

From Curating to Cedong:

Long March: A Walking Visual Display
and the Emergence of Contemporary
Chinese Curating

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Abstract

Long March: A Walking Visual Display (abbreviated as *Long March*) was an internationally renowned large-scale curatorial project curated by Lu Jie and executive curator Qiu Zhijie in China in 2002. It involved over 150 artists in an intense journey of temporary exhibitions and events along the historical and revolutionary Long March route in China. Based on four years of archival research and nearly thirty interviews with key participants, especially with Lu Jie, this thesis, as the first significant research on *Long March*, restores the international trajectory of the project in the wake of globalisation in the Chinese art ecology. The thesis details how the project grew out of Chinese artists' and critics' concern over the dependence of contemporary Chinese art on Western art and its art system in the 1990s. Influenced by the surging experimental curating practices in the West and in China, the two curators creatively appropriated work models of Socialist China — revolution propaganda and mass mobilisation — in their curatorial practice. In so doing, they attempted to open up alternative spaces and invent new approaches to art in a Chinese context. This thesis argues *Long March* reinvented Western curating for the Chinese context. Having greatly expanded the discourse and practice of curating, *Long March* became a watershed moment in the emergence of independent curators and curating in mainland China.

To shed light on the transcultural factors shaping the project, this thesis embodies a chronological order in three sections: 1) Lu's early trajectory in mainland China, Hong Kong and abroad as a young artist, editor, and art dealer (1964–1998); 2) the birth of the project's curatorial proposal at Goldsmiths, London, and its development in New York (1998–2001); 3) the project's mobilisation and realisation in China (2002). Sourcing from first-hand documentation, internet archives, video footage and interviews, the research restores the complex dynamic of the project's realisation, especially its unprecedented open nature of organising, improvisational display of artworks by curators as agents of artists, and clashes caused by different understandings of exhibition-making. The gap between the original curatorial concept and the on-site execution led to the project's halt halfway, demonstrating the tension in curating between an individual's creative approach and the realities of the murky and muddy process of collaboration.

Re-examining *Long March* in relation to contemporary Chinese art, this thesis considers how the project has opened new spaces and reactivated overlooked local approaches for contemporary art in China. Curating as an unsolidified discipline also made it possible for

Long March and Lu Jie to demonstrate a heterogeneous mode of artmaking and understanding of art. This thesis argues that the approaches and intentions found in *Long March* differed fundamentally from typical approaches to curating and participatory art practices of the West, with its aim to mobilise participants and instigate practitioners for self-reflection instead of displaying artworks as objects. I conclude by arguing that the work of *Long March* and similar curatorial projects in China should be understood as *cedong*, which initially means to devise plans, mobilise the public and instigate people for political movements. Free from the burden of art history and the long tradition of museums, *Cedong* can liberate curating and inspire more self-instigated actions reacting to urgency.

Key words: curating, Long March, Lu Jie, contemporary Chinese art, *cedong*



Fig. 1 Screenshot of website longmarchspace.com (6 March 2005). Courtesy of Long March Project, Long March Space and Internet Archive.



Fig. 2 Qiu Zhijie (the man with glasses on the left) and Lu Jie (the man with glasses on the right) were exhibiting Song Dong's photographic work Changing Directions-Scenery Series in a bazaar at Site 3 Longsheng, on 15 July 2002. Courtesy of Long March Project.

The Trajectory of Long March: A Walking Visual Display

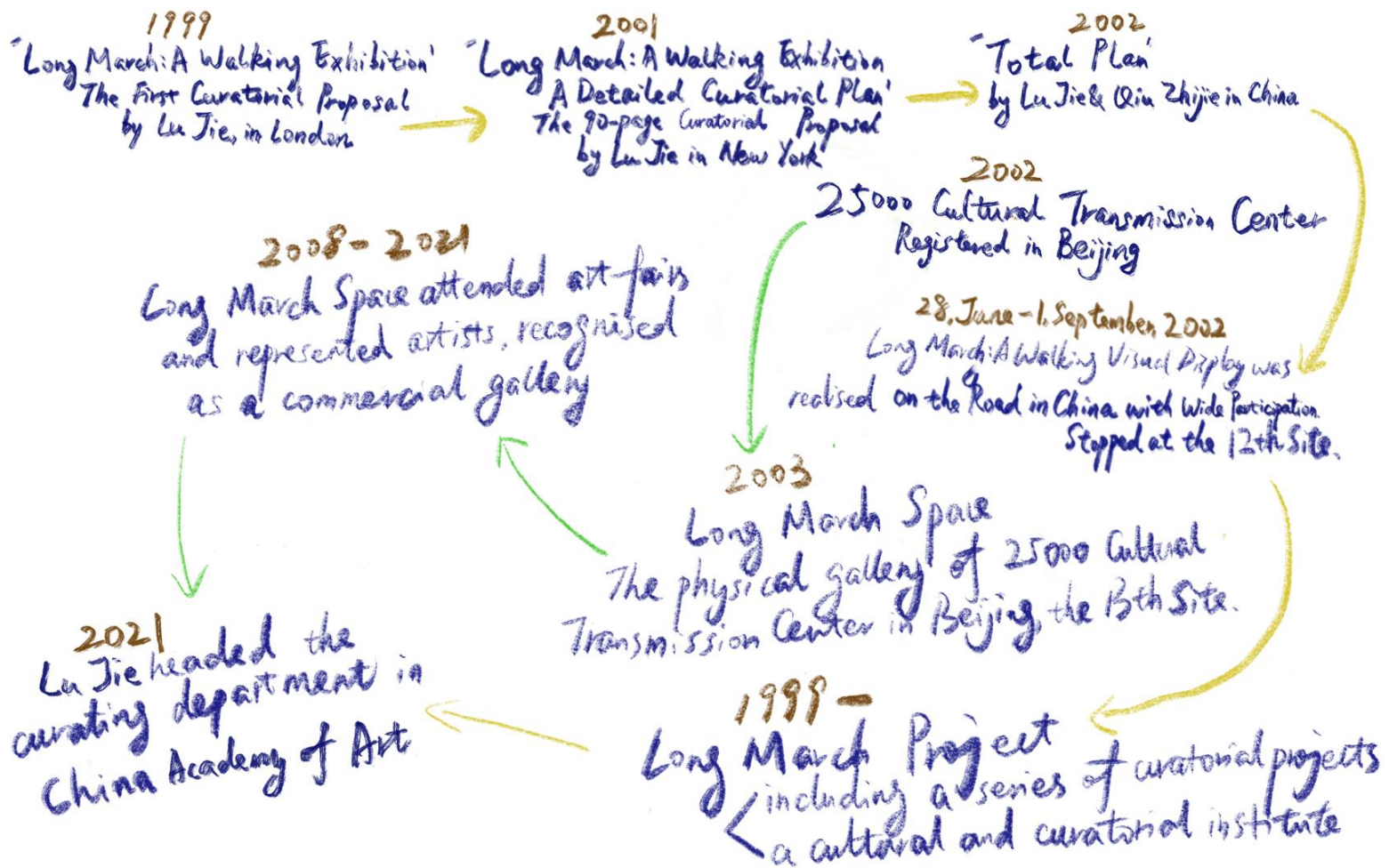


Fig. 3 The trajectory of Long March: A Walking Visual Display, drawn by the author.

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