

Traditional-style ink painting (in China) was revitalized after the Cultural Revolution as both an aesthetic investigation and a rebellion against the propagandist ink painting of the Maoist era. In the late '70s and early '80s, one dominant trend of ink painting was a formalist school that emphasized a stylized combination of traditional literati painting and western modern art styles under a slogan "no subject matter, just form." ... In the mid '80s, an avant-garde ink painting group rebelled against highly stylized traditionalism and incorporated some western avant-garde forms and ideas. They freed the medium from the specific techniques of orthodox aesthetics and developed it as a contemporary medium. ... Considering themselves Rationalist painters, the artists devoted themselves to the creation of universal pictures transcending the self expression of both traditional literati painting and western modern formalism. Their painting frequently presents some concept of a universal structure with a somewhat religious meaning.¹

Pseudo Series: Contemplation of the World, 1985

Wenda Gu's *Contemplation of the World* is a good example of this. (Gu) strove to represent the universal world supported by various kinds of historical, philosophical, and even scientific knowledge; (his) paintings were called "scholarly painting." Wenda Gu was the most influential artist of this group; his experimental ink painting employed traditional techniques of washes and splashed ink to create an imagery of energy, *qi*, and a flowing stream, *liu*. Therefore, this kind of "landscape painting" was also called "Universal Current."²

In his Pseudo-Characters series of splashed ink on huge sheets of rice paper, (from)1984-86, Gu used traditional calligraphic techniques but wrote restructured characters with components (that were) upside-down, reversed, or wrongly written. Wenda Gu's language project investigated the intrinsic nature of aestheticizing characters or text by destroying the basic structure of the Chinese character while retaining its calligraphic presentation in order to create a conflict between linguistic meaning and aesthetic pleasure.³

One of the most pervasive themes (in Contemporary Chinese art) is the interest in exploring the forms and meaning of script. It is no coincidence that it is script, rather than religious images, which in other parts of Asia still exert a strong influence on artists, that constitutes the most enduring aspect of tradition and one in which artists continue to find inspiration. Control of the script was an imperial concern as early as the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), when heterodox versions were deemed a great threat that required elimination. The obsession with pseudo-characters (graphs that look at first glance like real Chinese characters, but which on closer inspection turn out to be meaningless patterns invented by the artist) is common to artists in the Peoples Republic of China, Taiwan, and overseas. It is tempting to see the creation of these pseudo-characters as a deliberate attempt to subvert the most powerful tool of state ideology, but if so, it does not seem to have attracted official opprobrium. The work of Wenda Gu ... can be read on another level; the predilection for distorting and dissolving images so that they lie on the border of meaningless pattern is a hallowed tradition in Chinese art, stretching back

¹ Minglu, pg 157

² Ibid

³ Minglu, pg 159

through the spatial and semiotic ambiguities of scholar painting to the roots in the tantalizing patterns of archaic bronzes.⁴

The contents of Wenda Gu's characters are in each case drained of meaning. What that effacement dramatizes, beautifully and impressively, is that script – or the social field – may exist not only as a structure of contents or ideas; its coherence may instead come from its own compulsive systematicity, and at levels deeper than – or indifferent to – the ideological. What is perhaps being sketched here is an idea of power that, in the West, can be expressed only in tentative terms: that in societies of disciplinarity, ideology may no longer be required to be the primary cohesive force binding the subject in social space. What holds the social formation together are modes of activity whose basis lies at the micro-level, in the myriad acts of repetition and self-regulation by which the subject inscribes itself in social discourse.⁵

Merely through the suggestion of something vaguely clandestine, Gu's use of bogus ideograms antagonized the Chinese Authorities, despite his explanation later that there was no political message. Gu states "I was interested in language itself, how to break through the control of tradition" Nevertheless, in 1986, his first solo show, in Xian, was not permitted to open.⁶

Oedipus Refound, The Enigma of Blood Series

He experienced culture shock after immigrating to the US and sought to challenge the international mainstream. Gu took up this challenge with body art. His first controversial work, exhibited in Los Angeles, was made from dozens of used sanitary napkins and tampons collected from women around the world.⁷

2000 Natural Deaths (1990), (from the Oedipus Refound Series) refer(s) to the passing of blood during the menstrual cycle as a metaphoric "death" of a human life. The installation consists of two parts. In the center of the gallery, lying flat on the floor or suspended at eye level from the ceiling, are shallow plastic boxes about the size of small paintings in which are sealed delicately displayed used sanitary napkins and tampons, about two to four per box. Also sealed within the box are the packing materials in which the women shipped their used napkins and tampons to the artist and any letters or stories they chose to include with them. Each box is carefully composed, set within a crimson frame painted with blobs of swirling red wax.⁸

The exhibitions precipitated angry letters from visitor and threats of resignation from board members at the museums. "The tampons stopped my career for year," Gu explains. "I thought there was free expression in the West, but it still has so many political and social taboos."⁹

The shocked response that many people have to some parts of the bodily materials used in his installation work is, he argues, due to society's fears equated with the very substance of these life giving bodily materials. These are then presented in a gallery environment. ... Their pristine, odorless, and almost clinical presentation resembled

⁴ Minglu, pg 13

⁵ Minglu, pg 57

⁶ Lufty, pg 142

⁷ Minglu, pg 35

⁸ Soe, pg 11

⁹ Lufty, pg 143

carefully exhibited anthropological specimens. He says: In a way, I wish to present a counter-part to Duchamp's theory of the ready-made. For me the body is the ready-made subject. But I also want to close the gap between art and audience because the work originates from the same space.¹⁰

United Nations Series

Gu kept going. By 1993, the "*Oedipus Refound*" series had mutated into the "*United Nations*" series, and he had changed his material of choice to human hair. The first of these installations, in Lodz, Poland was called United Nations – Poland Monument: Hospitalized History Museum (1993). It consisted of a simple arrangement of hair-strewn hospital cots made up with white sheets borrowed from a local mental hospital. A large Nazi concentration camp that had been situated near Lodz was presumably Gu's inspiration. But this connection apparently touched too sensitive a nerve. The city's major closed the exhibition after the first night.¹¹

Since their inception in 1993, beginning with the "*Polish Monument*," the United Nations" series has become equated with Gu's interests, not only in issues around multiculturalism but in the visual and spiritual exploration of a country's social and cultural history and identity. This is contrary to the political organization known as the "*United Nations*" series, with its focus on political and social alliances between countries. Gu has proposed a conceptual and artistic connection based on one of the most symbolically potent mortal substances, pure human hair. He addresses the notion of universalism as of our collective consciousness, our awareness of the human condition and of our spiritual essence by thread-like strands, which link a nation both metaphorically, and physically.¹²

(In his "*United Nations*" series), Gu constructs different monumental forms, such as an American flag, a Chinese landscape painting, or an Islamic temple with its calligraphy, by using bricks made with human hair from people in different places. The works wed public, monumental forms with the most private of personal substances – hair.¹³

Swedish and Russian Monument-Interpol, 1996: Gu states, "I decided to construct a pure hair tunnel made of Russian and Swedish hair which had been collected from barbershops since July 1995. In the middle of the tunnel, I suspended a genuine rocket, loaned to me by the Royal Swedish army. The visual impression was that of running through the long, narrow hair tunnel as a hint of using military action to control the cultural battle. I wanted this work to stand as a referee of cultural confrontation. As Alexandr Brener (another exhibitor) began playing his drums and screaming at the opening, I paid special attention to him, as I was videotaping (his) performance. ... I then left the exhibition space momentarily to meet friends in (another) part of the building. One minute later, a German artist ran up to me shouting that my work had been destroyed by Brener. ... I saw this "performance" as a mirror reflecting a political and

¹⁰ Kember, pg 199

¹¹ Lufty, pg 143

¹² Kember, pg 197-8

¹³ Minglu, pg 35

economical power game. ... The actual action was a “crime.” On an artistic level, it was a repetition of old Dada ideology.¹⁴

The well received **United Nations – China Monument: Temple of Heaven (1998)**, have taken the series – and Gu’s work as a whole – in a softer, more fluid direction than his earlier ... (more) rigid pieces. Commissioned by the Asia Society in New York for the 1998 exhibition “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” and installed in P.S 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, *Temple of Heaven* consisted of suspended curtains, evoking a tent and suggesting the structure of the “temple.” The curtains were made from clippings collected from more than 325 barbershops around the world patterned with pseudo-Chinese, English, Hindi, and Arabic characters. The curtains, with their masses of hair functioning as clumps of pulp, possessed qualities of handmade rice paper, alternately guiding and blocking the light. Inside the tent, Gu created an oddly soothing environment – composed of Ming-style tables and chairs with televisions inset in their seats – in which the visitors were invited to stay and drink a cup of tea.¹⁵

Gu states, “The seat of each chair is a TV monitor showing passing clouds. Visitors may sit on the clouds and meditate. The unreadableness of the languages is intended to evoke the limitations of human knowledge. ... The furniture is a counterpart to the words. I want people to sit on the chairs, surrounded by the four invented languages in a transcultural setting, to meditate about issues like existence beyond knowledge, beyond nationality, beyond the boundaries of culture and race.”¹⁶

Gu had been trying to find a way to crush hair into powder since 1993. “I put it in the coffee grinder. Nothing. I put it in the microwave for an hour. Nothing,” he recalls with a laugh. By chance on a trip to China, he discovered that hair powder already existed as a medicinal tonic. ... In Gu’s mind, the prospect of embracing ink, his first love as an artistic material, under the umbrella of his human “body waste” concept will bring his work full circle.¹⁷

Unlike many Euro-American contemporaries whose work deals with bodily substances and crises of the human body, Gu’s work doesn’t address specific social, political, religious, or sexual issues. Rather, he explores the eternal human verities and the general human condition. However, Gu does not project his own interpretation and understanding of the history and culture of the Other into his monuments made of other’s hair. Gu describes himself as “a foreign intruder to any country, using local materials and local labor.” For him, “the various ‘misunderstandings’ from different people, times, locations, are part of the value of the creation in itself. ‘Misunderstanding’ is the essence of our knowledge concerning the material world. The sum of various misunderstandings is the confrontational truth of my work.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Gu, pg 102

¹⁵ Lufty, pg 143

¹⁶ Kaplan, pg 87-8

¹⁷ Lufty, pg 143

¹⁸ Minglu, pg 35

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