

ART & Place

Essays on ART FROM a Hong Kong Perspective

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*Cover illustration: Entrance to the exhibition of works by Zhang Hongtu,
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, May 1996*

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Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
Section I. Art and Its Contexts	1
1. Site-Specificity in Recent Art	3
2. Monologues Without Words: Museum Displays as Art Historical Narratives	12
3. Museums, Artists, Audiences	19
4. Private Art in a Public Place	24
5. 'In Search of Art': Looking Back With the Future in Mind	28
6. Engaging Tradition	33
7. Photography, Art, Life	37
Section II. Arts Policy Issues	45
8. The Culture of Democracy: Looking at Art in Hong Kong	47
9. The Arts Policy Review Report: Some Responses	52
10. Submission to the Legislative Council's Panel on Recreation and Culture Concerning the Proposed Arts Development Council	55
11. Research and the Nurturing of Public Understanding of Art	58
Section III. Hong Kong Art	63
12. Between East and West: Negotiations With Tradition and Modernity in Hong Kong Art	65
13. The Sculpture of Antonio Mak	85
14. The Art of Yank Wong	105
15. The Art of Chan Chi-ling	109

16. A Sense of Place: Chan Chi-ling and Wong Wo-bik in Conversation With David Clarke	114
17. Innocence and Experience: The Art of Mei Lo	120
18. The Insufficiency of Tradition: Paintings by Fang Zhaoling and Chu Hing-wah	126
19. Photography and Social Reproduction	132
20. Revisions	138
21. Zuni Icosahedron in Context	144
Section IV. Western Art in a Hong Kong Frame	149
22. Grimm's Fairy Tales: A Series of Etchings by David Hockney	151
23. The Blue Guitar	157
24. Drawing From the Unconscious: The Surrealist Art of Max Ernst	169
25. German Graphics of the 1970s	174
26. Aspects of Contemporary Australian Art	178
27. Hot and Cool: The Art of Robert Rauschenberg	183
28. Rodin and the Fragmented Figure	187
29. The Aesthetic of the Sketch	198
30. National Shows at the 1995 Venice Biennale	202
31. Art and the History of the Body: A Review of 'Identity and Alterity', the Keynote Show of the 1995 Venice Biennale	207
Section V. Chinese Art: The View From Hong Kong	213
32. Li Tiefu and Western Art	215
33. Exile From Tradition: Chinese and Western Traits in the Art of Lin Fengmian	225
34. Reframing Mao: Aspects of Recent Chinese Art, Popular Culture and Politics	236
35. Foreign Bodies: Chinese Art at the 1995 Venice Biennale	250
<i>Plates</i>	259
<i>Chinese Names</i>	285
<i>Index</i>	287

Illustrations

Figures

1.1	Richard Serra, <i>Tilted Arc</i> , 1981	5
1.2	Richard Long, <i>A Line in Ireland</i> , 1974	9
2.1	The National Palace Museum, Taipei	15
3.1	Wong Shun-kit, <i>Artist Standing in Front of His Work</i> , 1992	20
3.2	Danny Yung, <i>Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture</i> , No. 4, 1991	22
4.1	Origami Pineapple, submitted to <i>In Search of Art</i> by Lee Lok-ka	26
4.2	Photo/postcard, submitted to <i>In Search of Art</i> by Eric Wear	27
5.1	Self-portrait photo, submitted to <i>In Search of Art</i> by Cheung Wan-wah	30
5.2	Moneybox in the shape of the old Hong Kong Bank Building, submitted to <i>In Search of Art</i> by Chung Yin-chai	31
6.1	<i>Engaging Tradition</i> : detail of the installation in the Fung Ping Shan Museum by Oscar Ho, 1994	35
7.1	Kwok Man-lung, <i>In the Street, Causeway Bay</i> , 1990, from <i>One Day in Hong Kong</i>	39
7.2	Tang Kong-fai, <i>Untitled (Central MTR Station)</i> , 1990, from <i>One Day in Hong Kong</i>	42
12.1	Ng Yiu-chung, <i>Mountain Scenery IV</i> , 1970	70
12.2	Van Lau, <i>The Meeting of Yin and Yang</i> , installed in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (opened 1989)	74
12.3	Oscar Ho, <i>The Turtle Rock</i> , 1991	77
12.4	Wang Hai, <i>Cultural Relics. Hong Kong History Series (Section 4)</i> , 1990	79
12.5	Chan Yuk-keung, <i>Untitled</i> , 1990	80
13.1	Antonio Mak, <i>Horse Lover Goes West</i> , 1992	87
13.2	Antonio Mak, <i>Bible From Happy Valley</i> , 1992	89
13.3	Antonio Mak, <i>Book Lover I</i> , 1992	89
13.4	Antonio Mak, <i>West Meets East</i> , 1973	93

13.5	Antonio Mak, <i>Easy Rider</i> , 1993	94
13.6	Antonio Mak, <i>Sleepwalker I</i> , 1991	97
13.7	Antonio Mak, <i>Last Tango With Tiger</i> , 1993	97
13.8	Antonio Mak, <i>Atomical Relationship</i> , 1974	99
13.9	Antonio Mak, <i>Horse Crossing I</i> , 1977/83	102
14.1	Yank Wong, <i>Point Final</i> , 1994	106
14.2	Yank Wong, <i>Les 100 Pas de la 1000 Patte</i> , 1994	107
15.1	Annie Chan, <i>The Sink</i> , 1988	110
15.2	Annie Chan, <i>The Top and the Fire</i> , 1993	113
16.1	Wong Wo-bik, <i>Architectural Transmutation</i> , 1988	118
17.1	Mei Lo, <i>Untitled</i> , 1988	121
18.1	Fang Zhaoling, <i>Painting and Calligraphy Share the Same Origin</i> , 1981	128
18.2	Chu Hing-wah, <i>In the Museum</i> , 1994	129
19.1	Osbert Lam, <i>Stun</i> , 1992	134
20.1	Ken Wong, <i>Yaumatei Typhoon Shelter</i> , 1994	140
20.2	Ken Wong, <i>Yaumatei Typhoon Shelter</i> , 1995	140
20.3	Edwin Lai, <i>Two Unrelated Pictures</i> , 1995	142
21.1	Zuni Icosahedron, a scene from <i>Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture</i> , 1990	147
22.1	David Hockney, <i>The Enchantress With the Baby Rapunzel</i> , 1969. From <i>Illustrations for Six Fairy Tales From the Brothers Grimm</i>	154
22.2	David Hockney, <i>Home</i> , 1969. From <i>Illustrations for Six Fairy Tales From the Brothers Grimm</i>	155
23.1	David Hockney, <i>The Old Guitarist</i> , 1976/77. From <i>The Blue Guitar</i>	159
23.2	David Hockney, <i>Franco-American Mail</i> , 1976/77. From <i>The Blue Guitar</i>	161
23.3	David Hockney, <i>What Is This Picasso?</i> , 1976/77. From <i>The Blue Guitar</i>	167
24.1	Max Ernst, <i>Celebes</i> , 1921	170
28.1	Auguste Rodin, <i>Walking Man (L'Homme qui Marche)</i> , 1877–8	188
28.2	Auguste Rodin, <i>Man With the Broken Nose (Homme au Nez Casse)</i> , 1864	190
28.3	Auguste Rodin, <i>The Hand of God (Main de Dieu)</i> , 1898	193
28.4	Auguste Rodin, <i>Torso of Centauress and Study for Iris (Torso de la Centauresse et etude pour Iris)</i> , c1910	195
29.1	Claude Monet, <i>Bathers at La Grenouillère</i> , 1869	199
30.1	Sammy Cucher and Anthony Aziz, <i>Pam and Kim</i> , 1995	203
30.2	Young visitor and detail of Martin Honert's <i>Das Fliegende Klassenzimmer</i> (1994–5), in the German pavilion at the 1995 Venice Biennale	205
31.1	<i>Physiognomy of Fallen Women, Russian</i> , plate from Cesare Lombroso's <i>The Female Offender</i> , London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1895	209
32.1	Li Yishi, <i>Portrait of Shuqi, Age 30</i> , 1935 or earlier	216
32.2	Li Tiefu, <i>Musician</i> , 1918	218
32.3	Li Tiefu, <i>Feng Gangbai, the Artist</i> , 1934	219
33.1	Lin Fengmian, <i>Suffering</i> , 1929	227
33.2	Lin Fengmian, <i>Figure</i> , 1980	229

33.3	Lin Fengmian, <i>Landscape</i> , 1979	231
34.1	Portrait of Mao Zedong on Tiananmen, Beijing (April 1993)	237
34.2	Wang Ziwei, <i>The Leader</i> , 1992	239
35.1	Liu Wei, <i>You Like Pork?</i> , 1995	252
35.2	Zhang Xiaogang, <i>Bloodline: The Big Family</i> , No. 3, 1995	253
35.3	Lien Te-cheng, <i>Particular Tao</i> , 1995	254
35.4	Wu Mali, <i>Library</i> (detail), 1995	255
35.5	Chinese sailing boat moored on the Grand Canal, an element of Guo Qiangcai's <i>Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot</i> (1995), an installation piece included in the <i>TransCulture</i> exhibition	256

Plates

1	<i>Engaging Tradition</i> : detail of the installation in the Fung Ping Shan Museum by Oscar Ho, 1994	261
2	Lui Shou-kwan, <i>Zhuangzi</i> , 1974	262
3	Wucius Wong, <i>Cloud Harmony</i> , No. 1, 1978	263
4	Antonio Mak, <i>Blue Elephant</i> , 1989	264
5	Yank Wong, <i>Rules (Un Tableau Carrement Rond)</i> , 1994	265
6	Yank Wong, <i>Grey Still</i> , 1994	266
7	Annie Chan, <i>University Courtyard</i> , 1994	267
8	Annie Chan, <i>Room 240</i> , 1988	268
9	Mei Lo, <i>Shooting Star</i> , 1986	269
10	Fang Zhaoling, <i>Landscape (In Memory of My Teacher, Zhang Daqian I)</i> , 1983	270
11	Chu Hing-wah, <i>One Relaxing Afternoon</i> , 1994	271
12	Raymond Chan, <i>Sometime in Wanchai</i> , 1995	272
13	Yvonne Lo, <i>Days of Dormitory '94</i>	273
14	Installation shot of <i>Australia: Beyond the Mundane</i> , Fung Ping Shan Museum, 1989, showing (left) <i>The Three Trees Painting</i> , 1987, and (centre) <i>The Pool</i> , 1987, by Hollie, together with (right) <i>Untitled</i> , 1988, by Mike Parr	274
15	Robert Rauschenberg, <i>Crustaceans (Day Lights)</i> , 1993	275
16	Li Tiefu, <i>Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice</i> (detail), 1946	276
17	Lin Fengmian, <i>Exercise</i> , 1934 or earlier	277
18	Lin Fengmian, <i>Landscape</i> , early 1980s	278
19	Lin Fengmian, <i>Landscape</i> , mid-1980s	279
20	Lin Fengmian, <i>Still Life</i> , late 1970s	280
21	Zhang Bo, <i>The Word's Meaning</i> , 1991	281
22	Yu Youhan, <i>Double Image</i> , 1992	282
23	Wang Guangyi, <i>Great Criticism Series: McDonald's</i> , 1992	283
24	Liu Wei, <i>The Revolutionary Family: Dad in Front of a Poster of Zhu De</i> , 1990	284

Site-Specificity in Recent Art

1

The following piece was written for an exhibition of work by Annie Chan and Wong Wo-bik, which was held in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong, where I teach. We had a classroom there which could be cleared during term breaks and used for low-budget exhibitions. This was the first time I had organized an exhibition of work by local artists, it having taken me a bit of time after my arrival in Hong Kong to get in touch with local art events.

*Annie and Wo-bik's show was inspired by the particular qualities of the room in which it was held, and took that room and its surroundings as its subject matter. Hence I was inspired to think about issues to do with site-specificity, and this essay was the result. All three of us were also involved, along with a group of other artists (including Yank Wong and Antonio Mak) and organizers (such as Hugh Chiverton, now a presenter on RTHK Radio 3, and Christine Loh, now a Legislative Councillor) in a project called the *Mobile Art Show*. We took art to, and made art in, a variety of public spaces such as Yan Oi Square in Tuen Mun, MacPherson Playground in Mongkok and Chater Garden in Central. Planning for this project had an influence on the writing of the essay too, and a version of it went into the catalogue for that show.*

There are many ways in which a work of art can be said to have a special relationship to a particular place. Most obviously, a work of art can represent or otherwise comment upon a place, as John Constable's landscapes do in the case of Suffolk. The images he created evoke such a vivid sense of place that it takes quite an effort of will to begin questioning (as art historian John Barrell does¹) the narrowly ideological account of the rural scene which they give. His 'Suffolk' may be fictional, but the power of the fiction is such that over 150 years later many people visit the sites referred to in his paintings and view them as if through his eyes.

Since Constable's paintings make Suffolk apparently visible to our eyes when we view them, it would not be surprising if a spectator were to assume that Flatford Mill, for instance, was visible to Constable when he painted *Scene on a Navigable River (Flatford Mill)* in 1817. In fact, however, the work was constructed (with the aid of sketches) in a studio.

A second type of relationship to a particular place which an artwork can have is for it to be made there. The ritually separate space of the studio is that place in the majority of cases, and although the qualities of that location may be of great importance to the artist's frame of mind and to the creative process, it is usually hidden from view in the final work. Constable's *Scene on a Navigable River (Flatford Mill)* is typical in this respect. Some exceptions would be: landscape sketches made wholly out of doors, 'artist in his studio' self-portraits and studies of studio models posing which do not attempt to disguise them as, say, Venus or Hercules.

A work of art can also refer in an indexical way (rather than an iconic way) to its place of making. This is the case with Richard Serra's *Casting* (1969), which was made by throwing molten lead into the angle between a wall and floor. The solidified strip of lead was removed towards the centre of the room, and flipped over. The process was repeated a number of times till the space between the first form and the wall against which it had been made was filled with a series of wave-like shapes each bearing the imprint of the wall-floor juncture. The final casting was left in its 'mould'.

Casting also belongs in the third category of this simple taxonomy of relationships between artworks and particular places, since it was a sculpture made for a particular location, and not just in one. The importance Serra attaches to site where his works are concerned can be shown by the example of *Tilted Arc* (installed in 1981 and removed in the late 1980s; fig. 1.1). When the owners first attempted to move the sculpture from its location in downtown Manhattan Serra instigated a US\$30 million lawsuit claiming copyright infringement (relocation being seen as creating a derivative work), violation of constitutional rights to free speech, etc. *Tilted Arc* was angled so as to cast no shadows at midday, a time when the plaza in which it stood was particularly busy. The curve of its vertical steel sheet was designed to complement pedestrian movement patterns, and its height approximated to the eye-level of people exiting nearby buildings.

It could be argued that all art has a relationship to the place of its exhibition. There remains, however, a distinction between those works of art which are created for a place and those which develop a relationship with a location after arriving there. Certainly many works of art from earlier eras were created for particular sites. From the Baroque era we can cite as examples Gianlorenzo Bernini's



Figure 1.1
Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981.
Copyright 1995 Richard Serra
/ Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York. Photo courtesy Leo
Castelli Gallery, New York.

sculptural decorations for St. Peter's and Giovan Battista Gaulli's illusionistic ceiling decoration for the nave of the Gesù. There are points of comparison between the artworks of the Baroque and those of the last 30 years in that both these times have permitted a certain theatricality in paintings or sculptures, and have blurred the distinction between artistic genres. The multi-media 'happenings' of John Cage and others can be likened in this respect to the merging of paint, stucco and architecture on the ceiling of the Gesù.

Although creating for particular sites is an activity which can be shown to have a long history, this should not lead us to see continuity where it does not exist. Recent site-specific art is a conscious departure from the dominant tendency of modernism.

As represented by its key critical defenders, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, modernist art concerns itself with the qualities inherent in the individual medium used. Thus painting since Manet, for instance, is seen in Greenberg's 1965 essay 'Modernist Painting' as eliminating 'literary' or 'sculptural' qualities in the search for its own supposed 'essence' as a flat, bounded surface marked with pigment.² Not only does such an aesthetic devalue hybrid artworks, but it also condemns as theatrical those artworks which show concern with their environment. To Fried (in his 1967 article 'Art and Objecthood') 'theatricality' is to be opposed to the quasi-mystical value of 'presence', which is attained by the self-contained, self-referential artwork.³

Modernist paintings, then, tend to be created with no place in mind, with an obliviousness to what is happening outside their frame. To point out that modernist works are often created for museums (rather than, say, churches) is not really to fundamentally challenge this statement. This is so not simply because they are created for museum space as a general category of space (and not for a particular museum) but because modernist discourse views the museum as a neutral background for art, as a qualityless non-place.

It is no coincidence that the public art museum is an institution which came into its own in the era of modernism. It appears at a time when the question of art's (metaphorical) place in relation to society was becoming problematic. At a time when art was being marginalized, when it had 'no place' in society, the art museum appeared as the no-place in which it could find asylum. Anxiety that art's audience was no longer a given, that its role was no longer predetermined, is neutralized by modernist theory: art's autonomy is celebrated as a positive virtue. When early modernist critic Clive Bell asserts (in his 1931 book *Art*) that 'to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space'⁴ he denies the need for a discursive context. The art gallery which exhibits works against bare white walls, isolating its inmates from their neighbours as well as from life at large, is a physical embodiment of the same theory.

I hope I have said enough to indicate that I see the neutrality of the art museum space as fictional. An exhibit is always more than the sum of its parts, it is an argument about the works present (and absent), an argument all the more powerful for being presented obliquely, disguised as an array of objects rather than revealed as a series of propositions. Modernist art theory claims to be interested in the literal properties of artworks, but in fact inscribes them within a sophisticated and contentious discourse.

A desire to escape the museum space and create art in the environment (which became popular in the 1960s and 1970s) was

partly motivated by a recognition similar to that which I have been reporting here. Artists felt that by finding new sites for art they could establish a new (perhaps political) role and relevance for art. Art would survive in the contemporary world by engagement, rather than by withdrawal into a hermetic 'purity'. It could be argued that happenings, along with environmental and conceptual artworks, were primarily concerned with escaping a different kind of place for art – the commercial art gallery – but ultimately the two types of space must be considered together. The commercial gallery space may be one that a work of art seeks to pass through (to a sale), whereas the museum is a place of stasis, a final destination, but, as Jean Baudrillard points out in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), there is a link between them. The museum's apparent aloofness from the art marketplace merely enables it to ratify the value of art objects in an analogous way to the Bank of England in its role as guarantor for the currency used by the clearing banks.

My feeling is that those artists who saw art's future as lying in engagement rather than isolation were correct. Nevertheless, since the museum didn't create the problem of art's insecurity in modern society, the problem did not simply dissolve when art moved outside its walls during the 1960s and 1970s.

The new physical context for art did help rupture the modernist conceptual context in the case of those artists who were responding to the specific qualities of the site. The boundary between the work and its physical environment is blurred (contrasting with modernist practice) in the case of Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1976–7). This work consists of a series of steel poles, set in a geometric pattern. The height of the poles is adjusted so that their tips are at almost exactly the same level, despite the unevenness of the terrain. The absolute regularity of the arrangement makes the question of the internal structure of the work's elements an unimportant one. Their minimal bulk and identical, uncomplicated form prevents the poles being of interest as sculptures when viewed individually. They can only be of significance when viewed in relation to the site, an isolated spot in New Mexico. The interaction with the environment is particularly intense and theatrical when a pole is struck by lightning, a not uncommon event given the weather patterns of the locality. However, despite its title, De Maria does not regard lightning as a necessary part of the work. The less spectacular interactions with the environment that occur on a daily basis (due to the changing angle of the sun, for instance) are quite sufficient.

Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) is a site-specific artwork which like *Lightning Field* is located in an inaccessible outdoor location, the Nevada desert. It consists of two slots cut 12

metres deep into the top of facing sections of a mesa. The slots are aligned, but are separated by a ravine. If anything this 'earthwork' has a closer relationship to its site than the De Maria piece. There are no elements which could even be mistaken as sculptures in isolation from the setting. Indeed, *Double Negative* has been created by a subtraction rather than an addition. Carl Andre, another sculptor who concerns himself with place, describes the forms of his sculptures as 'cuts' into the surrounding space (the elements he uses being themselves uncarved). In Heizer's case the cuts are literal ones: he used two tons of dynamite, and over 200,000 tons of rock were removed from the mountain. Clearly this is a different story from that of Baroque murals and other artworks from earlier eras which were created for particular locations. Those works involve materials brought from elsewhere, whereas *Double Negative* is made not just for but of the site. If we were to look for pre-modern precedents we would have to think of gardens, which share in addition the quality of being artworks that one experiences from the inside. The markings left behind on the landscape by pre-Columbian civilizations might also come to mind, and one can assume that Heizer would also be aware of the parallels since his father is an archaeologist. Intervention in the landscape seems something of a family tradition: Heizer's grandfather was a mining engineer.

Because of the remote location of *Double Negative* and *Lightning Field* few people are able to see them. This is clearly intentional, and De Maria actually imposes a limit of six persons at a time. Solitude and scale operate to invoke a feeling of the sublime before Heizer's earthworks, and one is reminded of the paintings of Clyfford Still or even Albert Bierstadt.

The asocial nature of De Maria or Heizer's pieces prevent them fulfilling the political goals which were associated with the move away from gallery space. The rupture with modernist values didn't inexorably lead to a socially-engaged art: A retrogressive Romanticism was an equally possible outcome. This mood is certainly felt in the pieces of the English artist Richard Long.

Long creates sculptures through the arrangement of natural materials discovered at his often inaccessible sites. Again one senses a concern with man's relationship to nature, but Long's pieces have a more intimate scale than Heizer's. Whereas that artist's works seem built to outlast the civilization which produced them, Long's are ephemeral. *A Line in Ireland* (1974; fig. 1.2) is a grouping of stones, while *A Line Made by Walking, England* (1967) is merely a mark made on the surface of some grass by the method described in the title. Rather than documenting the imposition of human will on nature, Long makes minimal interventions into the landscape, seeking a dialogue with it in an ecological spirit.



Figure 1.2
Richard Long, *A Line in Ireland*, 1974. Photo courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery. Photographer: Richard Long.

One can contrast the asocial character of the art which has just been examined with that of Christo. His *Running Fence* was as ephemeral as Long's work, since it stood for only two weeks, but it was the outcome of two years of planning. The gaining of permissions, the raising of money, the organization of the work force, and all the other activities associated with the construction of a 24-mile-long fence across northern California made Christo's endeavour unavoidably social and led art into an encounter with

new audiences. The six-metre-high nylon panels fastened to a total of 2,050 steel poles must undoubtedly have enhanced viewers' awareness of the qualities of the chosen site, but the process of its creation can be seen as being equal in importance to the final outcome. In this respect *Running Fence* is comparable to a 'happening', a type of art activity where there is no visible art object produced which survives beyond the time and place in which it occurs. A happening is certainly a social activity, with audience participation encouraged to the point where the roles of artist and spectator can become blurred: indeed it might be argued that the danger with the happening is that the ecstatic merging of art and life may erase the very distance which gives art its critical value.

To describe a happening (or indeed one of Long's sculptures) as ephemeral is perhaps not to tell the whole story. These works, like Heizer's and De Maria's, have become known to a wider audience through documentary photography. Although the works themselves attempted to escape commodification by being ephemeral, inaccessible or immovable, the necessity of earning a living led to photographs replacing them in the art gallery space as non-site-specific, saleable objects. A 'schizophrenic' splitting occurred, demonstrating that the logic of the capitalist (art) marketplace is not so easily avoided. The museum too proved capable of recuperating site-specific artworks, and not only through the display of documentation: Heizer's *Double Negative* is now owned by the Los Angeles Museum Of Contemporary Art.

It would be overly pessimistic to conclude from this brief discussion of site-specificity in recent art that attempts to escape gallery and museum space were a complete failure. The relationship of art to these institutional sites has been successfully rendered problematic by the efforts of artists such as those I have been discussing here. This is the case even though they have been unable to abandon such spaces entirely. Furthermore, the hegemony of modernist ideology has been destroyed, leaving us with an open situation in which a socially-critical art could flourish.

Artworks created for particular sites beyond the walls of galleries or museums will, I feel, continue to play a part in this strategy of engagement since they enable art to interact with new audiences in a direct way. Other approaches, however, will be equally viable. The current tendency of artists to return to gallery space, for instance, should not be seen as a necessarily reactionary one, opposed to the political dynamic of site-specific art. Alongside the many who are willingly submitting to a recommodification of art there are some whose return is motivated by a desire to subvert the institutional spaces of the art world from within.

Former environmental artist Hans Haacke belongs in this latter category. His works explore through images and texts the business

interests of museum trustees, the uses to which art sponsorship is put by multinational companies and other related issues. Despite the content of Haacke's art, many museums do host shows of his work. The hope, of course, is that by doing so they will enhance their reputation for liberal even-handedness. Not all museums perceive this trade-off to operate to their advantage, however. On more than one occasion a Haacke show has been cancelled because it threatened to conflict too openly with the depoliticized notion of art being sustained by that institution. The fictional nature of the museum space's neutrality is disclosed most dramatically on these occasions. Rather than being innate, the autonomy of art with respect to life is revealed as something which must be actively created and policed.

Notes

1. See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980.
2. Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in F. Francina and C. Harrison (eds.), *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, London, Harper and Row, 1982, pp. 5–10.
3. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in Gregory Battcock (ed.) *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1968, pp. 116–47.
4. Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', in op. cit. note 2, p. 73.

The Culture of Democracy: Looking at Art in Hong Kong



*Along with many others, I became drawn to comment on the inadequacy of government visual arts policy by the sheer extent of the problem. The following piece was published in the Hong Kong Economic Journal just before the opening of the new Hong Kong Museum of Art building in 1991, an occasion which had provided a focus for debate. At that time the situation seemed pretty hopeless, but the arts community was to become remarkably vocal and organized, and changes have since occurred. The Council for the Performing Arts has now gone, for instance, and the Arts Development Council which has replaced it has included the visual arts in its brief. The theoretical analysis of the role of museums which I developed in certain essays of the previous section informs some of the practical policy suggestions made here. The democratic dimension I had sought in exhibits such as *In Search of Art* I was now proposing as a quality that needed to be developed in the art world as a whole.*

The opening of the new Hong Kong Museum of Art at the Cultural Centre has provoked much discussion in the Hong Kong art world, with many artists expressing dissatisfaction over what they feel to be the museum's attitude towards local art. While I have a lot of sympathy with many of the remarks that artists have made to me concerning the museum, I feel that there are broader problems concerning support for the visual arts in Hong Kong which can hardly be laid at its door.

A most obvious problem is that there is a Council for the Performing Arts, but no similar funding body for contemporary local visual arts (in which category I would wish to include film, video and photography as well as painting, sculpture, printmaking, etc.). Such an odd prejudice against visual media is hard to explain, and is certainly not paralleled in the United Kingdom or the United

States, for instance. The British Arts Council and the United States National Endowment for the Arts both support the visual arts to great effect, and I see no valid argument why Hong Kong should not similarly allocate to the visual arts a fair proportion of the total arts support budget. In learning from the experience of these two countries, Hong Kong might also wish to adopt another practice — namely that of ensuring grant evaluation panels are made up solely of professionals from the fields involved. The Hong Kong Council for the Performing Arts panels are not at present constituted in accordance with this principle, and indeed have been subject to criticism for this reason.

One reason sometimes given for the lack of visual arts funding is that paintings and sculptures are made by individuals whereas plays and dances are made by groups. While it is undoubtedly true that it is easier in administrative terms to give money to organizations than to a series of individuals, this hurdle should not be treated as an insurmountable one. Visual artists tend to work isolated from one another, but this isolation can be one of the things that funding could be used to alleviate. I am thinking for instance of the establishment of something analogous to the Dance Forum, which (supported by the CFPA) has succeeded in bringing together people in a field to discuss matters of common concern.

Opposition to the distribution of taxpayers' money to individuals (as opposed to groups) is often based on a misunderstanding of the purpose of such grants. Support for the arts should be directed towards developing artistic culture for the benefit of the community as a whole, for the benefit of those who will be the audience for it. Giving money to artists is a means to achieve this end, not an end in itself. While good art is rarely produced in a situation where artists lack a degree of autonomy, it would not be inappropriate for some of the available grant money to be earmarked for projects which would require from artists a direct kind of commitment to the community. I am thinking, for example, of an artist-in-residence scheme, which would offer artists the opportunity of working in a school or other particular public setting. Such a scheme would offer the kind of social involvement which the commercial art market is unable to provide to artists, but without tying the artist's hands in creative terms.

Another way in which sponsorship money could reach artists might be through the commissioning of works for public places, or the partial financial underwriting of pieces that would otherwise be too expensive (in terms of material costs, for instance) to be produced by an artist without a prior guarantee of a sale. In the latter case the artist's commitment might be to loan the work for public display for a specified period in order to discharge indebtedness for the support received.

Of course, I am well aware that public commissions are already offered in Hong Kong, but my suggestions would involve a departure from present practice in two ways. Firstly, I would envisage that the commissioning process would normally be by means of open competition when it is directed at Hong Kong artists. Secondly, I would not envisage that commissioned artworks would be sited only in cultural ghetto areas such as a sculpture park, an art gallery forecourt or a theatre foyer. There are plenty of dull government offices or depressing hospital wards, for instance, which could be enlivened by the presence of a painting — and without that painting being reduced to fulfilling a purely decorative function.

I hope that it is clear from my suggestions about sponsorship that I do not see public support for art as merely an addition to the existing level of patronage which the art market supplies to the makers of art, but as offering possibilities different in kind. Those possibilities are particularly needed in Hong Kong because the commercial art market (while it does a good trade in antiques or in foreign art of a largely decorative nature) is with few exceptions uninterested in supporting challenging contemporary local art. Furthermore, when a non-commercial art venue such as the Hong Kong Arts Centre wishes to put on an exhibition of such art it finds commercial sponsorship difficult to attract. Sponsors expect an economic return from the association of their business with culture, and adventurous local visual art is of course less able to provide this than, say, a prestigious visiting performing arts company. Non-commercial sponsors of the visual art scene (such as the Goethe Institute or the British Council) are also not always best placed to help the development of local art — despite the contribution that they make such bodies are of course guided by their express purpose of promoting their own country's culture. Overseas governmental bodies cannot be expected to fulfil the role that Hong Kong governmental bodies are failing to take up.

While the support of artists currently working in Hong Kong is, as I am suggesting, of great importance, there must also be an acknowledgement that much needs to be done at the level of developing infrastructure. The abolition of political film censorship, for instance, would create a more conducive environment for that medium and contribute to the development of an open arena for cultural activity. Efforts to improve matters through the educational process also require a high priority: there is no institution with sole responsibility for advancing the visual arts in the territory — we have an Academy for Performing Arts but no Academy for Visual Arts. Furthermore, the status of art in schools seems somewhat low, with the result that many who would make good art teachers are not encouraged into the profession.

Art education is not just for schoolchildren and students

acquiring skills in preparation for a career in the area — art is one of the most rewarding areas to spend leisure time, and we can all benefit from an increased visual literacy even if we never pick up a paintbrush in our adult lives. Because of this it is particularly sad that the Hong Kong Museum of Art will be introducing entrance charges when it reopens. Such a policy is likely to discourage most those who do not already have a fairly established interest in art, thereby diminishing the museum's educational impact. When a museum has admission charges the tendency is for people to visit only on special occasions. Where entrance to the permanent collection is free, people will often come in for frequent brief forays — during a lunch break for instance — gradually building up a familiarity with a collection which might only cause visual indigestion if taken in at one go.

Because it is the only institution of its kind in Hong Kong, people expect a lot from the Museum of Art. I do feel, however, that there is one area to which it should devote greater attention — the art of Hong Kong itself. There are two main gaps here, to my thinking. The first is art produced between the time of Chinnery, Lamqua, etc., and that of the modern ink painters such as Lui Shou-kwan and Wucius Wong. The second is contemporary art, particularly art not produced in 'Chinese' media, but with such materials as oil, acrylic, photographic or video film, etc. Collection and exhibition in both these areas is a task with a measure of urgency since no museum outside the territory could be expected to perform it — either it will be done here or not at all. The same is not true of Chinese painting and antiques, the areas in which the museum's curatorial expertise is presently concentrated.

Without a collection which provides a resource, attempts to tell a story of Hong Kong's art history (a story of fragments though that might be) cannot begin. There is always more than one way of interpreting history, but I'm not aware that the museum has ever produced an exhibit which attempts to provide any version of this history as a whole, or to foreground what (if anything) is distinctive about Hong Kong art. This kind of task was attempted very successfully with respect to Hong Kong design in the Hong Kong Museum of History's *Made in Hong Kong* show. That show opened a debate about Hong Kong design identity which could be paralleled in (or extended by) exhibitions which considered other areas of the visual arts.

Hong Kong art usually tends to be framed by curators as a facet of Chinese art rather than being considered in relation to the city where it was made. A consequence of this is that art which looks 'Chinese' is characteristically favoured. For instance, *Ink Painting by Hong Kong Artists*, the only recent show of any ambition representing Hong Kong art abroad, predictably focused

on those artists whose work can be comfortably placed in relation to a tradition traceable back over dynasties. 'Modernizing' that tradition is acceptable, but rupture from it less so. East can *meet* West (is always said to be doing so in Hong Kong), but that's as far as it gets. In the Urban Council Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial the painting exhibits are divided into two categories: 'Painting — Chinese Media' and 'Painting — Western Media'. This 'One art, two systems' approach could almost have been designed with the prevention of cultural miscegenation in mind.

The absence of categories such as photography and video art from the museum's collection are further evidence of a wariness about embracing the diversity of Hong Kong visual culture. The case of film is particularly interesting because this is the visual medium in which a Hong Kong cultural identity is most strongly seen, and 'Chinese' qualities most absent. Although Hong Kong has one of the world's most vibrant film cultures, there is no Hong Kong film archive to preserve it as a part of the territory's history.

Art is more than just an 'icing on the cake', it is one of the means by which we define ourselves and our values. The existence of an arena in which diverse artistic attitudes can freely contend is a mark of health in a society, and government policy in Hong Kong should, I believe, concern itself with enabling such an arena to come into existence. For such a goal to be achieved, the policy-making process itself needs to be conducted in an open and democratic fashion. The culture of democracy does not end with the casting of votes, but it might well be said to begin there.

Between East and West: Negotiations With Tradition and Modernity in Hong Kong Art

12

This essay (first published in Third Text) considers aspects of Hong Kong modernist art as a whole, and thus can serve as an introduction to this section, which is otherwise made up of more specific studies. The issue of cultural identity is foregrounded again, and I talk about some of the problems faced by a cultural practice which seeks to assert a Hong Kong identity. The notion of 'tradition' is considered here (as it has been in 'Monologues Without Words' and 'Engaging Tradition'). It will also be examined in two later essays, 'The Insufficiency of Tradition' and 'Exile From Tradition'.

The most distinct grouping of painters and sculptors to appear so far in Hong Kong art came to prominence from the late 1960s onwards. This group, which is made up of artists who were either born in China or had strong links to that country's high cultural heritage, tended to position their work as a continuation of the Chinese ink-painting tradition. While there are artists of the same generation who might be taken as 'traditionalists' (a complicated notion itself, of course), my particular interest in this essay is with those who have attempted in some way to be 'modern' artists, who are explicitly aware of the need to negotiate a position in relation to the realities of contemporary life, as represented for them by Hong Kong existence.

Lui Shou-kwan (Lu Shoukun)¹ is the earliest of these artists, as well as the most well-known. Many of the painters to become associated with this movement studied with him, including Irene Chou (Zhou Luyun), Ng Yiu-chung (Wu Yaozhong), Cheng Weikwok (Zheng Weiguo), Leung Kui-ting (Liang Juting), Chui Tze-hung (Xu Zixiong) and Wucius Wong (Wang Wuxie). Most were also members of one or both of the two artists' groups which

appeared at the end of the Sixties, the *In Tao Art Association* (which first exhibited in 1968) and the *One Art Group* (which was formed in 1970).

The most favoured medium of these artists is ink on Chinese paper, applied with the Chinese brush — tools and materials which have remained practically unchanged over an enormously long period of Chinese painting history. Since these are the tools and materials for Chinese *writing* as well they carry a particularly strong flavour of tradition, and consequently have an important part to play in sustaining a sense of cultural continuity at the level of technique, despite the changes that occur in other aspects of painting.² Perhaps for this reason, technique is emphasized in the name most commonly used to identify this group of artists: New Ink Painting. The use of the term ‘ink painting’ (*Shuimo*, literally *water-ink*) asserts a desire to be viewed in the context of tradition on the part of artists worried by their transgression of it. It displays the anxiety inherent in the task of attempting to be both a Chinese artist and a modern artist — in a world where modernity tends to be defined in European and North American terms;³ where ‘modernization’ can so easily mean ‘Westernization’, the loss of cultural identity in favour of a not-truly-international ‘internationalism’.

This difficulty of reconciling (Western) modernism and (Chinese) tradition was, of course, a problem faced by earlier generations of Chinese modernist artists. The Hong Kong New Ink Painting artists, however, were able to make use of more recent developments in Western art which were easier to assimilate to Chinese painting, in particular Abstract Expressionism and European gestural abstraction. Abstract Expressionism’s foregrounding of dynamic brushwork, of the trace of the artist, is nothing new in the context of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Even the absence of directly identifiable subject matter is comparable to the latter. Furthermore, as the Hong Kong artists were well aware, Abstract Expressionism and European gesturalism were themselves already influenced by East Asian art and traditional philosophy,⁴ were expressions of a Western modernism which seemed, for once, to be coming halfway to be in dialogue with them. All this was very different from the case of earlier Chinese modernists such as Liu Haisu. When he and other artists introduced oil painting, volumetric representation of the human body and the use of nude models to China in the 1910s and 1920s, these were considered scandalous ruptures with tradition.⁵ That Liu, along with Lin Fengmian and other artists responsible for introducing Western modes of image-making, later returned to working in a more ‘Chinese’ style, may be evidence that they continued so to prove.⁶

One can specify the influence of Abstract Expressionist-era

Western art in Lui Shou-kwan's case. The broad, gestural, but relatively unmodulated strokes in the lower part of *Zhuangzi* (1974; plate 2) can be related to Pierre Soulages's characteristic syntax. Its format (found in others of his paintings as well) is indebted to that of Adolph Gottlieb's *Burst* series. Other Abstract Expressionist influences can be detected in the case of his students. The earlier works of Leung Kui-ting, for instance, have splashed ink effects which seem to derive from the vocabulary of Robert Motherwell, rather than from some unmediated engagement with East Asian precedents. The stain effects and veils of colour in Leung's *Tranquil Mountains* (1974) are more reminiscent of Helen Frankenthaler than anything Chinese, even though water-based media (including Chinese ink) are being used.

Even the admission of influences from such East Asian-inspired sources could not be overplayed by artists, however, in the difficult task of balancing modernity and tradition. While it seems that an awareness of recent Western art was indeed the most significant factor in the evolution of Lui Shou-kwan's style, his departure from Chinese modes was also authorized by reference back to aspects of the Chinese tradition itself. The introduction to the catalogue for Lui's November 1964 City Hall Art Gallery exhibition, for instance, denied that he was imitating the work of recent American painters and suggests instead that Lui was rediscovering the abstract and expressionistic elements of early Chinese painting. While Lui was undoubtedly aware of the stories concerning eccentric Tang Dynasty painters who were said to have used chance effects in their art,⁷ it is hard to construe his paintings — as the introduction seems to wish to do — as part of a purely internal evolution of Chinese painting.

The attempt to assert connections to Chinese tradition which we see at the level of technique in New Ink Painting painting can also be found at the level of subject matter. The prevalence of landscape (particularly mountain landscape) in the paintings of Cheng Wei-kwok, Wucius Wong, Ng Yiu-chung and others can be seen as an anxious invocation of the most characteristically 'Chinese' of painting subjects in images which in other respects are embracing modernity. That sense of the landscape subject matter as balance (or antidote) for something non-Chinese can be found in *Guilin in the Sunset* (1982) by Ng Ku-hung (Wu Guhong) — not in fact one of the New Ink Painting artists, but facing a similar dilemma to them even though his paintings are not so radically modernistic. In that work (as in many by Wucius Wong) there is a coherent perspectival space whose source can only have been Western art,⁸ yet the emphatically Chinese subject matter of mountain and water scenery effectively veils that fact from attention. Pre-modern Chinese painting rarely treated particular geographical locations with as much specificity as Ng treats Guilin. Ng's more realistic insistence

on topographical specifics is a modern intensification of the flavour of 'Chineseness' which would not have been necessary in a pre-modern image. Distance from China is revealed even in the choice of location: Guilin is a popular tourist site which is only a couple of hours from Hong Kong by air — it is the China of the visitor and of the picture postcard more than the China of the resident.⁹ The same airplane which makes a visit to Guilin possible also enables the novel vertical viewpoints on the landscape which are so often adopted in Wucius Wong's paintings: yet it appears in neither Ng or Wong's images.

Lui Shou-kwan, to a greater extent than most of his followers, *was* willing to focus on the landscape of Hong Kong itself.¹⁰ In doing so he inevitably had to confront modernity at the level of subject matter since by the time he began to paint the territory, modernity had already made a significant impact on Hong Kong's appearance. Lui's strategy, however, was to minimize the visual impact of the high-rise buildings and other potential signifiers of modernity in a number of ways. The geometrical, man-made forms of human construction are visually devalued by the adoption of distant viewpoints, for instance, or softened with the aid of cloud or rain. The use of a night-time view achieves this latter aim even more effectively, and in many of his Hong Kong landscapes Lui is in any case concentrating on outlying islands, fishing villages, and other non-urban aspects of the territory. In all instances nature predominates over culture, and thus the latter is capable of being incorporated into (one might wish to say, of being neutralized by) the world of the painting.

A similar strategy of incorporating measured doses of inescapably modern subject matter into the schema of traditional Chinese landscape painting had also been successfully employed at an earlier date by Lingnan School artist Gao Jianfu. Even the airplane (that hidden precondition for the paintings of Ng and Wong) appears openly in his works. In *Flying in the Rain* (1932), for instance, a number of biplanes are depicted in the distance, looking only mildly out of place. Like Lui, Gao was undertaking the difficult task of modernizing Chinese painting, but unlike Liu he wished his art to bear an overtly social content.¹¹ Consequently we see the difficulty of producing an art which is both 'Chinese' and 'modern' more clearly displayed. The limits to the incorporation of modern subject matter within the Chinese painting economy are visible in Gao's *A Disaster for Civilization* (1937), where a close-up of an urban ruin — the consequences of warfare in China — is depicted. In order for this novel subject to be presented without irrevocable rupture of the Chinese aesthetic paradigm, a misty vagueness must be introduced into the middleground — the otherwise dominant forms of the architecture must be visually obscured even though this works

against the painting's ability to carry its meaning. The ruins must take on forms analogous to those of the mountains in a myriad Chinese landscape paintings, despite the incongruousness of the associations thus created.

Most of Lui Shou-kwan's followers eschewed an engagement with urban subject matter and consequently with the difficult social realities of Hong Kong during a period of extraordinary growth. Even more than their mentor, they were inclined to prioritize nature in their work,¹² or rather, the specifically Chinese painterly genre of mountain landscape. Only occasionally is a specific Hong Kong natural landmark recognizable in their images, perhaps because such a local reference, if insisted upon too heavily, might disrupt the connectedness of their paintings to the broader national tradition (even though a specific Guilin or Huangshan reference, on the other hand, might serve to strengthen it, to underline an equation of nature and China).

One exception to this general rule is Cheng Wei-kwok's *Lion Rock* (1976), which depicts a well-known landmark in Hong Kong's New Territories.¹³ Perhaps this particular motif is chosen because it enables the easier assimilation of Western elements (in relation to this work one thinks of Max Ernst's blurring of distinction between the animate and the inanimate in paintings such as *Europe After the Rain II*, 1940–2). To paint an unusually shaped rock, whose name already acknowledges the biomorphic associations which can be brought to bear on it, is perhaps the easiest, least disruptive route by which to introduce Surrealist elements into a Chinese painting.

Ng Yiu-chung's paintings display the difficulty of completely eliminating references to urban development when choosing to depict the Hong Kong landscape. The areas of white he introduces into his images (such as *Mountain Scenery IV* of 1970; fig. 12.1), while on the one hand being comparable to the areas of cloud or mist which traditional Chinese landscape painters introduced into their works to open up the composition, can often read as signs of the trespass of human activity into the landscape. Instead of the harmoniously integrated rustic villas and pavilions which tend to appear in earlier Chinese landscape paintings, I read images of water conduits, concrete paths, and even the kind of scarring of the rock that is commonly seen in Hong Kong when quarrying is taking place, or when an area of hillside is being cleared and levelled in preparation for the construction of buildings.¹⁴ In such a modernistic painting as this, the traces of modernization at the level of subject matter nevertheless read as intrusion into a world where nature, tradition and Chineseness are aligned as positive factors. Modernity and Chineseness are not presented as harmoniously compatible but as in some sense opposites, and possibly antagonistic ones.

Analogous oppositions to that which I have just described in Ng's paintings can be found in the works of other New Ink Painting-generation artists, but generally at the level of form. An opposition between, on the one hand, nature (or China, or tradition, or the intuitive, or the feminine), and on the other hand the man-made (or the Western, or the modern, or the rational, or the male), is suggested, I feel, by a commonly found opposition between organic and geometric forms.¹⁵ The conflicts these Hong Kong artists face in their attempts to be both modern and Chinese are displaced into their artworks in this way. As my linking of chains of concepts will perhaps have indicated, I see this dimension of meaning as taking the form of shifting allusion rather than that of explicit iconography, but nevertheless in the work of painters such as Wucius Wong or Toto Kung (Gong Peiyun), or of the sculptor Van Lau (Wen Lou), there is a dramatization of, and perhaps an attempt to contain or resolve, more than purely formal oppositions.

The work of Wucius Wong contains many examples of the kind of opposition between organic and geometric forms I have been mentioning. Although human activity tends to be absent from his paintings (Wong writes that 'deserted landscapes symbolize the desire to escape from the concrete jungle of the city'¹⁶), they frequently have a highly prominent geometric structuring that provides a counterpart to the more organic, softly defined forms of the mountainous landscapes which are his usual subject matter. The vertical strips (as in *Divergent Waters No. 4*), or grids in diamond format (*Agitated Waters No. 5*) and square format (*Cloud Harmony, No. 1*, 1978; plate 3) are completely without precedent in Chinese landscape painting, and read as either elements imposed upon the organic forms behind, or as a fragmentation of them in the cases where those organic forms display no continuity across a geometric divide. In either case they provide a structuring logic which seems to come from outside, to be in opposition to the rhythms developing out of the natural subject matter itself.

Geometric overlay effects are also found in Toto Kung's *Yellow Chattering* (1984). Not surprisingly, since she studied at one time with Wong, there are specific similarities of style. Towards the bottom left of the image the organic forms partially continue across the horizontal line, which is indicated only as a tonal difference (in the same manner as the lowest horizontal in Wong's *Cloud Harmony, No. 1*). Where (to the left end of the line) there is no continuation of the mountain forms above the horizontal, this discontinuity emphasizing the geometric element is 'excused' by the presence of cloud, which might be taken as obscuring our vision of rock. A similar effect occurs below the central horizontal in Wong's work. Both these effects also appear in the work of another painter who has studied with Wong, Kan Tai-keung (Jin Daiqiang).

Spring-Mountain-Dream (1983) is an example. Leung Kui-ting (again a former student of Wong) also opposes geometry to more fluid, amorphous areas. In *Beyond Vision IV* (1990), a nearly abstract work, colour plays a more active role in giving prominence to the overlapping geometric planes, whose power is nevertheless tempered by the drifting cloud-like forms which transgress and obliterate their boundaries. In a work of a similar style, *Composite Landscape* (1992), the more amorphous forms are more clearly identifiable than in *Beyond Vision IV* as natural, landscape elements with a specifically Chinese flavour. The natural/man-made, Chinese/Western contrast is therefore highlighted to a greater degree. The persistence in Leung Kui-ting's art of an interest in opposing geometric or hard-edged shapes to less defined forms can be documented by reference to *Composite Assemblage IV* (1967). In that painting, shapes which appear to have been influenced by American hard-edge images of the 1960s are directly opposed to shapes which, while they recall the art of Motherwell and Frankenthaler, also look back to Chinese calligraphic brushwork traditions.

Wong, Kan and Leung share an involvement in design as well as in fine art. At one time or another all have been lecturers in the Hong Kong Polytechnic's School of Design, and Wong is the author of several widely disseminated manuals on two- and three-dimensional design. In these books a Bauhaus model of basic design education is presented,¹⁷ and that German design school can be pinpointed as the specific Western source of the geometric vocabulary used in the images of these artists.

Despite what seems a basically vitalist aesthetic,¹⁸ Hong Kong sculptor Van Lau chooses to introduce geometric forms into his works. Bringing together the usually separate constructivist and organicist sides of modern sculptural vocabulary,¹⁹ he creates an art where conflicts between the natural and the geometric are foregrounded as much as in the paintings of Wucius Wong. We can see such an opposition in *Windy Form* (1985) where the natural forms of bamboo leaves are represented, but in a geometricized vocabulary. An opposition between Chineseness and Western modernism is also present here, just as in Wong's paintings, and is highlighted rather than elided. The choice of bamboo as a subject is the means, of course, by which this allusion to Chineseness is introduced as a counterweight to the otherwise very Western style. The Chineseness of the bamboo derives not only from its widespread distribution in China, but also from its secure place as a subject within Chinese literati painting.²⁰ No literati sculpture tradition exists, so an allusion to this more highly regarded artform becomes necessary to effect a link to Chinese roots.

A way of thinking about opposites as mutually supportive in

their dynamic interaction is already present in traditional Chinese philosophy, and it is worth noting in this discussion of the representation of opposites in Hong Kong art that several artists draw upon this pre-existing intellectual resource. I am referring to the well-known concepts of Yin and Yang, which are associated respectively with the female, the quiescent, and the dark, and with the male, the active and the light. An application of the philosophical principles of Yin and Yang to the process of art-making can be found in the case of Irene Chou. 'Yin and Yang [she states] keep the universe in balance, the balance between human existence and life, the balance between intellectual thoughts and the emotions of gladness, anger, grief and happiness. True art is the production of such a balance.'²¹ Chou makes the well-known Yin and Yang diagram the basis of her *Yin and Yang* of 1993, and it also appears as the subject matter of Hon Chi-fun (Han Zhixun)'s *The Way of the Lotus* (1974) and Aries Lee (Li Fuhua)'s *Untitled* (1971). Van Lau's *Shiang of 1972* (1972) and *Yin Yang* (1970) also employ it. In the latter work the choice of subject helps (as it did in *Windy Form*) to introduce a definitively Chinese reference into a sculpture which might otherwise appear very Western in style, but in *The Meeting of Yin and Yang* (fig. 12.2), a more recent work of similar title, one senses that the opposition between Chinese and Western aspects is being addressed in terms of the opposition of Yin and Yang itself. The ancient polarities are here being employed allegorically, it seems to me, to refer obliquely to the Western and Chinese dimensions of Hong Kong, and to imply their peaceful coexistence. This work, a large sculptural relief created for the foyer of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (which opened in 1989), reads as a kind of inexplicit or partially veiled civic statement, as close as one could expect to a direct commentary on the situation of Hong Kong itself.²² This image of a male and a female figure standing side by side, but not interacting even to the extent of looking at one another, belongs to the era of the Joint Declaration between Britain and China, the era of 'one country, two systems', that is, the era of declarations concerning the peaceful coexistence of opposites.

Although Hong Kong as subject seems (almost) to appear in Van Lau's *The Meeting of Yin and Yang*, in most works by *Shuimo* artists Hong Kong experience remains in the background, prompting perhaps the anxiety about reconciling Chineseness and modernity, but never being itself directly addressed. That anxiety is always expressed through oppositions between Western and Chinese elements, with Hong Kong itself being merely the neutral arena in which those elements come into contact. Such a characterization of Hong Kong is by no means unique to art: the notion of Hong Kong as the place where 'East meets West' is an enormously widespread cliché, and one which manages to deny any separate identity to the

colony, to reduce it to a 'gateway' or 'bridge' through or over which Chinese and Western influences pass. The displays of Hong Kong art in the Hong Kong Museum of Art seem predicated upon this notion of 'East meets West', categorizing the territory's art as either 'Western' or 'Chinese', and providing separate galleries for each. The Hong Kong art story is reduced to two narratives from elsewhere, and contamination (or miscegenation) is prevented through physical distancing.²³ The ideology embodied mutely by this organization of the gallery display is given more explicit voice by Lawrence Tam (Tan Zhicheng, a former student of Lui Shoukwan and until recently the Museum's Chief Curator) in his introduction to a 1981 exhibition of Hong Kong art at the Museum. He writes of the exhibit as containing 'happy evidence of the blending of aspects of two streams of world culture, the East and the West'.²⁴

That the art of the New Ink Painting generation has pride of place in the Hong Kong Museum's displays and overseas travelling shows²⁵ is perhaps not surprising given the explicit way in which it treats the interaction of Chinese and Western elements, but while some works (such as Van Lau's *The Meeting of Yin and Yang*) seem to accept the framing ideology of a benign encounter between opposing forces, for the most part these works betray signs that the encounter is one fraught with a degree of difficulty. Wucius Wong, who at one point feels able to describe Hong Kong as 'the obvious frontier of the meeting of East and West',²⁶ nevertheless on another occasion saw the position of the Chinese artist in Hong Kong in a rather less optimistic light. Rather than combining the best of East and West, artists in this colony may instead merely fall between two cultures into obscurity. 'Some of us may eventually make history [he writes], but all of us do not know how the history of this age will be written. We are apt to get lost in searching for directions and be completely forgotten, ... all of our efforts could be regarded by historians as something of only peripheral significance.'²⁷

We can put in perspective the difficulties faced by artists of the New Ink Painting generation in attempting to be both Chinese and modern — as well as the specific strategies they adopt to deal with their situation — by considering briefly the experience of Hong Kong artists of a younger generation. Broadly speaking, the younger generation of artists — those who began to produce their mature work during the 1980s — have a much less strong affiliation to the Chinese high cultural heritage than the New Ink Painting generation. A major reason for this is that they have mostly been born in Hong Kong itself, rather than in the mainland — as second-generation residents they do not share the refugee mentality which was so prevalent in the earlier post-war years, when residents of the territory born outside it outnumbered those born within it. These younger

artists are for the most part drawn to work in Western media such as acrylic, thus cutting themselves off at the level of technique from the possibility of a dialogue with pre-modern Chinese painting. At the level of style too their work tends to adopt unashamedly the idiom of Western modernism — unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that many have gained their formal art training in the United Kingdom, continental Europe, or North America.²⁸

While this adherence to Western modernism might make their art seem more accessible to a Western audience than the unmistakably 'Chinese' art of the New Ink Painting generation, they too have obstacles to face. Like the New Ink Painting artists — but more so — they must resist being seen as merely weak, provincial mimics of an art whose centre of gravity is elsewhere. One way in which artists have done this (particularly since June 4, 1989, and as the 1997 handback to China approaches) is through an assertion of a Hong Kong identity; they are at the same time both more cosmopolitan and more locally orientated than the New Ink Painting generation of artists. But if Chineseness is an identity which is difficult for an artist to sustain in the face of Western modernism's challenge, then Hong Kongness faces even more obstacles to its existence. Not only does Hong Kong lack any high cultural tradition of its own which can serve as a resource, it also lacks support from either an ethnic or a national narrative in a broader sense. These two most powerful sustaining forces (present even in the case of the more liberatory narratives of identity) are not available to Hong Kongness, and indeed may be said to be actively ranged against it. This is true in the sense that most Hong Kong people (artists included) have their ethnic and national identifications invested in China — and yet it is above all from Chineseness which Hong Kongness must distinguish itself. No easy demonization of the other, such as might be employed by a white racist in England for instance, can be drawn upon to shore up a sense of a distinct Hong Kong identity.

Hong Kong had no separate existence prior to colonization, and (unlike all other colonies) cannot even dream of autonomy in the future. 1997 will bring no independence day, only absorption in another unitary nation state, and a walk-on role in that state's narrative of wholeness recovered. The absence of a resource from history and cultural tradition means that Hong Kong identity can only be expressed in art as a trace, as a species of non-essentialist, unrooted, post-modern identity.²⁹ We see this for instance in the work of Oscar Ho Hing-kay (He Qingji), one of the younger generation of Hong Kong artists most consciously committed to the question of cultural identity. Unable to draw (like the Mexican muralists, say) on a national myth, he instead invents his own stories about Hong Kong to fill the vacuum. Fashioned on the model of

When actual history is trawled for evidence, the same fragmented narrative is found, and Wang Hai adopts a collage-like principle to produce a visual equivalent or metaphor for it. In his photo-realist paintings, such as *Cultural Relics. Hong Kong History Series (Section 4)* of 1990 (fig. 12.4), Wang juxtaposes disparate images borrowed from early photographs of Hong Kong (including those of the English photographer John Thompson) without attempting to create the kind of coherent illusory space which would make the past available as material for a nostalgic reverie. Using photos as a source has a double value for Wang: he is able to draw upon the aura they have of being authentic witnesses of the past, as well as to make clear that the past belongs to another. Not only are many of the people in his images Westerners, but the camera's vision is also Western, recording its Chinese subjects either incidentally as servants, or more consciously as ethnographic types. The visual history he quotes is laid bare as a colonial one, rather than one which might be unproblematically recovered and owned.

Given the difficulty of elaborating a Hong Kong cultural identity in positive terms, some younger artists attempt to assert it negatively, that is, to define themselves in terms of their distance from Chinese traditions. The choice of 'Western' media, of course, helps produce this rupture, given the centrality of the brushed ink gesture in Chinese art, but more interesting perhaps are those cases where tradition is as it were present as absent. This can be said of Chan Yuk-keung (Chen Yuqiang)'s *Untitled* (1990; fig. 12.5), which — to offer a literal description — basically consists of an open-topped box containing (one almost wants to say concealing) a series of black and white photographic portraits on its inner walls. These portraits are of the kind commonly used on family altars and graves in Hong Kong as reminders of the deceased, and so a note of bereavement is introduced. This theme of loss or disconnection from the past is similarly conveyed in Danny Yung (Rong Nianzeng)'s 1991 installation piece *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture, No. 4* (fig. 3.2),³¹ which consists of a closed circular arrangement of free-standing minimalist forms shaped so as to appear like enormously enlarged versions of the ancestral tablets found in family altars or clan ancestral halls as tokens of earlier generations.³² Instead of having names of the deceased inscribed upon them, however, they have been given mirrored surfaces. We Hong Kong Chinese people, the work seems to be saying, are cut off from the past by our experience of life in this British colony — and this may be taken as a freedom as well as a deprivation. We are condemned to a concern with ourselves, but also liberated somewhat from the burden of a several-thousand-year cultural heritage.³³ It is this sense that a distance from the grand narratives of both Modernization and Chinese nationalism may not be a wholly bad thing which

most distinguishes the younger Hong Kong artists from the earlier *Shuimo* generation. Whereas the latter strove (often anxiously) to effect links between these two powerful terms, their juniors seem to be able to live more easily with their rootlessness, and to produce, within a Western modernist formal vocabulary, an art which is in many respects deeply post-modern, and primarily local in its address.

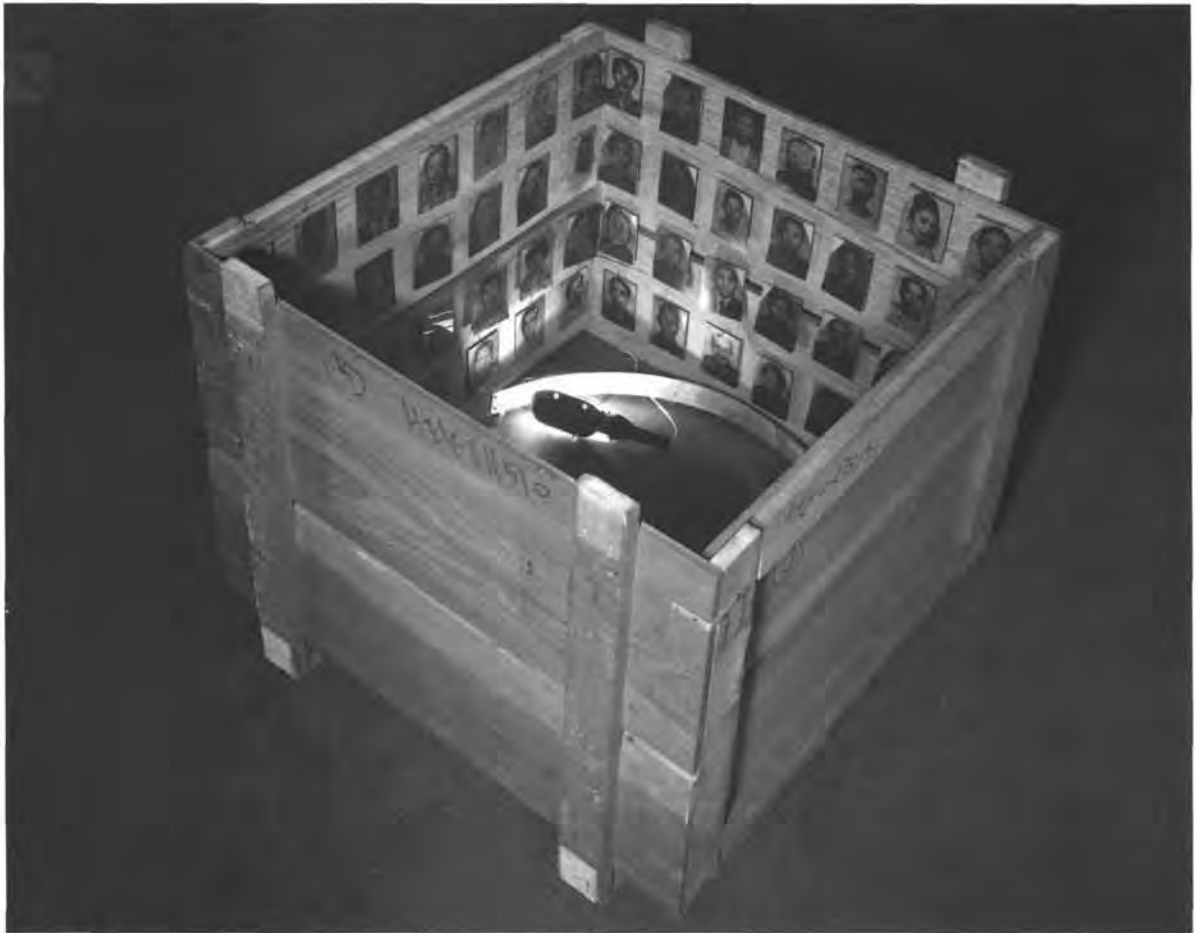


Figure 12.5
Chan Yuk-keung, *Untitled*,
1990. Photo courtesy the
artist.

Notes

1. Since I am specifically concentrating in this essay on the history of Hong Kong art, I have considered it appropriate to refer to artists by means of a romanization of the Cantonese pronunciation of their names. There are certain problems with this strategy, however. Firstly, there is more than one system of romanization

available for Cantonese. Secondly, people often produce their own informal romanizations for their own names. In order to introduce an element of standardization and to make things easier for those who wish to work out the Chinese characters of the names, I have also included in brackets after the first mention of a name the *pinyin* romanization of its standard Chinese pronunciation. Where no bracketed version occurs at first mention (as in the case of mainland Chinese or pre-modern artists) the name or term may be assumed to be given in *pinyin*.

2. The role played by the technical and formal continuities of Chinese calligraphy in helping to sustain an ideological sense of the continuity and cohesion of Chinese literati culture is interestingly treated in L. Ledderose, 'Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function', *Oriental Art*, Vol. 17, No. 10, Oct. 1986, pp. 35–50. See also D. Clarke, 'The Gaze and the Glance: Competing Understandings of Visuality in the Theory and Practice of Late Modernist Art', *Art History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, March 1992, pp. 80–98.
3. Writing of the Indian experience, D. Chakrabarty ('Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', *Representations*, 37, Winter 1992, p. 19) argues that the 'third-world historian is condemned to knowing "Europe" as the original home of the "modern"'. 'Indian history, even in the most dedicated socialist or nationalist hands, remains a mimicry of a certain "modern" subject of "European" history and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure' (p. 18). Much of Chakrabarty's analysis could, I feel, be fruitfully applied to China. An example of a non-European country which has not only successfully inserted itself in European narratives of modernity, but even hijacked them, is of course the United States. I discuss aspects of this process in an article which in certain senses complements the present one, 'The All-Over Image: Meaning in Abstract Art', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1993, pp. 355–75.
4. On Abstract Expressionist responses to East Asia see D. Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1988.
5. In 1926 Liu Haisu was at the centre of a row with warlord Sun Chuanfang concerning his introduction of nude models at the Shanghai Art Academy. Sun had banned their use, and Liu chose to debate the issue with him in the press (see issues of *Shen Bao* for May 1926, especially those for the 16th and 17th of the month).
6. On Lin Fengmian's re-engagement with Chinese tradition after an extended involvement with European modernism, see D. Clarke, 'Exile from Tradition: Chinese and Western Traits in the Art of Lin Fengmian', *Oriental Art*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 4, Winter '93-4, pp. 22–9.
7. These Tang works don't survive, so this is not a *visual* source. See Charles Lachman, "'The Image Made by Chance' in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock's Mother', *Art Bulletin*, Vol. LXXIV, No. 5, Sept. 1992, pp. 499–510, for the most accessible recent discussion of the Tang eccentrics. Another Chinese source invoked as support for the new directions is Shitao (also known as Daoji), the 17th-century painter whose work is often viewed as eccentric and individualistic. Lui's interest in Shitao can be documented by his *Landscape, After Shitao* (c1972, hanging scroll, 153 by 83 cm). See Flora Kay Chan, *The Development of Lu Shoukuan's Art*, M.Phil Thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 1991, especially p. 101, on Lui Shou-kwan and Shitao. The *One Art Group* takes its name from a concept in Shitao's art theory, indicating that Lui's followers shared their teacher's interest in that artist.

8. Ng had worked in a Western style at one stage, before returning to Chinese media.
9. The distinctive landscape of Guilin was not a popular subject with pre-modern Chinese artists. Xu Beihong, Western-influenced reformer of Chinese painting, spent time in Guilin during the 1930s, producing there *The Lijiang in the Spring Rain* (1937), one of his most 'Chinese' works.
10. See the works illustrated in *Hong Kong in Ink Moods. Landscape Paintings by Lui Shou-kwan*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Fung Ping Shan Museum, Hong Kong, 8-10-85 — 13-12-85.
11. On the social idealism of Gao Jianfu and other members of the Lingnan School (which was closely associated with Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement) see R. Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988.
12. The desire to escape modernity seems to take an extreme form in Lawrence Tam's *Landscape 1* (1970), where an interior, cave-like space is depicted.
13. Cheng has painted Lion Rock on several occasions, as did Lui Shou-kwan.
14. Ng worked at one time for a company which levelled hillsides in preparation for construction work.
15. This opposition was commented upon at the time. John Warner, curator at the City Hall Art Gallery (the predecessor of the Museum of Art) wrote on the occasion of the fifth annual exhibition of the *Circle Art Group* that the paintings were 'full of contradictory elements — organic versus geometric lines, abstract versus representational forms, subtle linear passages versus bold ink splashes' ('Circle Art Group', *What's Doing in Hong Kong*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 1968, p. 6). Warner also reads the formal oppositions, as I am doing, as metaphorical of broader concerns. Writing of Wucius Wong's works, he states (p. 7) that 'the paintings of this period reflect his struggle between the two opposites, the remote Oriental past which he found no longer relevant, and the modern West which is often alien'.
16. W. Wong, quoted in Petra Hinterthur, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Myer Publishing Inc., 1985, p. 110.
17. See, for instance, Wucius Wong, *Principles of Two-Dimensional Design*, Hong Kong, Department of Extramural Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong/City Museum and Art Gallery, 1969. Irene Chou also shows an interest in Bauhaus notions of basic design, writing in *Chinese Painting by Irene Chou* (Fung Ping Shan Museum, Hong Kong, 1986, p. 25) that 'points, lines and planes are the essential ingredients of a picture'.
18. Van Lau writes (*The Art of Van Lau*, Hong Kong, Urban Council, 1987, p. 55): 'Most of my work tends to express a kind of organic life force, the process of growth in particular.'
19. See J. Burnham (*Beyond Modern Sculpture*, New York, George Braziller, 1987) for a cogent analysis of the vitalist tendency in modern Western sculpture.
20. The bamboo was a particular favourite subject of literati amateur painters, in part (as J. Cahill argues in *Hills Beyond a River. Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty*, New York, Weatherhill, 1976, p. 159) because it would have required similar brush skills to those the scholar might be expected to have acquired in the practice of calligraphy. Complex skills of spatial representation, more commonly found only in the case of the (lower status) professional painters, would not have been needed. The bamboo, which combines the qualities of flexibility and strength, symbolized the virtue aspired to by the literati.

21. I. Chou, quoted in Petra Hinterthur, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Myer Publishing Inc., 1985, p. 96.
22. Public sculpture in Hong Kong, where it exists, is mostly characterized by a desire to avoid controversy. Although there is an early statue of Queen Victoria in the park which bears her name, there are (as one might indeed expect) no frank sculptural statements of imperialist ideology to be seen which date from more recent times. Paradoxically, most of the sculptures placed by the Urban Council in sites around the Museum of Art, or in the Kowloon Park sculpture walk, seem to have been chosen because they bear meanings which are more *private* than public. The one work which comes closest to breaching this apparent ban on contentious subject matter is the sculpture by César to be found in front of the Cultural Centre. This wounded statue of 'Liberty' (as César has identified it in an interview) must surely be taken as a reference to the failed Chinese democracy movement and the events of June 1989 (the work was finished in 1991 and had taken about two years to make). Perhaps because it is by a non-local artist, and was a gift of the French, it has been able to negotiate more leeway, but some attempt to disguise its content may be discerned in its title, *Flying Frenchman*. Hong Kong government policy on contentious public sculpture was most dramatically highlighted with the revelation of the hitherto secret text of a 1989 letter of appeasement written to the Chinese following a row over illegal immigrants. In the same paragraph as that in which the letter states that the government has no intention of allowing Hong Kong to become a base for subversive activities against the People's Republic of China there is a sentence noting that the Hong Kong government had recently rejected a proposal for a permanent site for the replica Goddess of Democracy statue that had been created in the territory.
23. The Hong Kong Museum of Art makes similar distinctions between 'Western' and 'Chinese' art in the categories it adopts for its Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition, although there the distinctions are presented as being between media rather than between cultures. The inability of the Hong Kong Museum of Art to provide a unified narrative of Hong Kong art history contrasts with the powerful narrative of Chinese art history told by the exhibits of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. The power of that narrative comes in part from it being framed in national terms (an option not open to the Hong Kong Museum of Art) and it can be said to have offered significant support to the Kuomintang's claims to political legitimacy.
24. L. Tam, *Hong Kong Art. 1970–1980*, Hong Kong, Urban Council, 1981, p. 12. A reference to (rather than mere employment of) the cliché of 'East meets West' is found in an early work by a younger generation Hong Kong artist Antonio Mak (Mai Xianyang). The title of *West Meets East* (1973) interrupts the flow of the cliché by reversing the normal order of its two terms, and Mak politicizes the notion of cultural contact by including a borrowed photographic image of Nixon meeting Mao. Mao the leftist is placed on the right of the image, while Nixon the rightist is here seen on the left. The theme of opposition frequently recurs in Mak's art and his ironic, playful employment of the theme of Yin and Yang may be taken as a critique of the way New Ink Painting-generation artists have used it. One example would be his sculpture *Walking Figure* (1977), which has a body constructed of two separate elements which intertwine (like the dark and light areas of the Yin and Yang diagram) to create one whole.
25. The two main travelling shows to emanate from the Museum during recent years are *Ink Painting by Hong Kong Artists* (which was shown in 1988 at the Concourse Gallery, Barbican Centre, London) and *Where Streams Become a River* (which

took place at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1992–3).

26. W. Wong, 'Chinese Painting in Hong Kong', in Mayching Gao (ed.), *Twentieth Century Chinese Painting*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 221.
27. W. Wong, quoted in Petra Hinterthur, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Myer Publishing Inc., 1985, p. 171.
28. Western-style art by Hong Kong artists of earlier generations does exist, but there is very little continuity between such art and that of the younger-generation artists I am considering here, partly because earlier Hong Kong 'Western' art is rarely deeply influenced by modernist developments. The only artist of any significance working in a 'Western' style at an earlier date who succeeded in making a transition to a more modernist idiom is Luis Chan (Chen Fushan). Perhaps most deeply grounded in Western modes among the earlier Hong Kong artists are Yu Ben and Li Tiefu, both of whom had studied art in North America prior to 1930. The former had studied at the Ontario Art Academy, and the latter at various places in the United States, counting William Merritt Chase among his tutors (see D. Clarke, 'Li Tiefu and Western Art', in *The Art of Li Tiefu*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1991, pp. 11–3).
29. I am indebted here to Stuart Hall's attempts, drawing on Derrida, to develop a non-essentialist conceptualization of Caribbean cultural identity. See particularly S. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–37.
30. A model for Ho's fantastic stories concerning Hong Kong are the late Qing pictorial magazines in which lithographic illustrations with commentaries were reproduced. Bizarre tales of dubious authenticity predominate in these magazines. Ho's images have nothing in common with the style of his Qing precedents, China being for him 'just one of the many possible sources' open to him as an artist (O. Ho, Introduction, *Turn of a Decade*, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1989, not paginated).
31. Yung's work borrows its title from a popular book by Sun Longji which offers a critical analysis of what it regards as the underlying traits of Chinese culture. The bracketed reference to Hong Kong is Yung's own addition.
32. Practices of this kind were forcibly suppressed in the mainland by the communists, but have survived without much change in Hong Kong. The tablets are carried at funerals as representatives of the deceased, and descendants periodically offer incense before them after they have been installed in the family altar.
33. Yung (in conversation with the author) has spoken of his belief in Hong Kong as a site (and possibly the only one) for a renewal of Chinese culture. The mirrored tablets out of which *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture, No. 4* was constructed were also used in a similarly titled theatrical production of which Yung was the director. In that case the mirrored structures were arranged in a format which more closely resembles the habitual organization of ancestor tablets, and they were placed on an altar-like structure at the back of the performance space. A use of mirrored surfaces also occurred in *Pai On Qin Qi. The Trail* (1994). This performance took place at the bottom of a well-like space with mirrored sides, echoing the sense of entrapment created in *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture, No. 4*.

Grimm's Fairy Tales: A Series of Etchings by David Hockney

22

I came to Hong Kong to teach Western art history, and not surprisingly my earliest writing in Hong Kong remained concerned with Western art. With time I began to understand more about Hong Kong and Chinese art, and so started to write on those areas as well, but I have continued to act as an interpreter of Western art. Being based in Hong Kong has gradually changed my way of looking at Western art history — I have become aware of some of its closures and parochialisms. Rather than thinking of Hong Kong as a place from which it is not possible to understand Western art properly, I would like to think of it as a place from which an alternative view of Western art, valid in its own terms, might be elaborated. This way of thinking underlies my decision to include essays on Western art in this book, and not just essays on the art of Hong Kong and China. For the most part, however, I focus my discussion on Western artworks which have been displayed locally — in this section I am still mostly talking about art in Hong Kong, even if I am not talking about Hong Kong art.

*This essay was published in **City Entertainment** on the occasion of the Arts Centre's 1991 exhibition of Hockney's etchings. I am placing it before another, earlier, essay on Hockney's prints, since the series discussed here was executed at an earlier date. Both essays contain discussion concerning the theme of images and words, and the theme of art about art.*

On show at the Hong Kong Arts Centre from March 9th till March 28th are a series of illustrations to the Grimm fairy tales by English artist David Hockney. The etchings were published in 1970, having been produced between May and November 1969. If one includes the time spent collecting reference material prior to beginning work then the project can be said to have begun in 1968, although the idea was around even longer than that. In 1961 and 1962 Hockney had made some prints based on *Rumpelstiltskin*, one of the most famous of the stories in the Grimm anthology.

A decision to illustrate a pre-existing text involved Hockney in accepting a limitation that modern artists have characteristically shied away from. Pre-modern Western art is to a great extent concerned with telling stories (whether from Christian dogma, classical mythology or history) but modern artists have tended to see the abandonment of 'literary' or 'illustrative' qualities as a precondition of art's autonomy, of its freedom to set its own more purely visual goals. A further limitation Hockney chose was to have images and text together on the same page. Since the stories were of different lengths this meant that the number of illustrations would have to vary from tale to tale. Another consequence of his decision to integrate word and image was his adoption of monochrome etching, and his emphasis not on tone but on line — which can be seen as the central resource of etching and the one which is most analogous to the printed word. Hockney does use aquatint to create tonal effects on occasion, but for the most part those effects are produced by cross-hatching, by an accumulation of intersecting lines.

I've talked so far of the choice of medium and the illustrative nature of these works as limitations, but in a sense those same qualities were enabling to Hockney. The use of a graphic medium was not a handicap for him since it prevented the tendency towards excessive realism which was to give him problems in his paintings. 'Naturalism was never a problem in my graphic work [Hockney states], because to me graphic work is about marks, part of its beauty is the marks, whereas I'd gotten to the point where I didn't seem to care about the painted mark that much ... Somehow I've been a lot freer in the graphic work than in the painting ... there is a delight in the medium itself.'

In a similar way the richly imaginative nature of the fairy tales prompted Hockney away from the naturalistic approach which can be found in his paintings of the same period, and which was to continue to trouble him for several years. Hockney did not choose, however, to slavishly re-tell the stories in his images. He shares the dominant belief of his age in the autonomy of art forms to some degree, and his images seem to claim an equal status to the text, with which they sometimes only obliquely interact. As if influenced by the 18th-century writer Lessing's essay *Laocoon, On the Limitations of Painting and Poetry*, Hockney tends not to attempt to represent the key narrative actions of the stories, but to focus instead on describing things (such as a pot of water or a glass mountain) — on the static and the spatial rather than on that which is in motion, that which is temporal.

In his illustrations to the tales Hockney seems to be acknowledging the impossibility of directly translating from words into images, the inadequacy of visual representation to its object. Many of the horrific events in the stories do not appear in Hockney's

images. He does not attempt to depict miraculous transformations either: Where the text tells of two children who transform themselves into a rosebush in order to hide, Hockney merely gives us an image of a rose. Even wonderfully visual images such as the moment in *The Boy Who Left Home to Learn Fear* when a bucketful of water with fish in it is poured over someone as they lie in bed cannot be shown in the etching. Emphasizing the atemporal nature of his medium Hockney depicts water about to hit the boy as if it were frozen in mid-air, recalling his 1962 painting *Picture Emphasizing Stillness* which shows an animal in mid-leap.

One of the six stories Hockney chose from the original collection of over 200 can be read as having the limitations of the visual as its theme, and one wonders whether Hockney was considering this when he selected it. *The Little Sea Hare* has a princess who could see 'everything above and below the earth' and who would only marry the boy who could hide so well that she could not see him. In the end her seemingly omnipotent vision is thwarted, her visual mastery of reality being as incomplete as the etchings' mastery of the tales they illustrate.

In the story the boy successfully conceals himself by turning into a mythical animal and hiding in the princess's hair, but Hockney's etching shows him instead as hiding inside her body. This disparity is further evidence of the independence of the images from the text, with Hockney here capitalizing on the autonomy of his images to elaborate an interpretation of the text through them. In a published statement concerning this story Hockney says that one interpretation of it he came to was that it concerned the princess's ambivalent desire for a baby, and therefore 'instead of putting him in her hair, I put him there as though he's inside her'.

This extrapolation from the text, quite uncommon in more traditional approaches to illustration, is also found in an image of the enchantress with a baby which Hockney produced for *Rapunzel* (fig. 22.1). The enchantress makes a bargain with a couple which requires them to give her their first-born child. Hockney's explanation for the enchantress's actions is that she is unable to have a child of her own, and must be an old and ugly virgin. Consequently this is how he depicts her. To do so he makes a reference to a common theme in Western religious art, the image of the Virgin and Child. The enchantress's ugliness is made explicit, but we are aware of her virginity only to the extent that we recognize his allusion to the painting of Hieronymus Bosch, or at least to the type of image to which that painting belongs.

There are many other allusions to previous art in Hockney's Grimm etchings. The trees in the background of the plate I have just been discussing are quoted from Leonardo, and the figure of the cook in *Fundevoegel* is taken from him as well. The prince on



Figure 22.1
David Hockney, *The Enchantress With the Baby Rapunzel*, 1969. From *Illustrations for Six Fairy Tales From the Brothers Grimm*. Copyright David Hockney. Photo courtesy the British Council.

horseback is taken from Uccello, and the image of a room full of straw in *Rumpelstilzchen* is indebted to a Magritte painting of a room entirely occupied by a rose. Magritte paintings in which everything has been turned to stone are the inspiration for the rock-like forms in a plate entitled 'the sexton disguised as a ghost stood still as a stone'. Here Hockney chooses to take literally the metaphorical language of the text, or rather of another translation of it since the line does not appear in this one.

As Marco Livingstone points out, Hockney's borrowing from earlier artists, his sense of a continuity of pictorial traditions, makes

his images analogous to the fairy tales themselves, products as they are of a constantly evolving oral tradition rather than of a single author. His use of earlier art, though, must also be related to his more general practice of employing reference imagery in his working process. In illustrating *Fundevoegel*, for instance, he based a landscape on an old photograph he had found of vineyards on the Moselle River, and an image of a lake on a photo from a German guidebook.



Figure 22.2
David Hockney, *Home*, 1969.
From *Illustrations for Six
Fairy Tales From the
Brothers Grimm*. Copyright
David Hockney. Photo
courtesy the British Council.

Some architectural details were based on material generated by a trip up the Rhine, and the empty chair in *Home* (fig. 22.2; the first etching to *The Boy Who Left Home to Learn Fear*, which represents the home from which he's departed) is taken from a drawing he had executed earlier in the library of a house in Ireland.

Hockney did produce preparatory drawings especially for the project: The image of the boy hidden in a fish for *The Little Sea Hare* was drawn from a model, for example. But Hockney did not make detailed drawings to be copied unchanged onto the etching plate, since he wished to achieve a more spontaneous effect than this method would permit. Directly working the etching plates rather than finalizing the designs in advance led to many more plates being produced than were finally used: 80 were made, but only 39 included.

The Grimm etchings were not Hockney's first attempt to create images for a pre-existing text, nor his last. He had illustrated poems by Cavafy in 1966, and in 1977 he was to produce a series of etchings inspired by Wallace Stevens's poem *The Man With The Blue Guitar*. In both cases Hockney showed the kind of independence from the text I have been describing here, and this is particularly so in the case of the *Blue Guitar* etchings. Hockney describes that series not as 'literal illustrations of the poem but as an interpretation of its themes in visual terms'. The conscious references to previous art Hockney makes in the Grimm etchings occur with greater frequency in the *Blue Guitar* plates, giving them a many-voiced quality. Since Wallace Stevens's poem is inspired in its own turn by a Picasso painting, Hockney's interest in making images that are about images as much as about words is permitted free rein in that project in a way that the Grimm tales do not allow.

Li Tiefu and Western Art

32

Although I have chosen to place this essay at the beginning of a section on Chinese art, it could also have been included in the section on Hong Kong art, since Li Tiefu spent a significant section of his life in the territory. His influence on artists such as Ma Jir-bo (Ma Jiabao) and Chan Hoi-ying (Chen Haiying) makes him an important figure in the story of Western-style art in Hong Kong, alongside such pioneers as Yee Bon (Yu Bun) and Lee Byng (Li Bing), who had both studied at the Ontario College of Art, Toronto, in the late 1920s, and returned to Hong Kong in the early 1930s. These overseas-trained artists, together with the locally self-taught painter Luis Chan (Chen Fushen), were the main artists in Hong Kong using Western media during the inhospitable pre-Second World War era.

My Ph.D. thesis had examined the responses of American artists to East Asian art and thought, and after moving to Hong Kong I became interested in looking at the reverse aspect of this cultural interaction, the response of Chinese artists to Western art. The essay on Li Tiefu which follows belongs to this area of my research, which is very different in nature from my work on American art. Many scholars have studied modern American art and consequently the level of debate in that field is already high. By contrast, the literature on Western-style art in 20th-century China is relatively sparse, and one needs to be involved in basic data-gathering before one can say anything useful.

This essay was first published in the catalogue of an exhibition of Li's work from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, held at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in May and June 1991.

It is well known that in the early 20th century a number of Chinese artists looked to the West in their search for means with which to revitalize Chinese painting. Xu Beihong, for instance, travelled in 1919 to Paris, where he was to obtain a training in the French academic manner,¹ and in 1926 Liu Haisu was to gain notoriety in Shanghai because of his introduction of Western methods of art

education, including the use of nude models.² These two examples are key parts of the story of early contact with Western art, but I feel that story is often told in a narrow way, with a focus only on certain artists and events at the expense of the whole picture. Naturally scholars have a tendency to work in areas where material is more readily available and questions more readily answerable, but it is also important from time to time to leave the well-rutted tracks that previous scholarship has established and venture into more difficult terrain.

One such difficult area in the field of Chinese/Western art contacts is the period prior to that in which Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu appeared on the scene. Partly because of the high profile role these figures played in Chinese art education — the senior positions they occupied even while quite young³ — their contribution has received its due credit. Other figures less adapted by temperament to taking part in public life, such as Li Shutong (who became a Buddhist monk in 1919) and Li Tiefu (who seems to have sought a relative isolation in later years), remain less well-known to us. Yet before Liu Haisu introduced nude models at the Shanghai Art Academy they had been utilized by Li Shutong at Hangzhou.⁴ And before Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian went to Paris, Li Yishi (fig. 32.1) had travelled to Scotland and studied at the prestigious Glasgow School of Art.



Figure 32.1
Li Yishi, *Portrait of Shuqi*,
Age 30, 1935 or earlier.

Li Yishi was enrolled at this college (whose building had been designed and furnished by the Art Nouveau architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh) between 1907 and 1912. According to the school register for that period he was awarded a diploma on 18th February 1913, having been passed by the assessor for painting, George Clausen.⁵ As well as having come into contact with that well-known artist, he would have had the benefit of being taught by an international collection of teachers — two of the professors employed while he was there were Belgians. At the time Li was at the school its rigorous programme of study would have offered students not only the opportunity to learn perspective and to draw from life and from plaster casts, but to study anatomy (including witnessing dissections of the muscles at Glasgow University), and to study the history of dress (and to draw models posed in various historical costumes).⁶

It is worth pointing out in detail what a formal Western art education at that time would involve to fully understand how many new horizons it would open to a student from a Chinese background, how many new resources it would provide: as well as learning mural painting and miniature painting, and making landscape and architectural drawings out of doors, the Glasgow School of Art student also drew live animals brought into a special room from such places as the nearby stables or the Veterinary College.

Li Tiefu was to travel to the West to study art at an even earlier date than Li Yishi, making him perhaps the first Chinese artist to receive an art training there. His study in New York with William Merritt Chase and his experience in North America would have given him a very strong grounding in Western approaches to art, particularly since he spent such a long time overseas. Works that have survived from his overseas period are not always in a good state of preservation, but they show confidence and a level of skill which makes them more than student studies (fig. 32.2).

There are no obvious borrowings from other artists, no half-digested influences, although in his watercolours I think that I can see occasional similarities to the watercolour style of John Singer Sargent, an artist that Li Tiefu styled himself as the 'follower of' on his business card.⁷ Watercolour, of course, is the medium of Western painting which comes closest to the fluidity of traditional Chinese brushwork. That Li tended to use watercolour for landscape (the pre-eminent genre in Chinese painting) perhaps indicates his awareness of the closeness of the two traditions at this point. After his return to China Li continued to make landscape watercolours, with motifs such as junks or pine trees appearing, and these works seem consequently even closer to traditional Chinese modes of painting. I think it is fair to say that many of the early Chinese artists who studied in the West had great difficulty in integrating

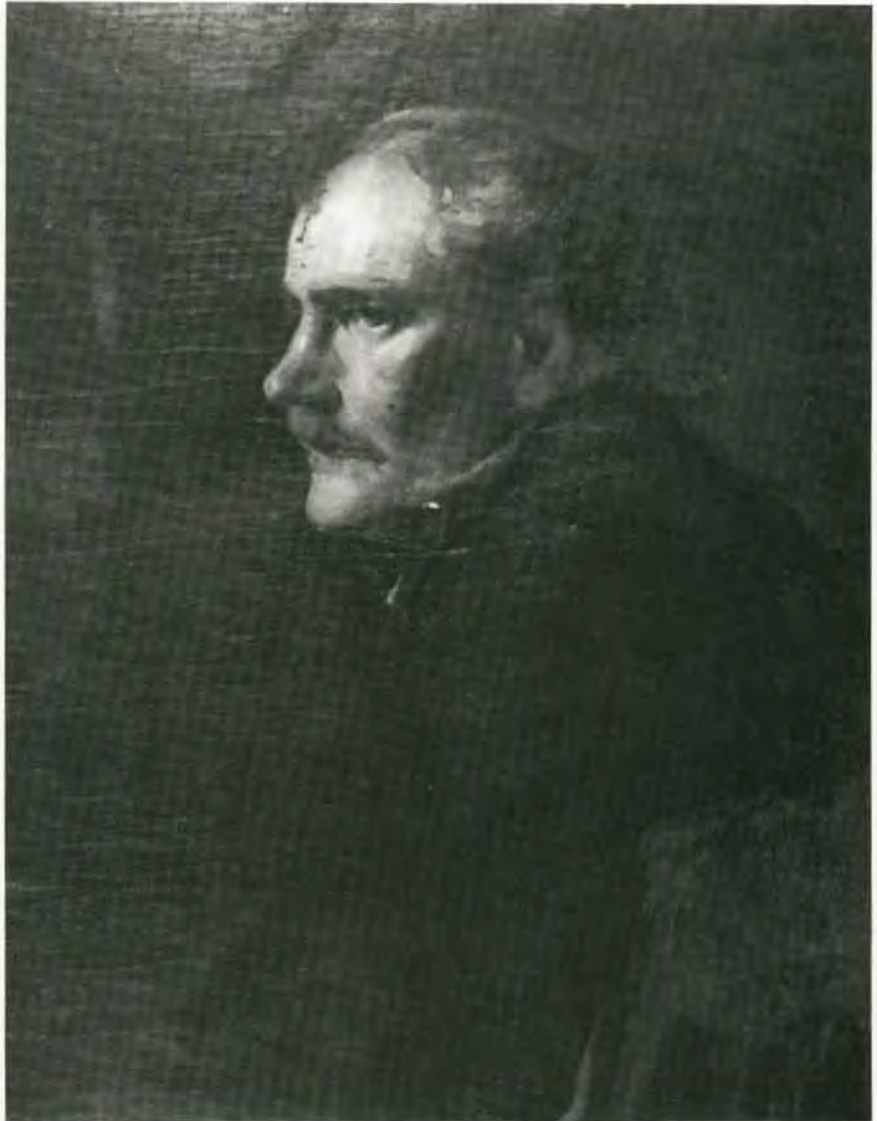


Figure 32.2
Li Tiefu, *Musician*, 1918.
Photo courtesy Hong Kong
Arts Centre.

what they learnt there on their return home, but Li's use of watercolour provides him with an avenue to achieve this.⁸

In his portraits and his still-lives (the other two main genres in which Li Tiefu worked) he tended to paint in oil, and here there is nothing visibly Chinese about the style he adopts (fig. 32.3). He shows no awareness of developments in Western modernism,⁹ adopting a relatively dark palette for instance and eschewing concerns for two-dimensional pattern-making in favour of a more traditional sense of depth created by tonal means. At the same time he also shows a distance from more academic modes of image-making which is consistent with his awareness of the art of Chase

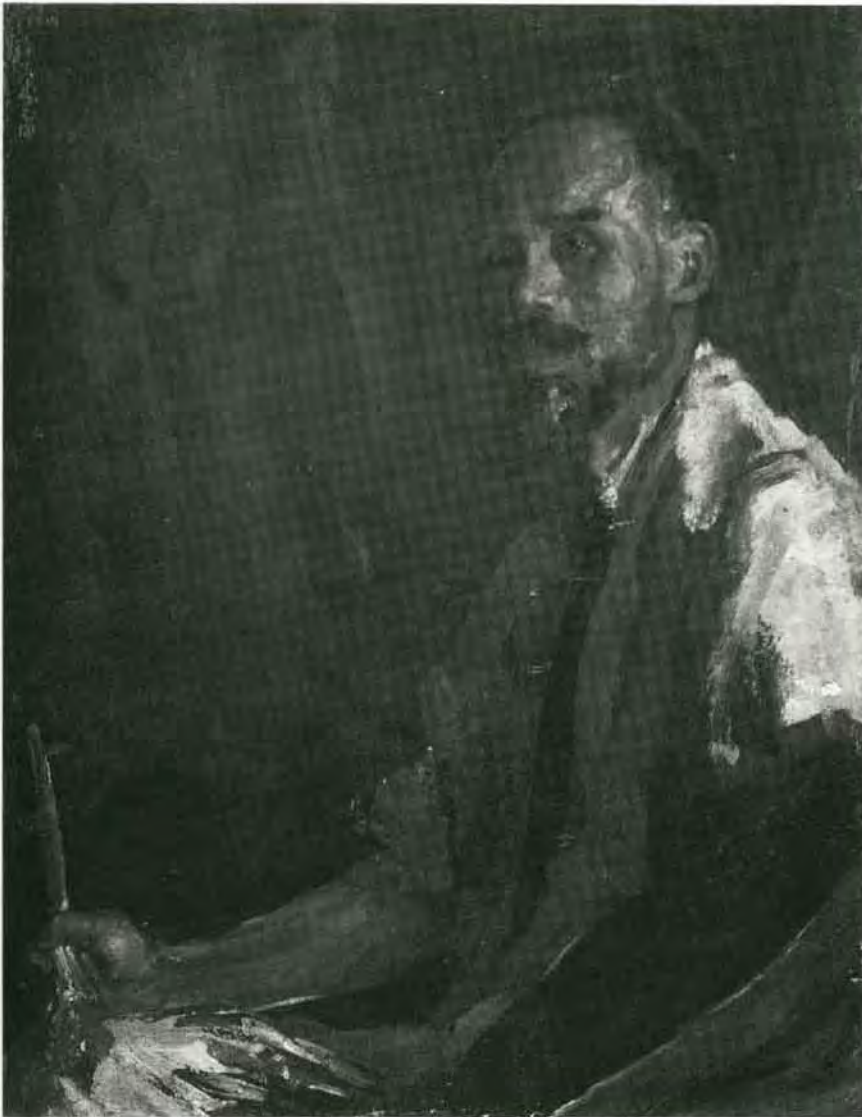


Figure 32.3
Li Tiefu, *Feng Gangbai, the Artist*, 1934. Photo courtesy Hong Kong Arts Centre.

and Sargent. His works do not display any evidence of a detailed study of perspective or anatomy, and the kind of smooth 'finished' brushwork favoured by the academic masters is replaced by a more visible stroke. This is not so much the 'broken' brushwork employed by the Impressionists to convey atmospheric light effects as the bravura brushwork found in Sargent's oil paintings. Its roots lie in the art of painters such as Thomas Lawrence or (perhaps more importantly) Velazquez.¹⁰ The latter artist had been a significant influence on Manet, and through him on other artists such as Sargent and Chase. Both had visited Spain, and Sargent (like Manet) did on occasion paint Spanish subjects. That Li Tiefu should choose in

1919 to paint a bullfighter, in what is surely a costume piece more than a portrait, places him in their orbit.

Outstanding among Li's paintings is *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice* (plate 16), a work of 1946. In this image he ventures to engage with a political subject, something his many landscapes, portraits and still-lives would not have prepared us for. What makes the production of such a painting a little more explicable is the knowledge that Li had been a major figure in Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary organization, playing a role in the establishment of the American branch of the Tongmenghui in 1909, and becoming its secretary.¹¹ Li was not unique in being both an artist and a revolutionary: as Ralph Croizier makes clear in his study *Art and Revolution in Modern China* (University of California Press, 1988), the early Lingnan School artists were also actively involved with the Republican movement. Where Li differs from those artists, however, is in the directness with which he approaches the realities of political struggle and in his wholehearted adoption of the resources of Western painting as a means to achieve this.

For the most part the Lingnan School artists were a lot more tentative in introducing elements of Western style in their images, and equally wary of rupturing the traditional Chinese painting paradigm through a focus on novel, contemporary subject matter. Although there are works such as Gao Jianfu's *A Disaster for Civilization* (1937), which depicts the destruction of an urban environment by warfare, I feel they approach their content in an unhelpfully oblique way. In that painting, for instance, the absence of detail in the middle ground seems to have been introduced solely to make a comforting reference to those traditional landscape paintings in which a band of mist breaks up the form of the background mountains. Indeed, the characteristic picturesque forms of such background mountain peaks is recalled by the shape Gao Jianfu gives to the ruined architecture which he places behind this 'misty' area, bringing incongruous allusions into the work which can only serve to undermine its effectiveness. Characteristically, the Lingnan artists introduced references to contemporary political realities in an even more muted and indirect way, by making use of allegory. New topical connotations are attached to images of animals, and although those meanings may be new that type of subject matter certainly has a precedent in pre-modern Chinese art.¹²

If we look elsewhere for points of comparison, then Xu Beihong's attempts to create a modern style of Chinese figure painting in such works as *Tian Heng and His 500 Retainers* (1928–30) comes to mind as a possible parallel to Li's project in *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice*. A difference, however, is that Xu Beihong did not choose to deal with recent history in his ambitious figure paintings. Furthermore, the more academic kind of Western art training he received would

hardly have equipped him to produce an image as starkly dramatic as Li's. I have already had cause to mention Velazquez as an influence (via Chase and Sargent) on Li's style, and this image of his can be related to one that was formerly attributed to that Spanish master. The painting, now known as *Dead Warrior* and catalogued as being by an unknown 17th-century master, is in the National Gallery, London. It depicts a dead soldier lying horizontally and taking up the whole of the image in a not dissimilar way to the figure of Cai Tingrui in Li's painting. Interestingly, the *Dead Warrior* may have been one of the sources drawn upon by Manet in his *The Dead Toreador* of 1864, another work which deserves mention as a possible influence on Li's image. Apart from the fact that Li had himself already painted a bullfighter, one must point out the way in which both works focus on the blunt physical fact of death — down to the trickle of blood — and eliminate any detailed setting. Neither work has a story-telling quality, this willingness to abandon narrative being something that was shockingly new in the work of Manet — that is, unavailable to artists who had only received a purely academic training.

Apart from Manet's *The Dead Toreador*, one could also point to various other 19th-century European images which provide a context for Li's painting. Daumier's *Rue Transnonian* (1834) and Gericault's study of severed heads both come to mind, as does David's *The Death of Marat* (1793). The latter work is arguably the first major representative of the type of works to which Li's *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice* belongs, namely depictions of revolutionary martyrs.¹³ Such images could hardly come into existence prior to the French Revolution, the first of these cataclysmic political changes that the modern world witnessed. The very novelty of the phenomenon David is depicting means that there is no established iconography he can turn to in representing it. He therefore invokes the pre-existing iconography of religious art, introducing allusions to Pietà and Deposition images, to artistic representations of the dead body of Christ. Li's work can also be said to evoke faint echoes of such images, and also perhaps of secular but equally traditional paintings displaying the death of classical mythological heroes such as Adonis. According to the myth of Adonis the ground on which his blood fell sprouted anemones, and artists have frequently represented this episode of the story.¹⁴ The flowers visible in the foreground of *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice* may carry the same order of rebirth symbolism as their counterparts in such mythological paintings.

If I am describing possible parallels with Western art that most of Li Tiefu's intended audience would presumably not have been aware of, this is largely in order to attempt to explain the context of its production. Nevertheless there remains the question (which I

do not have the evidence to answer) of how that audience responded to a work which presumably appeared somewhat novel at the time it was made. Certainly Western modernism has had problems in communicating with a wide audience because of its stylistic novelty, and that problem is particularly significant in the case of a work which seeks (as in the case of *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice*) to refer to political realities. That a rhetoric imported from Western art might have seemed to offer possibilities despite its novelty may be due to the new, larger audience a work of this kind addressed. Literati art had served an important role in preserving the cohesion of traditional culture,¹⁵ but had been addressed only to a narrow elite. The republican revolutionaries and those who in more recent times have similarly sought to effect changes in Chinese society have consciously dismantled aspects of that traditional culture, and needed, in art as well as other areas of life, to create a new sense of social cohesiveness to replace it, and one that would speak to, would interpellate, a broader category of persons. The ideology of nationalism was one of the new cohesive forces, and an artwork which can be interpreted as helping to bear its new definitions of Chineseness has paradoxically utilized Western means to do so.

Notes

1. Xu Beihong studied at the Académie Julian and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts.
2. See *Shen Bao* (Shanghai) for cover of the controversy concerning the use of nude models. Several May 1926 issues contain references to it, but the issues of the 16th and 17th May are particularly worth consulting.
3. Lin Fengmian became President of the Beijing National Academy of Arts in 1925, and Xu Beihong was appointed President in 1928. Liu Haisu became head of the Shanghai School of Art in 1915.
4. See Li Shu, 'Wo guo zuizaode ji wei youhuajia', *Mei Shu* (Beijing), 4, 1962, p. 68–70.
5. Glasgow School of Art, *Annual Report, 1912–13*, p. 14. I am indebted to George Rawson, the Fine Art Librarian at the Glasgow School of Art, for help in tracking down references to Li's time there.
6. Li Yishi made at least one historical costume painting after his return to China, indicating that he gained some specific benefit from this part of his studies. The painting is *Plaintive Picture in Palace* (1933) and it is reproduced in Tao Yongbai (editor-in-chief), *Oil Painting in China, 1700–1985*, Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 1988, plate 23. My information concerning the syllabus at Glasgow School of Art is taken from the prospectus for 1909–10.
7. Chan Hoi-ying, who studied with Li, remembers that he admired Sargent's watercolours. All information from Chan Hoi-ying utilized in this essay comes from Oscar Ho Hing-kay's interviews with the artist (April 1991), and I am grateful

to him for having shared so generously the fruits of his research. Jack Lee, one of my postgraduate students, has recently discovered an interview with Li Tiefu in *Dazhong Ribao*, 17 October 1936.

8. According to Chan Hoi-ying, Li made many watercolours during his Hong Kong period, with Lion Rock being one of his favourite subjects. Apparently he usually painted his landscapes out of doors, but did not feel obliged to follow the motif exactly.
9. Although there is no evidence in Li's works of Western modernism, Chan Hoi-ying remembers him speaking favourably about Matisse.
10. Li mentioned Velazquez, Rembrandt and Van Gogh to Chan Hoi-ying as artists that he admired. The prominence of the brushstroke in Li's paintings may also be related to his love of Chinese calligraphy, which he himself practised. He would talk about 'writing' a painting, echoing ideas from traditional Chinese painting theory.
11. See Chi Ke (editor-in-chief), *Li Tiefu*, Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1985, p. 119.
12. Like the Lingnan artists, Li Tiefu made works depicting wild animals. His images of tigers and eagles (done using Chinese media) may, like those of his fellow Cantonese artists, have been intended to carry a political symbolism.
13. I am not at present able to identify with certainty the figure depicted in this painting, but according to Chan Hoi-ying (who was with Li in Nanjing when he painted *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice*) the work may depict a journalist killed in an uprising against Yuan Shikai. This would presumably be either the 'Second Revolution' which began in July 1913, or the revolt which began in November 1915 with the assassination of Yuan's Shanghai commander.

It is possible, however, that the subject of this painting may be Cai Gongshi, who was killed by Japanese troops at Jinan on 3 May 1928. I have not been able to confirm that Tingrui was his original name, but the circumstances of his death make it quite likely that he is the figure depicted in this painting. In the only photo of Cai Gongshi I have so far been able to trace, he has a moustache similar to the figure in Li's painting, and his features do not seem markedly different. A further factor which makes this identification likely is that Xu Beihong produced an oil painting about the event of Cai Gongshi's murder in the summer of 1928, while staying in Fuzhou. According to Xu Beihong's wife Liao Jingwen, he undertook the work at the suggestion of Huang Menggui, the head of the Education Department of Fujian Province. The painting is not included in the six-volume collection of illustrations *Paintings by Xu Beihong* compiled by the Xu Beihong Museum, but a sketch for it is included in Volume 5. The figure of Cai in that image also has a moustache. To judge by the sketch, Xu Beihong's painting has none of the dramatic intensity of Li Tiefu's image: It shows Cai before his murder, and the figures are depicted in static poses.

Cai Gongshi had been born in 1888, in Jiujiang, Jiangxi. He studied at the Imperial University of Japan, specializing in economics and politics and receiving an M.A. degree. Upon his return to China he joined Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary party, holding various posts. In 1927 he was both Superintendent of Customs and Commissioner of Foreign Affairs at Nanjing, and in 1928 he was director of the diplomatic bureau attached to the Political Commission for the War Zone. On May 1, just prior to his death, he had been appointed Commissioner of Foreign Affairs for Shandong. His wife, whom he had married in Xiamen in 1920, was to establish a college in Shanghai after his death in memory of him.

Chan Hoi-ying informs us that Li at one time planned other paintings of

martyrs, namely individual portraits of those killed in the failed attempted revolution of April 1919 in Canton. Li apparently wrote to the Nationalist government attempting (without success) to gain financial support for the project, and also discussed it with Sun Ke, Sun Yat-sen's son — to no avail. Apparently *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice* was completed in only three or four days, and Li used a photograph (possibly from a newspaper) to help him with the features. He began work on it not long after witnessing the execution of some Japanese war criminals.

14. See for example Poussin's *Venus and Adonis* in the Musee des Beaux-Arts at Caen.
15. On this theme, see Lothar Ledderose, 'Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function', *Orientalisms* (Hong Kong), October 1986, p. 35-50.

Index

References to the page numbers of figures and colour plates are given in *bold italic*.

- Actions on Stage*, 111
Adorno, Theodor, 201
Age of Bronze, 187–188
Agitated Waters No. 5, 71
Ah Cheng, 245
Ai Weiwei, 245
Airmail Letter (Boshier), 161
Airmail Letter (Oldenberg), 161
Ambassadors, 112
American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Wiseman), 162
Anagnost, Anne, 247
Analysis of Beauty, 164
Andre, Carl, 8
Angel of Hearth and Home, 173
Anthropometrie, 208–210
Apollo and Daphne, 103
Apotheosis of Homer, The, 234
Architectural Transmutation, 118
Arnold, Matthew, 146
Arp, Hans, 171
Art and Asia Pacific, 105, 126
Art and Market, 246
Art Asia, 183
Art in America, 121
Artist and Model, 159–160
Artist Standing in Front of His Work, 20
Arts Council (Great Britain), 48
Arts Development Council (Hong Kong), 16–17, 47, 54, 55–57, 58–61, 198
Arts Policy Review Report, 52–54, 55
Atomical Relationship, 98, 100–101, 99
Auerbach, Frank, 205
Australia: Beyond the Mundane, 178–182
Australian and International Art Monthly, 144
Avery, Milton, 127
Aziz, Anthony, 204, *Pam and Kim*, 204, 203
Bacon, Francis, 121, 191, 210
Balla, Giacomo, 208
Barr, Alfred H., 13
Barrell, John, 3
Barthes, Roland, 43
Bartlett, Jennifer, 119
Baselitz, 175–176, 210
Bathers, 226
Bathers at La Grenouillère, 198–200, 199
Baudrillard, Jean, 7, 246–247
Bed, 184
Bell, Clive, 6, 13, 91
Belvedere Torso, 189, 196
Benjamin, Walter, 179–180
Bennett, Gordon, 256, *Possession Island*, 256
Bernini, Gianlorenzo, 4–5, 103, *Apollo and Daphne*, 103
Bertillon, Alphonse, 208–210

- Beuys, Joseph, 119, 176
Beyond Vision IV, 72
Bible From Happy Valley, 88, 95, 89
 Bierstadt, Albert, 8
 Blake, William, 92, 103–104, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The*, 103
Bloodline: The Big Family, No. 3, 251–253, 257, 253
Blue Elephant, 86–88, 264
 Boccioni, Umberto, 208
 Bocklin, Arnold, 173
 Bonnard, Pierre, 210
Book From Heaven, 255
Book Lover I, 88, 90, 91, 103, 89
 Bordieu, Pierre, 133
 Bosch, Hieronymus, 153
 Boshier, Derek, 161, *Airmail Letter*, 161
 Boston, Paul, 182
 Botticelli, 98–99
 Boudin, Eugène, 198
Bound to Win, 96–98
 Brancusi, Constantine, 191, *Torso of a Young Girl*, 191
 Braque, Georges, 226, *Violin and Palette*, 226
 Brecht, Bertold, 145
Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot, 257, 256
 British Council, 49
 Burnham, Jack, 82, 196
 Butler, Ruth, 187, 196
- Cage, John, 5, 119, 185
 Cahill, James, 82
 Cai Gongshi, 223
 Cai Tingrui, 220–224
Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice, 220–224, 276
 Cai Yuanpei, 234–235
Canyon, 185
 Capa, Robert, 38
 Caro, Anthony, 194, *Early One Morning*, 194
 Carracci, Annibale, 92, *Choice of Hercules*, 92
 Carroll, Lewis, 101
 Cartier-Bresson, Henri, 119
Caryatid, 197
 Casting, 4
Celebes, 169–172, 170
 César, 83, 191, 196, 204–205, *Flying Frenchman*, 83, 191, 204, *Man of St. Denis*, 196
 Cézanne, Paul, 192
Chair, 101
Chair on Chair, 101
Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, 239
 Chakrabarty, D., 81
 Chan, Annie, 3, 109–113, 114–119, *Actions on Stage*, 111, *Corridor, The*, 110, *Courtyard in Yunnan*, 112, *House With Barbed Wire*, 112–113, *Leaping Energy Force, The*, 112, *Room 240*, 115, 268, *Sink, The*, 110, 110, *Top and the Fire, The*, 112, 113, *University Courtyard*, 111–112, 267
 Chan, Flora Kay, 81
 Chan Hoi-ying, 215, 222–224
 Chan, Luis, 84, 215
 Chan, Raymond, 139, 141, *Sometime in Wanchai*, 139, 272
 Chan Yuk-keung, 78, *Untitled*, 78, 80
 Chang Tsong-zung, 250–251
 Chardin, Jean Baptiste Simeon, 38
 Chase, William Merritt, 84, 217–221
 Chen Tianhua, 245
 Cheng Wei-kwok, 65, 67, 69, 82, *Lion Rock*, 69
 Cheung Wan-wah, 30
 Chi Ke, 223
 Chiang Kai-shek, 245, 247
China's New Art, Post-1989, 236
 Chinnery, George, 50
 Chiverton, Hugh, 3
Choice of Hercules, 92
 Chou, Irene, 65, 73, 82, *Yin and Yang*, 73
 Christo, 9–10, 17, *Running Fence*, 9–10
Christopher With His Glasses on, 158
 Chu Hing-wah, 126, 127–130, *Fishing*, 130, *In the Museum*, 129, *One Relaxing Afternoon*, 130, 271
 Chui Tze-hung, 65
City Entertainment, 28, 151
 City Hall Art Gallery, 67, 82
City Vibrance, 19–23
 Cixi, 246
 Clair, Jean, 207
 Clark, John, 245
 Clark, T.J., 200
 Claudot, André, 234
 Clausen, George, 217
Closing Scene, 168
Cloud Harmony No. 1, 71, 263
Collection Series: Badges, 239
Composite Assemblage, 72
Composite Landscape, 72
Concrete Mao B, 238

- Constable, John, 3–4, *Scene on a Navigable River (Flatford Mill)*, 4
- Corot, Jean-Baptiste-Camille, 198
- Corridor, The*, 110
- Council for the Performing Arts, 16, 47–48, 54, 56, 58–59
- Courtyard in Yunnan*, 112
- Craft (Vehicle)*, 90
- Croizier, Ralph, 82, 220
- Crommelynck, Aldo, 166
- Crossover*, 59
- Crothall, Geoffrey, 246
- Crucifixion*, 158
- Crustaceans (Day Lights)*, 185–186, 275
- Cucher, Sammy, 204, *Pam and Kim*, 204, 203
- Cultural Relics. Hong Kong History Series (Section 4)*, 78, 79
- Dali, 169, 171
- Danaid*, 192
- Dante, 228, 234
- Daoji (see Shitao)
- Das Fliegende Klassenzimmer*, 205
- Daumier, Honoré, 221, *Rue Transnonian*, 221
- David, Jacques-Louis, 221, *Death of Marat, The*, 221
- Days of Dormitory '94*, 141, 273
- De Chirico, Giorgio, 171
- De Kooning, Willem, 184
- De Maria, Walter, 7–8, 10, *Lightning Field*, 7–8
- Dead Toreador*, 188, 221
- Dead Warrior*, 221
- Death of Marat, The*, 221
- Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture, No. 4*, 78, 84, 22
- Degas, Edgar, 38, 208
- Delaunay, Robert, 227
- Deng Xiaoping, 243, 249
- Derain, André, 200, 226, *Bathers*, 226
- Derrida, Jacques, 84, 142
- Di Suvero, Mark, 257
- Dikotter, Frank, 245
- Dine, Jim, 183
- Disaster for Civilization, A*, 68–69, 220
- Discord Merely Magnifies*, 160
- Dislocation*, 132, 138
- Divergent Waters No. 4*, 71
- Dix, Otto, 210
- Documenta*, 24, 202
- Double Image*, 240, 282
- Double Negative*, 7–8, 10
- Down to Earth*, 88
- Dream and Lie of Franco, The*, 162
- Dubuffet, Jean, 175
- Duchamp, Marcel, 160, 210, *LHOOQ*, 160, *Ready Made Rectifié: Wanted/\$2,000 Reward*, 210
- Durham, Jimmy, 24
- Du Xiuxian, 248
- Eakins, Thomas, 208
- Early One Morning*, 194
- Easy Rider*, 93–96, 94
- El Greco, 162
- Enamel Saucepan, The*, 158
- Enchantress With the Baby Rapunzel, The*, 153, 154
- Engaging Tradition*, 33–36
- Ensor, James, 210, *Masks and Death*, 210
- Ernst, Max, 69, 169–173, *Angel of Hearth and Home*, 173, *Celebes*, 169–172, 170, *Europe After the Rain II*, 69, 173, *Forest and Dove*, 169, 172–173, *Hat Makes the Man, The*, 171, *Histoire Naturelle*, 172, *Horde, The*, 169, 172–173, *Oedipus Rex*, 169–172, *Une Semaine De Bonte*, 172
- Escher, M.C., 100, *Magic Mirror*, 100, *Reptiles*, 100
- Etching Is the Subject*, 164, 166
- Europe After the Rain II*, 69, 173
- Exercise*, 226–228, 232–233, 277
- Factum I*, 184
- Factum II*, 184
- Falling Man*, 196–197
- Fang Zhaoling, 126–131, *Landscape (In Memory of My Teacher, Zhang Daqian I)*, 127, 270, *Painting and Calligraphy Share the Same Origin*, 127, 128, *Peaceful Settlement of the Future of Hong Kong*, 127, 131, *Tai Chi*, 127
- Father*, 245
- Fig. Tree*, 90
- Figure*, 228, 229
- Figure on Staircase*, 91–92
- Fire*, 254
- First Marriage (A Marriage of Styles), The*, 160
- Fishing*, 130
- Flying Frenchman*, 83, 191, 204
- Flying in the Rain*, 68
- Forest and Dove*, 169, 172–173

- Foster, Norman, 144
Foucault, Michel, 208, 211
Four Seasons, Spring, The, 239
Franco, 162
Franco-American Mail, 160–163, 161
Frankenthaler, Helen, 67, 72
Freud, Lucien, 210
Fried, Michael, 6
Friedrich, Caspar David, 173
Fung Ping Shan Museum, 33–36, 82, 174, 178
Fung, Sabrina, 119
- Gallery 7, 105
Gao Jianfu, 68–69, 82, 220, *Disaster for Civilization*, A, 68–69, 220, *Flying in the Rain*, 68
Gao, Mayching (see Kao Mayching)
Gardner, Martin, 101
Gasparini, Paolo, 204
Gaulli, Giovan Battista, 5
Geldzahler, Henry, 158
George Lawson and Wayne Sleep, 164
Gericault, 221
Gershwin, George, 162
Ghent Museum of Art, 24
Giacometti, Alberto, 210
Girl on the Upper Deck of a Bus, 122
Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, 166
Girls With a Toy Boat, 168
Goddess of Democracy (Tiananmen Square), 196, 243–244, 248
Goddess of Democracy (Hong Kong replica), 83, 145, 196
Goethe Institute, 49, 169
Good Morning II, 96
Gorbachev, 244, 249
Gottlieb, Adolph, 67
Goya, M.A., 247
Graubner, Gotthard, 175
Gravity III, 88–90
Great Criticism Series - McDonalds, 240, 246, 283
Green Trunk, 90
Greenberg, Clement, 6, 13, 17, 91
Grey Still, 106, 108, 266
Groping, 228, 234
Gu Wenda, 257
Guernica, 168
Guevara, Che, 204
Guo Qiangcai, 257, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*, 257, 256
Guston, Philip, 210
- Haacke, Hans, 10–11
Hall, Stuart, 84
Hanart TZ Gallery, 127, 236, 250
Hand of God, The, 192, 193
Hat Makes the Man, The, 171
Head, 251
Head of St. John the Baptist on a Tray, 190
Heads and Joker, 100–101
Headland, Issac Taylor, 246
Heart of an Ass, The, 123–124
Heaven and Hell, 101–104
Heckel, Erich, 175
Heizer, Michael, 7–8, 10, 17, *Double Negative*, 7–8, 10
Henson, Bill, 180–181
Hinterthur, Petra, 82, 84
Histoire Naturelle, 172
Ho, Oscar, 24, 36, 37, 76–77, 84, 222–223, *Engaging Tradition*, 35, 261, *Turtle Rock*, 77, 77
Höch, Hannah, 171
Hockney, David, 85, 111, 114, 151–156, 157–168, *American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Wiseman)*, 162, *Artist and Model*, 159–160, *Christopher With His Glasses on*, 158, *Closing Scene*, 168, *Discord Merely Magnifies*, 160, *Enchantress With the Baby Rapunzel, The*, 153, 154, *Etching Is the Subject*, 164, 166, *First Marriage (A Marriage of Styles), The*, 160, *Franco-American Mail*, 160–163, 161, *George Lawson and Wayne Sleep*, 164, *Home*, 156, 155, *In a Chiaroscuro*, 164, 167, *It Picks Its Way*, 163–164, *Man Taking a Shower in Beverley Hills*, 168, *Old Guitarist, The*, 158–160, 166, 168, 159, *On It May Stay His Eye*, 165–166, *Paper Pools*, 165, *Picture Emphasizing Stillness*, 153, *Picture of Ourselves, A*, 163, 166, *Play Within a Play*, 165, *Poet, The*, 163–165, *Tick It, Tock It, Turn It True*, 166, *Two Friends and Two Curtains*, 166, *What Is This Picasso?*, 166–168, 167
Hogarth, William, 164, *Analysis of Beauty*, 164, *Rake's Progress, The*, 164
Holbein, Hans, 112, *Ambassadors*, 112
Hollie, 180–182, *Pool, The*, 274, *Three Tree Painting, The*, 182, 274
Home, 156, 155
Homer, 228, 234
Hon Chi-fun, 73, *Way of the Lotus, The*, 73

- Honert, Martin, *Das Fliegende Klassenzimmer*, 205
 Hong Kong Arts Centre, 24–27, 28–32, 36, 37, 49, 151, 215, 236
Hong Kong Economic Journal, 47, 52, 169, 183, 202, 207
 Hong Kong Museum of Art, 14–16, 18, 19–23, 47, 50–51, 52, 56, 60, 75, 82–83, 169, 171–172, 187
 Hong Kong Museum of History, 24, 50
Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity, 24
Horde, The, 169, 172–173
Horse, Crossing I, 101, 102
Horse Lover Goes West, 87–88, 87
 Hou Chun-ming, 253–255
House With Barbed Wire, 112–113
 Hu Yaobang, 242–244, 248
 Huang Chih-yang, 255
 Huang Chin-ho, 254, *Fire*, 254
 Huang Menggui, 223
 Huang Yan, 239, 245, *Collection Series: Badges*, 239
 Huang Yongping, 24
 Hugo, Victor, 234
Humanity, 228
 Huyt, Jan, 24
- I Am Beautiful*, 196–197
I Love You With My Ford, 163
Identity and Alterity, 207–211, 250–253, 256–257
Idol, The, 245
 Immendorf, Jorg, 183
In a Chiaroscuro, 164, 167
In Search of Art, 24–27, 28–32, 33, 37, 47
In the Museum, 129
Incident in the Bullring, 188
 Ingres, Jean Auguste Dominique, 198, 234, *Apotheosis of Homer, The*, 234
Ink Painting by Hong Kong Artists, 50–51, 83
Inside Out, 101, 102
It Picks Its Way, 163–164
- Jawlensky, Alexei Von, 210
 Jheon, Soocheon, 204
 Johnson, Tim, 182
June, 249
- Kan Tai-keung, 71–72, *Spring-Mountain-Dream*, 72
 Kao Mayching, 84, 244
 Kasmin, 165
- Kiefer, Anselm, 111, 119
 Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig, 175
Kiss, The, 192
 Kitaj, Ron, 210
 Klee, Paul, 122, 175
 Klein, Yves, 208, *Anthropometrie*, 208–210
 Knoebel, Imi, 176
 Ko, Alfred, 139, 141
 Kohut, John, 246
 Kossoff, Leon, 205–206
 Kraus, Richard Curt, 17–18
 Krauss, Rosalind, 197
 Kung, Toto, 71, *Yellow Chattering*, 71
 Kwan, Billy, 233
- Lachman, Charles, 81
 Lai, Edwin, 141, 143, 198, *Two Unrelated Pictures*, 143, 142
 Laing, Ellen Johnston, 244–245, 247, 248
 Lam, Osbert, 132, 133, 141–142, *Stun*, 133, 134
 Lamqua, 50
Landscape (1979), 232, 231
Landscape (early 1980s), 232, 278
Landscape (mid-1980s), 232, 279
Landscape I, 82
Landscape, After Shitao, 81
Landscape (In Memory of My Teacher, Zhang Daqian I), 127, 270
 Larson, William, 119
Las Meninas, 160
Last Tango With Tiger, 96, 99–100, 97
 Lau Kin-wai, 138
 Lawrence, Thomas, 219
Leader, The, 239, 239
Leaping Energy Force, The, 112
 Lecourier, 166
 Ledderose, Lothar, 17, 81, 224
 Lee, Aries, 73, *Untitled*, 73
 Lee Byng, 215
 Lee, Holly, 138
 Lee, Jack, 223
 Lee, Ka-sing, 138
 Lee, Lok-ka, 26
 Lee, Lindy, 179–180, 182
 Lee, T.H.C., 244
 Léger, Fernand, 226–227, *Nudes in the Forest*, 226
 Lei Feng, 238
 Leonardo, 153, 160, *Mona Lisa*, 160
Les 100 Pas de la 1000 Patte, 108, 107
 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 152

- Leung Kui-ting, 65, 67, 72, *Beyond Vision IV*, 72, *Composite Assemblage*, 72, *Composite Landscape*, 72, *Tranquil Mountains*, 67
- LHOOQ, 160
- Li, Albert, 139–141
- Li Baoquan, 233
- Li, Chu-tsing, 17
- Li Peng, 243
- Li Qici, 246
- Li Shan, 257, *Rouge*, 257
- Li Shutong, 216
- Li Tiefu, 84, 215–224, 225, *Cai Tingrui's Sacrifice*, 220–224, 276, *Musician*, 218
- Li Yishi, 216–217, 222, *Plaintive Picture in Palace*, 222, *Portrait of Shuqi, Age 30*, 216
- Liao Jingwen, 223
- Library*, 255, 255
- Lichtenstein, Roy, 160, 177, 184
- Lien Te-cheng, 254, *Particular Tao*, 254, 254
- Lift*, 92
- Lightning Field*, 7, 8
- Lijiang in the Spring Rain, The*, 82
- Lin Fengmian, 15, 66, 81, 216, 222, 225–235, *Exercise*, 226–228, 232–233, 277, *Figure*, 228, 229, *Groping*, 228, 234, *Humanity*, 228, *Landscape* (1979), 232, 231, *Landscape* (early 1980s), 232, 278, *Landscape* (mid-1980s), 232, 279, *Still Life*, 233, 280, *Suffering*, 228, 227
- Line in Ireland, A*, 8, 9
- Line Made by Walking, England, A*, 8
- Lion Rock*, 69
- Liu Chunhua, 239, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, 239
- Liu Dahong, 239, *Four Seasons, Spring, The*, 239
- Liu Haisu, 15, 66, 81, 215–216, 222, 225
- Liu Wei, 211, 240, 250–254, 257, *New Generation, The*, 240, 257, *Revolutionary Family: Dad in Front of a Poster of Zhu De*, 240, 257, 284, *Two Drunk Painters*, 240, *You Like Pork?*, 251, 252
- Livingstone, Marco, 154–155
- Lo, Mei, 120–125, *Girl on the Upper Deck of a Bus*, 122, *Heart of an Ass, The*, 123–124, *Shooting Star*, 122–123, 269, *Soul in the Darkness*, 123–124, *Untitled*, 122–123, 121
- Lo Yin-shan, 141
- Lo, Yvonne, 141, *Days of Dormitory '94*, 141, 273
- Loh, Christine, 3
- Lombroso, Cesare, 208, 210, 209
- Long, Richard, 8–10, *A Line in Ireland*, 8, 9, *A Line Made by Walking, England*, 8
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 159
- Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 10
- Lost Magic Kingdoms*, 33
- Lui Shou-kwan, 50, 65, 67–69, 75, 81, *Landscape, After Shitao*, 81, *Zhuangzi*, 67, 262
- Luo Zhongli, 245, *Father*, 245
- Ma Jir-bo, 215
- Ma, Yo-Yo, 145
- Mackintosh, Charles Rennie, 217
- Made in Hong Kong*, 24, 50
- Magic Mirror*, 100
- Magritte, René, 98, 135, 154, 162, 169, 171, *Not to be Reproduced*, 98, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 162
- Maillol, Aristide, 192
- Mak, Antonio, 3, 83, 85–104, 105, *Atomical Relationship*, 98, 100–101, 99, *Bible From Happy Valley*, 88, 95, 89, *Blue Elephant*, 86–88, 264, *Book Lover I*, 88, 90–91, 103, 89, *Bound to Win*, 96–98, *Chair*, 101, *Chair on Chair*, 101, *Craft (Vehicle)*, 90, *Down to Earth*, 88, *Easy Rider*, 93–96, 94, *Fig. Tree*, 90, *Figure on Staircase*, 91–92, *Good Morning*, 96, *Gravity III*, 88–90, *Green Trunk*, 90, *Heads and Joker*, 100–101, *Heaven and Hell*, 101–104, *Horse, Crossing I*, 101, 102, *Horse Lover Goes West*, 87–88, 87, *Inside Out*, 101–102, *Last Tango With Tiger*, 96, 99–100, 97, *Lift*, 92, *Man, Chair*, 91, *Man With Ladder II*, 91, *Man With Ladder III*, 91, *Man's Nature*, 92, *Playing Escher*, 100, *Rebirth*, 103, *Root*, 103, *Sleepwalker I*, 96, 97, *Sleepwalker II*, 95–96, 104, *Tree Trunk*, 86, *Walking Figure I*, 83, 104, *West Meets East*, 83, 92, 98–100, 93, *What's Behind Venus?*, 98–99, 101, *Wood (Inside Out)*, 90
- Malevich, Kasimir, 210
- Man, Chair*, 91
- Man of St. Denis*, 196
- Man Taking a Shower in Beverley Hills*, 168
- Man With a Hat*, 196
- Man with Ladder II*, 91
- Man with Ladder III*, 91
- Man With the Broken Nose, The*, 189, 190
- Mandarin Oriental Fine Arts, 183
- Man's Nature*, 92
- Manet, Edouard, 6, 23, 160, 188, 219–221, *Dead Toreador*, 188, 221, *Incident in the Bullring*,

- 188, *Olympia*, 23, 160
Mao (Warhol), 180
Mao (Yan Peiming), 253
Mao Zedong, 83, 92, 98, 100, 236–249, 257, 237
Mao Zedong (Wang Guangyi), 240, 245
Marey, Etienne Jules, 208
Marx, Karl, 243
Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The, 103
Marriage of the Virgin, 23
Masks and Death, 210
Matisse, Henri, 127, 194, 228, 230, 233–234,
Moroccans, The, 230, *Pink Nude*, 234
Matta, 169
Meditation, Without Arms, 189
Meeting of Yin and Yang, The, 73–75, 74
Meyerowitz, Joel, 119
Mi Ku, 235
Michelangelo, 41, 90
Miro, Joan, 107, 121–122, 169
Mirsky, Jonathan, 248
Mo, Comyn, 142–143
Mobile Art Show, 3, 24
Modigliani, Amedeo, 228, 234
Mona Lisa (Leonardo), 160, 184
Mona Lisa (Rauschenberg), 184
Monet, Claude, 160, 198–200, *Bathers at La
Grenouillère*, 198–200, 199, *Rouen Cathedral*,
160
Monogram, 185, 194
Moroccans, The, 230
Most Wanted Man No. 12: Frank B, 210
Motherwell, Robert, 67, 72
Mountain Scenery IV, 69–71, 70
Munch, Edvard, 210
Munro, Donald J., 238, 245
Museum of Mankind (London), 33
Museum of Modern Art (New York), 13, 187
Musician, 218
- National Endowment for the Arts (U.S.A.), 48
National Gallery (London), 92, 221
National Palace Museum (Taipei), 14–15, 83, 15
Nauman, Bruce, 251
New Generation, The, 240, 257
Newman, Barnett, 254
Ng Ku-hung, 67–68, *Guilin in the Sunset*, 67–68,
81
Ng Yiu-chung, 65, 67, 69–71, 82, *Mountain
Scenery IV*, 69–71, 70
Nixon, Richard, 83, 92, 98, 100
- Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, 162
Noland, Kenneth, 184
Nolde, Emil, 228
Norman, Jessye, 145
Not to be Reproduced, 98
Nudes in the Forest, 226
NuNaHeDuo (see *Dislocation*)
- Oedipus Rex*, 169–172
Old Guitarist, The (Hockney), 158–160, 166, 168,
159
Old Guitarist, The (Picasso), 157, 158
Oldenberg, Claus, 161, *Airmail Letter*, 161
Olympia, 23, 160
On It May Stay His Eye, 165–166
One Day in Hong Kong, 31, 37–43
One Relaxing Afternoon, 130, 271
- Painting and Calligraphy Share the Same Origin*,
127, 128
Paintings From the Engine Room, 109
Palermo, Blinky, 175, 176
Pam and Kim, 204, 203
Paolozzi, Eduardo, 33
Paper Pools, 165
Parr, Mike, 178–182, *Untitled*, 179, 274
Particular Tao, 254, 254
Peaceful Settlement of the Future of Hong Kong,
127, 131
Pei, I.M., 144–145
Penck, A.R., 175
Penrose, Roland, 163
People's Daily, 243
Picasso, Pablo, 135, 156, 157–160, 162–168, 171,
196, 210, 226, 234, *Crucifixion*, 158, *Dream
and Lie of Franco, The*, 162, *Enamel Saucepan,
The*, 158, *Guernica*, 168, *Girls With a Toy
Boat*, 168, *Man With a Hat*, 196, *Old
Guitarist, The*, 157–158, *Two Nudes on a
Beach*, 163, *Weeping Woman*, 168, *Woman
With Pears*, 226, *Young Girl Before a Mirror*,
163
Picture Emphasizing Stillness, 153
Picture of Ourselves, A, 163, 166
Pink Nude, 234
Plaintive Picture in Palace, 222
Play Within a Play, 165
Playing Escher, 100
Poet, The, 163–165
Point Final, 106, 106

- Polke, Sigmar, 177
 Polo, Marco, 257
Pool, The, 274
 Poon, Carmen, 169
Portrait of Shuqi, Age 30, 216
Possession Island, 256
 Poussin, Nicolas, 224, *Venus and Adonis*, 224
 Preziosi, Donald, 13
Pygmalion and Galatea, 192
- Quart, 60
- Rake's Progress, The*, 164
 Raphael, 23, *Marriage of the Virgin*, 23
 Rauschenberg, Robert, 38, 183–186, 246, *Bed*, 184, *Canyon*, 185, *Crustaceans (Day Lights)*, 185–186, 275, *Factum I*, 184, *Factum II*, 184, *Mona Lisa*, 184, *Monogram*, 185, 194, *Rebus*, 184, *Retroactive I*, 184, *Soundings*, 185, *White Painting*, 185
 Rawski, Evelyn, 245
Ready Made Rectifié: Wanted/\$2,000 Reward, 210
Rebirth, 103
Rebus, 184
 Rembrandt, 160, 179–180, 223
 Remington, Frederic, 88
Rendez(-)Vous, 24
 Renoir, 198–199
Reptiles, 100
Retroactive I, 184
Revolutionary Family: Dad in Front of a Poster of Zhu De, 240, 257, 284
 Richter, Gerhard, 38, 177
 Rinke, Klaus, 174
 Rodin, Auguste, 187–197, *Age of Bronze*, 187–188, *Caryatid*, 197, *Danaid*, 192, *Falling Man*, 196–197, *Hand of God, The*, 192, 193, *Head of St. John the Baptist on a Tray*, 190, *I Am Beautiful*, 196–197, *Kiss, The*, 192, *Man With the Broken Nose, The*, 189, 190, *Meditation, Without Arms*, 189, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 192, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*, 187, *Thinker, The*, 196, *Three Shades, The*, 197, *Torso*, 189, *Torso of Centauress and Study for Iris*, 194–196, 195, *Torso of the Centauress and Despairing Teenager*, 194–196, *Walking Man*, 187–188, 188
Room 240, 115, 268
Root, 103
 Rosenquist, James, 163, 183, *I Love You With My Ford*, 163
 Roth, Dieter, 177
Rouen Cathedral, 160
Rouge, 257
 Rousseau, Henri, 92, *Tropical Storm With a Tiger*, 92
 Rückriem, Ulrich, 175
Rue Transnonian, 221
Rules (Un Tableau Carrement Rond), 106, 108, 265
Running Fence, 9–10
 Russell, Charles Marion, 88
- St. John the Baptist Preaching*, 187
 Saliger, Ivo, 210
 Salle, David, 38, 112
 Sandler, Irving, 17
 Sargent, John Singer, 217–222
Scene on a Navigable River (Flatford Mill), 4
 Schapiro, Meyer, 200
 Schlemmer, Oskar, 210
 Schoeni Fine Oriental Art, 239
 Schwitters, Kurt, 171, 185
 Scobie, Napula, 181–182
 Serra, Richard, 4, 17, *Casting*, 4, *Tilted Arc*, 4, 5
 Shaw, George Bernard, 192, 196
 Shi Chongming, 235
 Shi Ke, 93
Shiang, 73
 Shitao, 81
Shooting Star, 122–123, 269
Sink, The, 110, 110
Sleepwalker I, 96, 97
Sleepwalker II, 95–96, 104
 Smith, Eugene, 119
 Smithson, Robert, 17
Sometime in Wanchai, 139, 272
Soundings, 185
Soul in the Darkness, 123–124
 Soulages, Pierre, 67
Spring-Mountain-Dream, 72
Stars: 10 Years, The, 245
 Stella, Frank, 12–13, 111, 183
 Stern, Isaac, 145
 Stevens, Keith, 247
 Stevens, Wallace, 156, 157–158, 162–165, 168
 Still, Clyfford, 8
Still Life, 233, 280
 Stöhrer, Walter, 175
 Stravinsky, Igor, 164

- Stun*, 133, 134
Suffering, 228, 227
 Sun Chuanfang, 81
 Sun Ke, 224
 Sun Yat-sen, 82, 220, 223–224, 243, 245, 247
- Tagg, John, 135
Tai Chi, 127
 Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 250
 Tam, Eve, 233
 Tam, Lawrence, 75, 82, *Landscape I*, 82
 Tang Kong-fai, *Untitled (Central MTR Station)*, 42
 Tanguy, Yves, 171
 Tao Yongbai, 222
 Tate Gallery, 13, 160
Technocrat, 256–257
Thinker, The, 196
Third Text, 65
This Is Not a Pipe, 162
 Thompson, John, 78
Three Shades, The, 197
Three Tree Painting, The, 182, 274
Tian Heng and His 500 Retainers, 220
Tick It, Tock It, Turn It True, 166
Tilted Arc, 4, 5
 Tinguely, Jean, 184
 Titian, 160, *Venus of Urbino*, 160
 Tolstoy, Leo, 228, 234
Top and the Fire, The, 112, 113
Torso, 189
Torso of a Young Girl, 191
Torso of Centauress and Study for Iris, 194–196, 195
Torso of the Centauress and Despairing Teenager, 194–196
Tranquil Mountains, 67
TransCulture, 202, 255–257
Tree Trunk, 86
Tropical Storm With a Tiger, 92
Turn of a Decade, 84
 Turnbull, William, 162
 Turner, Matthew, 24
Turtle Rock, 77, 77
Two Drunk Painters, 240
Two Friends and Two Curtains, 166
Two Minds in Harmony, 93
Two Nudes on a Beach, 163
Two Unrelated Pictures, 143, 142
 Twombly, Cy, 111
- Uccello, 154
Une Semaine De Bonte, 172
University Courtyard, 111–112, 267
Untitled (Chan Yuk-keung), 78, 80
Untitled (Lee, Aries), 73
Untitled (Lo, Mei), 122–123, 121
Untitled (Parr, Mike), 179, 274
Untitled (Central MTR Station), 42
- Valentin, Leo, 196
 Van Eyck, 180
 Van Gogh, 223
 Van Lau, 71–75, 82, *Meeting of Yin and Yang, The*, 73–75, 74, *Shiang*, 73, *Windy Form*, 72–73, *Yin Yang*, 73
 Vancouver Art Gallery, 83
 Velazquez, 160, 219, 221, 223, *Las Meninas*, 160
 Venice Biennale, 202–206, 207–211, 250–257
Venus and Adonis, 224
Venus de Milo, 189
Venus of Urbino, 160
 Vermeer, 166, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, 166
 Vlaminck, Maurice de, 34, 200
- W.A., 249, *June*, 249
 Wakeman, Frederic, 238, 245, 247–248
Walking Figure I, 83, 104
Walking Man, 187–188, 188
 Walther, Franz Erhard, 174
 Wang Guangyi, 240, 245–246, 251, *Great Criticism Series – McDonalds*, 240, 246, 283, *Mao Zedong*, 240, 245, *Workers, Peasants, Soldiers, and Coca-Cola*, 240
 Wang Hai, 78, *Cultural Relics. Hong Kong History Series (Section 4)*, 78, 79
 Wang Keping, 245, *Idol, The*, 245
 Wang Ziwei, 239–240, *Leader, The*, 239, 239
 Warhol, Andy, 162, 177, 180, 184, 210, 240, 244–245, *Mao*, 180, 240, *Most-Wanted Man No. 12: Frank B*, 210
 Wark, McKenzie, 244, 248–249
 Warner, John, 82
 Watson, James, 245
Way of the Lotus, The, 73
 Wayne, John, 88
 Wear, Eric, 27
Weeping Woman, 168
 Wells, H.G., 101

- West Meets East*, 83, 92, 98–100, 93
What Is This Picasso?, 166–168
What's Behind Venus?, 98–99, 101
Where Streams Become a River, 83
Whistler, James Abbott McNeill, 162, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, 162
White Painting, 185
Whyte, Martin, 242
Windy Form, 72–73
Winged Victory of Samothrace, 191
Woman With Pears, 226
Wong, Ken, 139, 141, *Yaumatei Typhoon Shelter* (1994), 139, 140, *Yaumatei Typhoon Shelter* (1995), 139, 140
Wong Shun-kit, 20
Wong Wo-bik, 3, 114–119, 141, *Architectural Transmutation*, 118
Wong, Wucius, 50, 65, 67–68, 71–72, 75, 82, *Agitated Waters No. 5*, 71, *Cloud Harmony No. 1*, 71, 263, *Divergent Waters No. 4*, 71
Wong, Yank, 3, 105–108, *Grey Still*, 106, 108, 266, *Les 100 Pas de la 1000 Patte*, 108, 107, *Point Final*, 106, 106, *Rules (Un Tableau Carrement Rond)*, 106, 108, 265
Wood (Inside Out), 90
Word's Meaning, The, 238, 281
Workers, Peasants, Soldiers, and Coca-Cola, 240
Wu Hung, 247, 248
Wu Mali, 255, *Library 255*, 255

Xu Beihong, 15, 82, 215–216, 220–223, 225, *Lijiang in the Spring Rain, The*, 82, *Tian Heng and His 500 Retainers*, 220
Xu Bing, 245–255, *Book From Heaven*, 255

Yan Peiming, 250–253, *Head*, 251, *Mao*, 253
Yang Shangkun, 243
Yaumatei Typhoon Shelter (1994), 139, 140
Yaumatei Typhoon Shelter (1995), 139, 140
Yee Bon, 84, 215
Yellow Chattering, 71
Yin and Yang, 73
Yin Yang, 73
You Like Pork?, 251, 252
Young Girl Before a Mirror, 163
Younger, Jay, 180
Yu Ben (see Yee Bon)
Yu Youhan, 240, 249, 251, *Double Image*, 240, 282
Yuan Shikai, 223
Yung, Danny, 78, 84, 146, *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture*, No. 4, 78, 84, 22

Zhang Bo, 238, 240, *Word's Meaning, The*, 238, 281
Zhang Daqian, 126–127
Zhang Hongtu, 238, 245, *Concrete Mao B*, 238
Zhang Xiaogang, 211, 250–254, 257, *Bloodline: The Big Family*, No. 3, 251–253, 257, 253
Zhao Shao'ang, 126
Zhao Ziyang, 243
Zhongguo Meishuguan (China Art Gallery), 245
Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan (Chinese Contemporary Art Exhibition), 240
Zhou Enlai, 242–243, 246
Zhu De, 240
Zhuangzi, 67, 262
Zone, 207
Zuni Icosahedron, 144–148, 147