided me necessities to make art... but the materials are different, which still provided me with new appeals".⁴ By new materials, he meant an array of French perfume bottles, which were donated by Chanel.⁵ While Gu Dexin was playing with the new materiality of those perfume bottles, Yang was more desperately needing the funding. When crossing the Shenzhen border *en route* to Europe, Yang's works that Martin selected were detained by Chinese customs, and he traveled to Europe with only his brushes.⁶ However, with funds provided by the Pompidou, he ordered large quantities of ink and paper to be brought from China to Paris, did sketches, and made new ink paintings for the show.⁷ Huang Yong Ping also had access to the local materials, transforming French and Chinese communist newspapers into indistinguishable pulp.⁸

With sufficient material supplies and enough preparation time, artists were thus able to adjust, select one of their existing art practices, and rearrange the work to suit the demand. Here, I am not suggesting that they were fully aware of the imperative of context. Instead, my argument is that the curator's emphasis, the exhibition, and the competitive atmosphere have forced the artist, consciously or unconsciously, to align themselves with the general imperative of claiming originality. This could be achieved through feedback from the curatorial team, comments by other artists, seeing the diversity of other artists, familiarizing oneself with local audiences, hearing about the general direction of the show, and knowing the current trend in the western art scene. (I will address the artworks around them in the following paragraph.) Most notably, the domestic imperative of originality and the import of western art have already led those artists to do some "original" or avant-garde art, which paved the way for their new artworks for the exhibition. Before coming to Paris, Huang had developed an array of art practices that could be mainly classified into four categories: 1) In his Spray Gun series, he uses factory spray guns to paint objects such as the Pipe with T Shape; 2) His paintings in "Non-Expressive Painting," The Roulette Wheel Series, were made according to self-designed instructions for a spinning wheel; 3) Art related to burning; 4) Art related to washing, in particular putting books into washing machines. His artwork for the exhibition, *Reptiles*, is a continuation of the fourth category, reforming pulp into turtle-like tombs. Unlike his Spray Guns series and Non-Expressive Painting, which clearly follow painting tradition, his book-washing practices open up new territories between performance art and installation art and present obvious originality. Although Non-Expressive Painting could be treated as a combination between performance art and painting, its

¹ Lucy Steeds, (2013). *Making Art Global (Part 2): "Magiciens de La Terre" 1989* (Afterall Books, 2013), 61.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gu Dexin, Cai Fanglu, (1989). Interview by Houhan Ru, August 6, 1989.

⁵ Hung Wu et al., (2019). *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* (Chicago, Illinois Smart Museum Of Art Chicago, Illinois Distributed By The University Of Chicago Press, 2019), 102.

⁶ Britta Erickson and Alan Yeung, (2017). *Yang Jiechang: Earth Roots* (Ink Studio, 2017), 93.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Leduc, Dissidence, 58.

performance component could hardly be traced in the final product, as opposed to the apparent pulps. His burning practices were ruled out because they could be seen for a long time. The situation for Gu Dexin is different: his iconic works before 1989 were mostly group works. His own artistic endeavors have primarily consisted of watercolor paintings depicting aliens and plastic installations. Unlike his watercolor-inspired alien art, the plastic installation is a product of the industrial era and represents a significant departure from long-established two-dimensional art and installation art with solid forms. Yang's oeuvre before 1989 could be divided into three categories: 1) the tradition of ink paintings depicting unusual subjects, such as massacres; 2) a novel art form with calligraphy, like *The Dad Things I Often Do*; 3) abstract ink paintings. Similar to the time-honored tradition of ink painting and the new art form of calligraphy, his abstract ink series has the potential to bid a farewell to any long traditions. He achieved this ideal by repeatedly applying layer after layer of ink with his calligraphic brush on paper, creating a transformed metallic and glaze-like surface, as if the xuan paper, ink, and black Chinese ceramics were blended together and alienated all at once. By using ink, Yang distinguished himself from other artists in the exhibition. By using anti-representation and creating a wrinkled surface, Yang also distinguishes himself from traditional ink painting and conventional abstract painting with a flat surface. Yang further pushed this sense of originality by making all three ink paintings into an installation, or at least installation-like, by surrounding the viewers with three gigantic paintings on the three walls.

The material selection and its broader context complicated the originality even further. Although Wu Hung, an art historian, characterized this material emphasis of Chinese artists as “material art” or “material turn”,¹ I want to further this analysis — those are the arts of “autobiographical materials.” They did not just choose a random material and develop it; instead, those materials were important companions for a period of their lives. Huang's emphasis on art history books was partly because the first two books in the series are must-reads for art practice students and also because of his personal addiction to reading. Yang's emphasis on ink is because he received ink painting training and revealed his addiction to the odor of making ink in the interview with me. Gu had an infatuation with plastics because he worked in a plastics factory.

By using autobiographical materials and idiosyncratic art practices, they present their own identities and distinguish themselves from other artworks, which could be divided into three categories: 1) artists use their own iconic materials, e.g., Nam June Paik's distinct use of TV in “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell,” Sigmar Polke's use of potatoes, snail juice, and meteor dust, and Ilva Kabakov's employments of Soviet Union propaganda pictures; 2) artists present their own “original” art practice, e.g., Jeff Wall's large-scale back-lit Cibachrome photographs in “The Storyteller,” On Kawara's Today series; 3) artists complicate their artistic and cultural traditions, e.g., Wesner Philidor restage a Voodooist temple in a minimalist way; and Mike Chuwukelu's enlargement of tribes' masks. Those artists from all three categories all show their distinct practices or materials, which present different “originalities” of the unusual materials and untypical practices of three Chinese artists but also lead those three artists to claim their own originalities.

Along with this persona of singularity and the funding, the color here turned into a more intriguing issue. Coincidentally, those three artists all made those artworks monochrome. Gu's installation is made of melted one-color plastic, creating a collage of pliable blobs. Even though I will address the reason for this coincidence, the monochrome quality created another significance — being visually imposing. Monochrome artworks stand out quickly among all the colorful artworks, catching the viewers' eyes with visual fatigue. Monochrome was more aggressive in terms of aesthetics than we realize, forming a sword thrusting into the glamorous, commercialized, colorful world.

4. Imperatives of “Well-Prepared”: An Expansion

Considering this exhibition as the first debut for those artists as well as the first encounter between Chinese contemporary art and other contemporary art, a sense of importance permeated the artistic productions of those artists, which led them to expand their art practices physically and conceptually.

Huang extended his pre-existing Dadaist practice of washing books into the domain of cultural reflections, using the longevity of the ruin aesthetic as the main thread linking the turtle-shape, tomb-concept, and pulp-materiality. Gu expanded his cultural critique into the geographical territory of France, making fun of Chanel by distorting the bottles provided by them, which shifted his original critique of industrial society to a broader commercialized global society. Yang's original abstract ink painting practices were complicated by the concepts of installation art and performance art (repetition of ink application). Above all, he discovered the new materiality of ink itself, the metallic nature and reflective potential, which seemingly mocks the 2000-year ink tradition that did not discover this important intrinsic possibility.

In accordance with the materials support, Yang's exhibition catalogue claims that for this show, he had “access to

¹ Wu et al., *The Allure of Matter*, 19.

unlimited materials and space for the first time”.¹ The time (one-month preparation), space (a long wall that can do art freely), and funding (unlimited materials) all provided essential bases for scale-enlarging. Art historian Marie Leduc reveals that Huang represents his book-washing practice on “a much larger scale”.² Art historian Orianna Cacchione claims that this was his “largest work”.³ The exhibition catalogue of Yang presents his previous small-scale sketches and then says, “Works were massive — almost 4 meters in height and 2.5 meters in width”.⁴

Those scale-enlarging practices came along with the labor-intensive one-month preparation and repetition, which was primarily derived from twisting the small-scale material units into larger concrete art. I saw this process as another key reason for the monochrome coincidence. While Huang dealt with the monochrome new paper, Gu focused on the single-color perfume bottles. They all entail the repeated deconstruction of products, which resulted in blurred color and secured the monochrome outcome. Yang’s consistent application of ink also foreshadowed the monochrome final result. As they treated repetition as a key element, incorporating performance and the Dadaist spirit of mixing appearance, the monochrome outcome was promised.

5. Coda: Turning Back to the Smart Museum

Although my primary focus is Yang Jiechang and his *100 Layers of Ink*, I briefly discuss the color practices of two other artists as well as the critical threads that connect the contexts. Yang Jiechang’s *100 Layers of Ink* series was initiated because of this exhibition, and his visual language for this series was internalized. Therefore, I use this code to shed new light on his *100 Layers of Ink*.

100 Layers of Ink at the Smart Museum was relatively small and did not have the monumental quality of the installation work in “Magiciens de la Terre”. However, as I stated above, the pictorial language he practices shows a sense of originality and a clear departure from flat abstract painting and time-honored ink traditions. This work also internalized the performance element and revealed a monochrome black through the monotonous, repetitive process. And the monochrome itself is visually imposing compared to the colorful exhibitions we normally have. The black, here, shifts away from the cultural revolution’s political meaning of color and is the result of this contextual appeal of originality, the performance of artistic creation, and a subversion of conventional exhibition settings.

To conclude this essay, I hope this could introduce a new perspective to the current research on abstract painting and encourage a focus on the imperative of context and how artists’ visual languages internalize this appeal. The conversations about the meaning of abstract monochrome painting maybe are more important and intriguing than the material conservations.

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¹ Erickson and Yeung, *Yang Jiechang: Earth Roots*, 107.

² Leduc, *Dissidence*, 58.

³ Cacchione et al., *The Allure of Matter*, 102.

⁴ Erickson and Yeung, *Yang Jiechang: Earth Roots*, 107.

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