

California College of the Arts

Some Things Last a Long Time :
Trauma in Contemporary Chinese Art

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Abstract

This essay examines how three Chinese artists, Liu Xiaodong, Yue Minjun and Ai Weiwei, approach the representation of trauma. I locate the effects of trauma in the way the artists manipulate the materials and subject matters and argue that the process results in a narrative sense of trauma. I contextualize their representation of trauma according to themes such as medium, historical references, and audience. I use trauma theory to address how artworks produce memory and response through symbolic subject matters. I end the thesis with a discussion about the U.S. reception of Chinese art that expresses trauma, focusing on the 2018 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum exhibition “Art and China After 1989: Theater of the world.” Here, I argue...

Contemporary Chinese artists live with the physical and psychological trauma of the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre, and they reenact memories of trauma through art in different ways. The Cultural Revolution started in the 1960s and was a national movement against any form of Western-influenced capitalism. Education was arguably one of the most affected aspects during this chaos, there was no university education for a decade, and later, as young artists participated in society as adults, their faith in the government was further crushed by the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Artistic freedom was highly restricted by authorities after this event and the Cultural Revolution, and artists responded in different ways. I argue that artists response to trauma ranges from the silence of Liu Xiaodong (“New Generation” painting), the ambiguous mocking of Yue Minjun (Cynical Realism) and the thorough critique of Ai Weiwei (“the overseas artist”). In this paper, I will exam how each artist approach to the representation of trauma, and contextualize it according to themes such as medium, historical references, and audiences. I identify evidences of trauma based on how the artist manipulates the subject matters and materials. Liu Xiaodong shows a juxtaposition of silence and resistance, Yue Minjun reenacts the memory by using symbolic effect, and Ai Weiwei reperforms violence to expressing his condemn.

Trauma results from a person experiencing a physically or emotionally violent event; it can be defined as a stressful reaction to an event that has already passed. Liu’s, Yue’s, and Ai’s traumas are not individual; they endured cultural trauma as members of a collective, which left marks on their group consciousness, changed their acknowledgement of self-identity, and kept appearing in their works through historical references and symbology.

These three artists were born during the Cultural Revolution, also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This was a sociopolitical movement started by Chinese

Communist Party (CCP) leader Mao Zedong in 1966. The goal was to remove capitalist and traditional influences from Chinese society. When these goals are pursued, violence and chaos resulted. For a decade, educated people were displaced to the countryside; bourgeois people were also targeted, and furthermore the historical and religious cultures were damaged. The Cultural Revolution officially ended after Mao's death and the arrest of the leader of the movement in 1976.¹ While the external damage was extensive, the internal destruction was just as massive: people lost their friends and families, lost the ability to question authority, lost faith in themselves. When Liu, Yue, and Ai's generation grew to adulthood, they participated in social movements, hoping to cause change. By then, the head of the party was Deng Xiaoping; he has been credited with opening China to the global market. Young people saw this economic reform as a sign of coming democracy, and in April 1989, students started a peaceful demonstration in Tiananmen Square: they demanded a solution addressing the party's corruption, questioned the legitimacy of the one-party political system, and sought freedom of speech. The government responded with a crackdown, in which hundreds were killed—the final death toll is unknown, because the history still remains censored in China. After the event, the entire nation fell into a far more conservative mindset. Many artists had to work underground, especially if their works involved any political messages. The people in China remained silence about the Tiananmen Square massacre.

What about trauma?

Looking at the relevant time periods (Cultural Revolution: 1966–1976, and Tiananmen Square massacre: 1989), some of the works that I am going to discuss might seem outdated; both Yue's (2003) and Ai's (1995 and 1998) works were made quite awhile after the traumatizing incidents.

¹ Kang Liu, "Hegemony and Cultural Revolution," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 69-86.

This latency period is an essential aspect of trauma. Cathy Caruth, a professor at Cornell University who specializes in the language of trauma and testimony, writes:

The Historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness of historical experience; since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.²

One of the important aspects of analyzing an artist's later work is that it is a way to explore how a timeless pain has remained present in their psyche, which in turn causes their work to become a statement of trauma, as well as a constant retelling of the story of the event itself.

Personal life experiences and historical conditions shape the way artists produce art; art operates as a catalyst for identification, memory, and self-discovery. Corina Caduff has addressed the importance of life experience as methodological tool for interpreting contemporary art discourse. "Autobiography as method describes an approach in which one's own person serves as an object and instrument for expressing certain perceptions, interpretations and reflections."³

Among the three artists, Ai Weiwei takes the most radical position; his rejection of the accepted historical narrative is the strongest and the most distinctive as well. His personal experience and historical memory are reflected in his art in a way that Liu's and Yue's are not. Ai's father Ai Qing was a famous poet who was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution because of his criticism of the CCP. Ai was with his father when his father was exiled to a rural area and forced to clean public toilets. Liu and Yue have not spoken of any personally traumatizing stories from this period. All three artists experienced the political horrors and atrocities that resulted from the traumatic events, but Ai alone was personally impacted during one of the events itself.

² Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 8.

³ Corina Caduff, "The Autobiographical Act in the Arts." *Ego Documents: The Autobiographical in Contemporary Art*. (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, 2008), 48.

Griselda Pollock examines how artists who have suffered traumatic experiences either travel away from or toward an encounter with the aftereffects of the trauma. She outlines five defining features of trauma: “perpetual presentness, permanent absence, irrepresentability, belatedness and transmissibility.”⁴ A traumatized person often carries a huge burden of history in their later life, and a traumatized artist tends to use the symbolic and the imaginary as expressions of their psyche. The essential nature of trauma is that it can be projected into the future no matter how much time has passed since the triggering events happened. To look at how a piece of artwork becomes a statement of trauma is to look at the way artist manipulates the materials and subject matter in order to create a narrative about the trauma in order to make sense of it.

The Hidden Emotions - *Midsummer*

Midsummer (Fig. 1) by Liu Xiaodong is a perfect representation of Pollock’s trauma characteristic “permanent absence.” The painting shows a high sense of invisible trauma, which seems to manifest as melancholia and depression. Liu Xiaodong is a leading figure of the “New Generation” painting movement based in Beijing. His major works show modern life in China through portraiture of the common people. Depicting silence and absence is Liu’s main focus; the visual representation of these became an important agent in his production of cultural memory. When people experience intense physical and emotional violence, subsequent avoidance behaviors are one of the typical manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder. His responses to traumatizing memories are passive; Liu himself said during an interview that he wasn’t interested in having political symbols in his painting, he just simply wanted to capture a moment from real life.⁵ The severe atmosphere in China after the Tiananmen Square massacre

⁴ Griselda Pollock, *After-Affects/ After-Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013), 2.

⁵ Bozhen Du and Zijian Weng, “Xiaodong Liu,” interview in *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, Beijing, July 9, 2009.

didn't allow citizens to question and criticize. Liu uses his works as a way of seeing people as they really are, with no exaggerated emotions or strong personal messages. His subjects are typically set in rural China, people's homes, cities that have seen little to no development, and ethnic regions such as Tibet and Inner Mongolia. The defining feature of Liu's work is the realistic quality of the painting: the transformation of a creative medium into a vivid and believable representation. Liu's decision of refusal as well as the subjects in his painting both revealed a repressive measure, that is inevitable for post-trauma memory.

Liu painted *Midsummer* (Fig. 1) in 1989, during his transition period of gradually gaining interest in painting ordinary people like his friends and family. Instead of being a fantastical scene painted from his imagination, or a figure painting using posed models, *Midsummer* (Fig. 1) is a moment of a man and a woman sitting on a table, without any facial expression. The man is shirtless, wearing only glasses and grey pants; his hands are relaxing on his legs. Next to him, the woman sits in a less comfortable position. She's leaning a little behind the man, and has her hand behind her to support herself. Besides the man and the woman, who take up most of the space in the painting, the scene shows a table, a lamp, a roll of toilet paper, and a can of spray paint; viewers are able to understand the painting as a private domestic setting, where the human figures are not considered to be anybody important.

However, three of the common items (lamp, toilet paper, can of spray paint) in the painting don't seem to fit with the rest of the scene; he unintentionally symbolized everyday objects by creating a sense of oddness. At this point of the time, China just opened trade with global market, more and more consumer products started to make appearance in daily life. When people were applauding for the party leader Deng Xiaoping, he was also responsible for the ordering the crackdown at Tiananmen Square. The mundane items are the contractionary symbols for Deng,

who was responsible both for the fast-growing economics and crackdown in students' peaceful demonstration. *Midsummer* was painted the same year of the Tiananmen Square massacre, exact date is unknown. I argue it was painted right after the Massacre happened, the title gives important clue, the incident was happened in a midsummer—June 4th. The man and woman in the painting seem to be motionless and speechless, their motive, voice and energy are absence from the scene.

The unidentified figure of Liu's painting reveals the trauma of lost identity for both himself and many other people after the Tiananmen Square massacre. The man and woman are absolutely stone-faced, there's no information about their identities or personalities; the lack of narrative and the symbolic significance drive the painting away from its historical context. We are not able to sense any passion in the painting, nor any love or hate; it is filled with emptiness. The presence of trauma is not explicitly represented in the painting, but it has been approached through a depressing real-life scene.

China in the 1980s was experiencing the chaos between the demands of the people for democracy and the conservative attitude of the government. This was especially true for Liu's generation, who were the most active group in negotiating with the authorities. After the massacre at Tiananmen Square, they soon fell into a passive position, with no voice to speak up anymore. Therefore, the indicators of feelings of lostness in Liu's paintings—the emotionless figures, the quietness of the surroundings, the lack of narration—are seen as accurately illustrating the struggles of the people in China at that time. His paintings became a clear statement of trauma in terms of its relationship with past and present, and the effect of absence he depicted. When people experience physical and/or psychological violence, one of the common reactions is to avoid further interaction with the cause(s) and keep silent about what's

happened.

Liu's silence is not only his psychological response to trauma, but it also shows his passive status as a powerless artist, which doesn't give him enough support to stand against the predator. The trauma from the Cultural Revolution has still not healed because it is not really being confronted as truth: the political party who started the chaos is still in charge, and they don't want the negative memories tied to their party image. They simply announced that it was a mistake—in order to end it—and they didn't talk about it anymore. The successful government crackdown on the people's resistance and subsequent silence—effectively erasing said resistance from the historical narrative—increased the people's fear of their dominators, and thus the people became more conservative than before. Especially after the Tiananmen Square massacre, many art galleries had to operate underground because of censorship. Therefore, Liu's painting at the time came from a decision out of concern for his personal safety and his response of avoiding interaction with traumatizing memories.

The Mocking- *Garbage Hill*

Compared with Liu's paintings, Yue Minjun's work is highly aware of its trauma; his work speaks to the “perpetual presentness” in Pollock's definition. We are able to locate trauma in *Garbage Hill* (Fig. 2) in the way he symbolically refers to the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre. Yue's distinguished style is fully embodied in *Garbage Hill* (Fig. 2). His depictions of exaggerated facial expressions, cartooning or illustrating different feelings, were defined as “Cynical Realism” by art critic Li Xianting, who writes: “The works in this style often display fortuitous fragments of daily experience using a popi [rascal] attitude to describe the bored feelings of their characters.”⁶ Yue himself wasn't associated with the term—he prefers

⁶ Edward L. Davis, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), 178.

the term “pink humor” to describe his work, which represents an ambiguous and neutral attitude, rather than the black humor of Cynical Realism.⁷ Yue makes his statements through his satirical paintings—they are ironic and humorous. Underlying the satire is his attention to the social and political concerns facing China today.

As in his many other paintings, the figures in *Garbage Hill* are his doppelgängers— same haircut, round face, pinkish skin tone—and they are laughing very hard. There are more than fifty men piled uncomfortably on one another, their heads forming a small hill under a blue sky. All of these figures are laughing in the same creepy way—laughing so hard they are barely able to open their eyes. These men look very alike, with a similar appearance, color, and mood, and they have been presented as a whole by the identical laughing. However, Yue has painted their hairstyles slightly different—a few figures have longer hair than others, which can hardly be noticed. The tiny differences in hairstyle suggests they are different individuals rather than the same repeating figure. We can read this as a suggestion of how difficult it is as an individual to live in a society that honors collectivity and national spirit.

The title gives us clues about how Yue wants us to understand the painting. Yue named the painting “Garbage Hill”; the symbolism can be interpreted literally. First, dehumanizing the figures, garbage doesn’t have a voice or opinion. The state of currently being garbage suggests future abandonment. Yue belongs to the generation that was most active in the democracy movement in China during the 1980s. He witnessed the failure of the student protest in Tiananmen Square, and the government-ordered genocide of the protestors. The entire society was traumatized by this; people knew what had happened to the students, but they didn’t talk about it anymore—they chose to live with it, life continued. Yue noticed this self-deceiving

⁷ Penny Zhou, “Interview: Yue Minjun,” *Hong Kong Tatler*, November 27, 2013.

trauma in how they chose to carry on, how they laughed, how they threw the unspeakable reality into the dumpster.

Yue leaves the background in blank blue in contrast to the fullness of the mountain of figures; the absence of a detailed background suggests a certain history that has gone missing or been erased. He draws from Chinese philosophy and religion in his paintings; the mountain shape of the figures and the empty background both have significant roles in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Also, the similarity to Chinese traditional painting (Fig. 3) is shown by the depiction of the mountain and the blank space; these represent a spiritual harmony between an individual's energy and the universe, and the empty space represents a coexisting of nothingness and infinity.⁸ Confucius said that “the wise take pleasure in rivers and lakes, the virtuous in mountains.”⁹ This mountain mysticism emerged most strongly after the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, which was recognized as the most glorious period of Ancient Chinese civilization, with its enormous international influence and prosperity. As the Tang Dynasty fell apart, and painters and poets witnessed the failure and chaos of man, they turned their faith to the permanence of nature.¹⁰ So does Yue; his metaphor of the immortal and peaceful mountain stands in stark contrast to the unstable society that he is facing.

We can see the similarities between Yue's painting and the above photograph of the Red Guards (Fig. 4), who were the perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution. Red Guards were militarized youth origination, they followed the lead of Mao to attack the Four Olds in Chinese society, Old customs, Old culture, Old habits and Old ideas. The Photography of Red Guards

⁸ Van Thi Diep, “The Landscape of the Void: Truth and Magic in Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Visual Art Practice* 16, no. 1 (2016): 77-86.

⁹ Confucius, *The Analects (Lun Yü)*, trans. Dim Cheuk Lau (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

¹⁰ Department of Asian Art, “Landscape Painting in Chinese Art,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004).

(Fig. 4) share the same composition with the *Garbage Hill* (Fig. 2) in which people assembled as a mountain. The Red Guards photo shows the importance placed on togetherness and unity: if the people could rise together and honor the collective's interest over the individual's, then they would be as powerful as nature. Secondly, they both show the unusually hyper state of the central figures. The photo focuses on four super energetic Red Guards—they hold their fists up to show their excitement for the revolution; they are very certain about what they are fighting for, the faithful, loyal expressions on their faces contrasting with the unexcited crowds behind them. This is one of the factors that pushed the national chaos into a large-scale phenomenon—according to the psychology of group conformity, an individual can easily lose the awareness of self when in a group, and they will behave on behalf of the group for many reasons: companionship, survival, security, lack of independent thinking.¹¹ When an individual becomes a member of a large group, they are offered a sense of belonging to something enormous. In Yue's painting (Fig. 2), a few figures have slightly different hairstyles and hand gestures, but they are all making the identical facial expression of laughing with closed eyes. He addresses the concept of collective group behavior through this painting.

The absurdly smiling faces are symbolic; they are too similar to be realistic. People immediately associate laughter with happiness, but when Yue showed it in an imbalanced way, he transformed this preexisting interpretation of laughter into its contra. The faces are laughing heartily but sending a depressive message to the viewer. Yue's painting also refers to the Laughing Buddha, who is one of the most cherished Buddhas in China. The Laughing Buddha (Fig. 5) was known as the Buddha of abundance, happiness, and wealth. He is always happy, and people believe in him to bring joy and prosperity to their lives. The persecution of Buddhism was

¹¹ Muzafer Sherif, *The Psychology of Social Norms* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1936), 26-46.

one of many destructions that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Revolutionists accused Buddhism of being superstition and a waste of materials; as a result, people had to burn their Buddha statues to avoid punishment. Another, more recent influence on Yue's painting is the symbolism of the propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution (Fig. 6), which showed many laughing proletarians, as if they were happy about their lives, when in reality they were miserable. The posters were intended as a celebration of the transformation of Chinese society; the bright colors and laughing people were supposed to produce an attitude of satisfaction toward the revolution.

The uncomfortable pink color is the same as one of the colors that appear on fair skin when we get injured and are left with bruises. Also, Yue's decision to use enlarged versions of human body parts further suggests a sense of physical trauma, in that when a part of the body gets injured, it may experience swelling. Yue painted unusually large heads with big laughing mouths; thus, the head and mouth are where the traumatizing memories lie; the figures remember, but they can't speak about it. Chaos and control appear together in this painting as metaphor for trauma; Yue is of the generation that witnessed the massacre, and his psychological shock was suppressed by strict control from the authorities. The trauma in *Garbage Hill* is not just a past event—it has been released from its time-bound place in memory, and makes itself strongly present in every historical reference and symbol used in the painting.

The Fighting-Ai Weiwei

If Pollock would argue that trauma is irrepresentable, then it is not a subject, but an effect, condition, or even a shadow.¹² However, Ai Weiwei is able to put traumatic memory into a specific object or location; in his work, performing trauma is more effective than representing it.

¹² Pollock, *After Affect - After Image: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Museum*, 4-12.

Even though Chinese artists lost faith in their government, many—like Liu and Yue—stayed in China, surrendering to the present circumstances and waiting for an unknown future. But many other artists left the country and started their more radical careers in the West; Ai Weiwei was one of them. He was born in Beijing in 1957, and so was nine years old when the Cultural Revolution began. There was no university education during the Cultural Revolution, so his knowledge of Western art started with artists such as Van Gogh and Manet, and stopped at Cubism, with artists including Picasso and Matisse. Even with a limited presence of the liberal arts, and oppression from the authorities, there was a dynamic avant-garde movement in China in the 1980s. Ai explains:

We are a generation that had a sense of the past, which is the time of the Iron Curtain and of the communist struggle. It was a tough political struggle—it was against humanism and individualism and there was strong censorship of anything not coming from China. We all knew about our parents' fights for a new China, a modern China with a democracy and a science. We started to realize that the lack of freedom of expression is what caused China's tragedy. We started to act really self-consciously and with a self-awareness to try to achieve this—to fight for personal freedom.¹³

But this limited freedom wasn't enough for Ai—one of the activists from his group was put in jail, thus, due to his personal experience of the Cultural Revolution and after witnessing the corruption of the government, he decided to leave China in 1981 and go to the United States for education. In 1995, two years after first returning to China, he created a series of provocative photographs titled *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Fig. 7). In this work, Ai is standing in front of a typical Beijing-style brick wall. Initially holding a 2000-year-old ceremonial urn from the Han Dynasty, he then smashes it on the ground, breaking the urn into pieces. Joseph N. Newland, who studies contemporary art closely, writes:

It is not difficult to reconcile such remarks with the image of the artist dropping a Han-dynasty urn, the work from which this exhibition takes its name. The vessel sacrificed for this 1995 performance for the camera was a 2,000-year-old example of glazed stoneware, a singular specimen of the likes

¹³ Karen Smith et al., *Ai Weiwei* (London: Phaidon, 2013), 12.

of which do not appear anywhere else in a practice that includes scores of earthenware vessels from the Neolithic period and hundreds of replicas from the Qing-dynasty porcelains.¹⁴

What was he suggesting by destroying a valuable historical artwork? Ai explains in an interview: “You know, when we were growing up, General Mao used to tell us that we can only build a new world if we destroy the old one. That’s the basic concept: destroying the old to contribute to the new. We were well-schooled in that.”¹⁵ Beijing-based art critic Karen Smith characterizes Ai’s work thus: “But preserving his cultural heritage or paying homage to the past is not Ai’s goal. The artworks are unapologetically intended to subvert instituted notions of culture and of the role and form of art: to question the value of all, and to unsettle the status quo, much as the interventions and actions of Duchamp and Joseph Beuys achieved.”¹⁶ Destroying the symbolic artwork of an ancient culture symbolizes the cultural destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Destroying the “Four Olds” was one of the main aims of the Cultural Revolution, according to Mao’s teachings, the Old Things are what the antiproletarian monsters would use to exploit the working class. Ai was ingeniously reperforming the action of destroying the Old Things and making a provocative political statement about Communist China. The traditional forms of art, such as painting and sculpture, are not powerful enough for Ai’s intention of criticizing the mistakes of the dominant political party in China. The artifacts from the ancient dynasties are now considered to be representative of political and cultural institutions, which attempt to be revered and honored. China values highly the preservation of tradition and culture. The contradictory part of the work is that the action of dropping is normally thought of

¹⁴ Joseph N. Newland, ed., *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn, Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE-2010 CE* (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University, 2010), 11.

¹⁵ Weiwei Ai, *Ai Weiwei: Spatial Matters- Art Architecture and Activism*, ed. Anthony Pins and An Xiao Mina (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 23.

¹⁶ Smith, Obrist, Fibicher and Ai, *Ai Weiwei*, 62.

as having an audible component—in this case, the sound of the ceramic object hitting the ground and breaking into many fragments. But Ai chose as his medium a series of (inherently silent) photographs, the absence of sound suggesting the lack of freedom of expression in China.

Ai is very familiar with the silence within Chinese society. Neither the government nor the people talk about the Cultural Revolution openly, and they don't talk about the Tiananmen Square massacre at all. The authorities censored all of the documents about the Tiananmen protests; they are not in historical textbooks, nor have they been the subject of a presentation in any form, including literature, movies, and drama. Ai says if he'd ever had any hope for Communist China before, it would have been gone completely after what happened at Tiananmen Square. *Study of Perspective—Tiananmen Square* (Fig. 8) was one of his rebellious pieces of art aimed at the Communist government. He photographed himself sticking his middle finger up at Tiananmen Square, a gesture commonly read as “Fuck You.” The photograph is in black and white, and the camera is focused on his hand in front of hazy, blurry Tiananmen Square. We can see that he was standing on the corner of a block some distance away from Tiananmen Square, rather than close by. Because Tiananmen Square serves as a political symbol of China, there were many protests that happened there in the past, and it has become the most sensitive location in reference to the Communist party. The word “Tiananmen,” translated to English, means “Gate of Heavenly Peace.” It is a great signifier of authoritative power in Chinese history. Tiananmen Square was a gate separating the outside world from the Forbidden City, which used to be the imperial palace of the emperor and his royal families. In 1949, Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China from atop Tiananmen Square, and his large portrait is hanging in the top middle of the Tiananmen Square wall. Tiananmen Square also contains many important sites of Chinese history, such as the Monument

to the People's Heroes, the Great Hall of the People, and the National Museum of China. Today, there are special police stationed every one hundred meters, surveilling all the activities and people in the square. In addition, the Tiananmen Square massacre was termed differently in China ("The June 4th Event"); the decision to leave out the location name was a conscious one—the authorities don't want any negative associations with their political symbol. Ai's reaction to trauma is the most active one; he furiously critiques the two incidents by replaying the memories. As an activist and artist, Ai strongly scorns the power that location can hold over people—for example, he posted the following on Twitter: "Not an inch of the land belongs to you, but every inch could easily imprison you."¹⁷ As Pollock says, an artist who carries the burden of a traumatic past either travels away from it or walks toward it. Ai's work brings awareness of the trauma in history and culture to the surface in the most direct way. He not only shows the encounter with the memory, but also gives a commentary condemning the traumatic event.

Testimony of Trauma

These three Chinese contemporary artists were born around the same time, and they all grew up with the same traumas and struggles that were left by the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre. However, their responses to sociopolitical issues are interestingly different. Liu is an important figure in the "New Generation" painting movement; his works are not political or ideological, but more significant in terms of their display of technical skill and ability to evoke aesthetic appreciation. However, the recognizable lostness and emptiness of his painted figures reveals how his generation wondered about their future after the trauma. On the other hand, Yue set himself on the middle ground between conservative China and the democratic West; he is a participant in the social context of his work. Even Yue's paintings do

¹⁷ Ai Weiwei, Twitter post, May 21, 2010 (9:10 a.m.).

not attack the problems very hard; his literary and symbolic content are readable as a disagreement with a major event. For example, the feverish laughing face that appears in his many works can immediately be associated with the crazy devotion of the Red Guards. Ai's work is aimed at the sensitive Communist memory. The emptiness within these art works is not referring to their lack of social participation, but their traumatized experience: the intensively hidden emotion, the loss of identity, the loss of statement. These experiences build up a silence effect that runs through all three art works: the juxtaposition of motionless and depression in *Midsummer* (Fig. 1), the coexisting of the fullness and emptiness in *Garbage Hill* (Fig. 2), and the muteness of a dropping action in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Fig. 7).

The chosen media of the three artists' styles evolved gradually. "New Generation" painting is the most conservative in terms of both the use of materials and the subject matter. "New Generation" painters insisted on more conventional forms such as oil painting, sculpture, and print. They focused most on technical refinement and realism, which led them away from the 85 New Wave movement, and gained much more influence and fame since they were not publicly or politically engaged.¹⁸ Their work often disdained using literary or symbolic content, instead relying more on their own personal experiences and observations. Many of the artists regularly taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA).

The Cynical Realism uses painting-based work, but it contains more symbolic subjects to evoke the viewer's uncomfortable feelings. The preference for painting from life as a traditional art form is the result of the circumstances of artistic training and apprenticeship in China. Liu and Yue both completed their education at CAFA in the 1980s; by then, positive images of

¹⁸ An avant-garde movement in China that took place between 1985 and 1989, mainly in response to the predominant Socialist Realism style. This movement developed a provocative and conceptual new style; the works often involved multimedia presentations; video; and performance, installation, and experimental art. It reached its peak in 1989 and ended the same year due to oppression and harassment from the authorities.

peasants and workers were the only permissible subject matter. On the other hand, Ai spent thirteen years in the United States; he was influenced by artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. He works mainly in the Western forms of art, such as performance photography. Different mediums have different accessibilities for their artistic expression. Chinese art institution has a cultural preference over the realistic and narrative quality of art, rather than the abstractive and conceptional. In this case, a painting-based art has less space to be provocative or violence as Ai's performance photography.

The Commodification of Trauma in the West

Liu's work has helped him to assume an important role in China's art scene, but he is barely known outside of the country. Yue is the hottest-selling artist globally; his *Garbage Hill* was sold by Sotheby's for a hammer price of 1,552,197 USD. Ai is the most famous Chinese artist worldwide—though not the most valued one in China—he was named the “most powerful artist” by *ArtReview* in 2011, and today takes the 13th position on the list of one hundred. How can the work of these three artists have been received so differently between East and West? In terms of their traumatic subject matter, has it been commoditized more in the Western art market than in China? I will address this question using comparative analysis: Christianity vs Buddhism/Confucianism, individualism vs collectivism, democracy vs socialism. Throughout the history of Western art, images of physical and psychological trauma have always played an important role. Starting with the missionary paintings of biblical stories, artists were presenting images of the crucifixion of Jesus, and of his death and resurrection. The famous painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* by Caravaggio (Fig. 9) shows Jesus's wound directly to the viewer. Thomas was one of the twelve Apostles; he was doubting Jesus's resurrection, saying in John 20:25: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put

my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”¹⁹ The painting shows the exact moment when Jesus comes to Thomas and lets him touch him and put his finger inside the wound. The Chinese art market rejects trauma, but the Western market embraces it in extremes, along with manic, controversial, and nonconformist images. The public presence of trauma is not welcome in Chinese tradition; it goes against the concept of harmony in Chinese philosophy. Therefore, Ai’s work got more recognition in the West by virtue of his violent response to the memories.

Besides the fact that the West is used to the visual representation of trauma, is there a reason that the political stance of Ai’s work makes it get the most attention? It is not unheard of that the West expects certain wounded images from the artists from China. Art historian Margo Machida, who focuses on Asian American Studies, gives a detailed examination of Edward Said’s

Orientalism theory:

Orientalism has become so internalized and corrosive that the West has come to take its superiority for granted. Not only does a discursive formation like Orientalism allow many Westerners to feel unquestioningly that their cultures, policies, ethics, and aesthetics are absolutely different and inherently superior to those of the Other, but by dehumanizing the Orient as the antitype of the West—as a zone of barbarism, irrationality, and cultural inferiority—it ensures that non-Western ... aggression against them far less objectionable.²⁰

Machida reads Orientalism today as how West is normalizing of its superiority position by othering the rest of the world. I argue that in the case of Chinese contemporary art reception, there are certain expectation and applause for the theme of anti-communism. In other words, West set up the democratic and liberal standard, they naturally believe their system is the right one, and others are not, which should be criticized and looked after. This ancient, long-standing antagonistic position between East and West makes the West eager for the disadvantageous

¹⁹ John 20:24-29, Jesus Appears to Thomas, *Holy Bible: New International Version*, Zondervan Publishing, 1973.

²⁰ Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary (Objects/Histories)* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 58.

representation of Communist China. Therefore, artists like Ai, whose work carries the most obvious traces of trauma—and who adapted to the Western ideology—are more likely to be acknowledged in the West.

Chinese Contemporary art has a unique style, which is seen as sometimes being extremely violent in the ways of representation. People cannot appreciate it if they don't realize the cultural trauma behind it. Quite recently, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum held an exhibition, "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World." They were aiming to introduce more Chinese artists to the West, and to show how those artists play a significant role as social critics as their society changes dramatically. But once the show opened, the museum received thousands of phone calls from animal rights activists protesting the use of animals in the works, calling it animal abuse, so they removed three works from the exhibition: *A Case Study of Transference*, created by Xu Bing in 1994, which is a video of two pigs mating in front of audiences; *Dogs that Cannot Touch Each Other* by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, which is a video recording of a live performance from 2003 of two dogs trying to fight with each other while being held back by leashes; and the signature piece of the show, *Theatre of the World*, created by Huang Yong Ping in 1993 (Fig. 10), an enclosure containing hundreds of insects and reptiles eating each other. The museum stated that their actions came "out of concern for the safety of its staff, visitors and participating artists."²¹ These three works did address the subject of trauma, but not in the way the Western market was expecting. There is no clear condemnation of Communist China, but instead a critique of power, control, and conflict. What's more, it is a discussion of what human efforts are capable of with international audiences. They not only challenged the stereotypical artistic assumptions about China, but also tested the limits on the subject of animal protection in the United States. The

²¹ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "Statement Regarding Works in *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*," September 25, 2017.

commodification of trauma has its limits, and those are dependent upon who is in the superior position—who gets to set up the rules of what can be shown and what cannot.

The Role of Artist with Traumatized Memory

What is the role of artists when they are confronting trauma? Whether consciously acknowledged or not, trauma has played an important role in Chinese contemporary art. Liu Xiaodong chooses to be silent about it, but silence itself is a significant aftereffect of trauma; Yue Minjun uses symbols from traumatizing memories to recreate the scene; and Ai Weiwei fights back against trauma as his radical reaction. Artists might be just depicting what is happening, or they might be engaging as an active way of creating change. But regardless, they are all creating testimonials about history—avoidance, mocking, and fighting are real responses of people who struggle with traumatic incidents. Since Chinese culture doesn't have the same history and aesthetics as Western art in terms of the representation of trauma, contemporary Chinese artists have their own interpretations of the metaphorical images of trauma; they are quite familiar with the interactions between the past and the present. Emptiness, cynicism, and anger are different embodiments used in the representation of trauma.

Figures



Figure 1. Liu Xiaodong, *Midsummer*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 130.58 × 99.4 cm



Figure 2. Yue Minjun, *Garbage Hill*, 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 198.9 x 278.5 cm



Figure 3. Mi Youren, *Cloudy Mountains*, Southern Song dynasty, 1127-1279, Ink on paper, 27.6 x 57 cm



Figure 4. Unknown photographer, Red Guards



Figure 5. The laughing Buddha



Figure 6. Unknown artist, Cultural Revolution poster



Figure 7. Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, Gelatin silver prints, each print is 136 x 109 cm



Figure 8. Ai Weiwei, *Study Perspective-Tiananmen Square*, 1998, Gelatin silver print, 38.9 x 59 cm



Figure 9. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1601–02, Oil on canvas, 99 x 125 cm

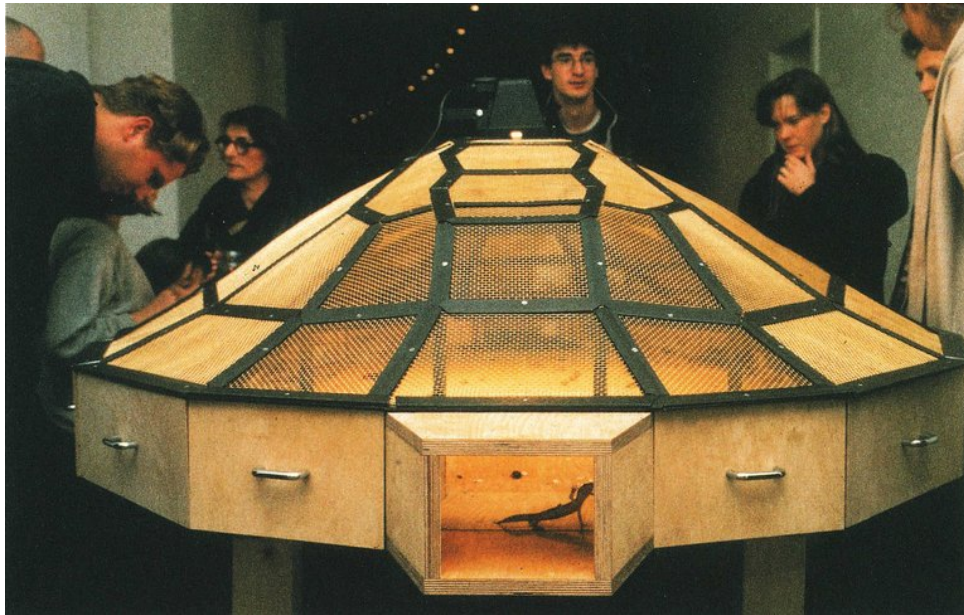


Figure 10. Huang Yong Ping, *Theater of the World*, 1993, Wood and metal structure with warming lamps, electric cable, insects (spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, centipedes), lizards, toads, and snakes, 150 x 270 x 160cm

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