

LOST IN ECSTASY: GLIMPING CHINA'S "INSTITU- TIONAL CRITIQUE" THROUGH ITS EXHIBITION PRACTICE

On the afternoon of March 11, 2001, Beijing Film Academy's recording studio held an event to which late arrivals were denied entry. In a space some hundred square meters large, living, human heads and sausages were both carried onto a table, people squeezed ketchup onto a trampoline, a two-headed, leopard-print-wearing monster stood on a chair, a woman in a body suit danced seductively; viewers moved among—or were overpowered by—the noise and bustle. This was "Post-sense Sensibility: Spree," and as Qiu Zhijie says in *Premonitions of the Post-Exhibition Era*, it could only be called "an event," not an "exhibition": "the concept of the 'exhibition' was exactly what we opposed."¹

1. Qiu Zhijie, *Premonitions of the Post-Exhibition Era*, "Post-sense Sensibility: Spree", 2001. Self-publishing, unpaginated copy. Article also published on artlinkart.com, (<http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/article/overview/18agzBt>).

Most students and practitioners of art born in the 1990s will hardly be familiar with "Post-sense Sensibility": occasionally mentioned as part of the formative experiences of certain industry potentates, it is a historical period rarely brought up when people discuss pressing, contemporary art world issues. At the beginning of the 2000s, the industry "infrastructure"—so urgently debated today—was nowhere to be seen in China, to say nothing of Chinese museums. The "exhibitions" that "Post-sense Sensibility" opposed were seen as rooted in "capitalism" and "colonialism": Qiu Zhijie initially planned to debut "Spree" in the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, satirizing the peripheral, underground exhibitions that began cropping up after the concept of "the international" touched down in China. The revelers referred to in the title tried consciously to abandon exhibitions, because "by simply selecting the exhibition as form, you were working within the system."² Here, the word "exhibition" convenes the concepts of domestic and international, politics

2. Qiu Zhijie, *Premonitions of the Post-Exhibition Era*, "Post-sense Sensibility: Spree", 2001. Self-publishing, unpaginated copy. Article also published on artlinkart.com, (<http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/article/overview/18agzBt>).

and art; they are mistaken for each other or muddled together, and all become objects of ridicule. At the time, Qiu's curatorial text contained many claims that were exaggerated for the sake of his argument; but in



2017, a retrospective show, “Post-sense Sensibility: Trepidation and Will” premiered in Ming Contemporary Art Museum, by which time not only contemporary art institutions of different scale, but Ming Contemporary, formerly a paper factory, now dedicated to live art such as performance and theater, had appeared one after the other on the scene. I do not mean to ridicule the process by which “Post-sense Sensibility” was remembered and inscribed into history, only to point out: **when “Post-sense Sensibility: Trepidation and Will” directed its battle cry at institutions, there were no real institutions to listen, but now that Ming Contemporary was looking back on “Post-sense Sensibility,” placing this years-long artistic event in the framework of “performance art,” it eschewed mentioning the aspect of self-organization and institutional critique contained within the movement.**

“Post-sense Sensibility: Spree” uses a technique similar to that of immersive theater to allow viewers and artists alike to enter a state of revelry; it seems to oppose performance to exhibition, but if we treat Qiu’s adversarial position in the debate as a kind of constructive question-posing, in order to ask whether these sorts of “events” might count as exhibitions, and what sort of institutions they can happen in, might we not then use the occasion to reimagine the concepts of



“exhibition” and “institution,” as well as their relation? What kind of institution and what kind of matrix (or in Qiu’s words, what kind of “system”) can produce an event/exhibition such as “Post-sense Sensibility: Spree”? Can Ming Contemporary? What kinds of relationships between artists, exhibitions, art workers and viewers, and what sorts of “revelry” can live art engender? To proceed from “Post-sense Sensibility: Spree” into imagining an institution is much like Biljana Ciric’s question in “Proposals to Surrender” (Ming Contemporary, 2016): “how does something timely become an institution? In other words, how does an institution itself engage in performance?”³ “Proposals to Surrender” reflected on the operational logic of an exhibition; many of its artworks were also performances. Yet since 1960, many Western artists have

3. Biljana Ciric, “Some Reflections on Performativity and the Institutional Context”, *Proposals to Surrender* (Ming Contemporary Art Museum, 2020), p. 7-21.

often used performance to foreground the unspoken rules and hidden powers in the art system. In *Museum Highlights* (1989), a grey skirt-suited Andrea Fraser impersonates a volunteer tour guide at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, using an exaggerated, agitated voice, to praise the contents of the museum to viewers, represented by the camera, endowing equipment such as exit signs and water faucets, with meanings that diverge wildly from their intended functions. The artist uses this backhanded praise to satirize the museum's self-construction as a center for educating the public into a proper understanding of art. This kind of institutional critique is directed not only at the museum itself, but also curatorial practices, markets, the media, and biennials—even the operating logic of the entire art system. “Post-sense Sensibility: Spree” might also be understood in this wider context. In the same vein, other institutions and curators have tried adopting new working methods, such as turning their spaces into “laboratories” or allowing actual society to permeate the boundaries of the white cube.⁴

4. In Hans Ulrich Obrist's interview with Walter Hopps and Pontus Hultén, they mentioned that, from 1960s, some European museums and cultural palaces tended to see themselves as a laboratory or a hybrid of laboratories and other spaces. For example, “In terms of flexibility, in the 1960s and, above all, the 1970s, the European Kunsthalle was defined as something of a laboratory, where things could be tested [...]” Hans Ulrich Obrist, ‘Walter Hopps’, *A Brief History of Curating*, Documents Series (JRP / Ringier, 2008), p. 10-40.

In “Proposals to Surrender,” Ciric also experiments with the current exhibition system, not only allowing artwork to be shown in Ming Contemporary, but allowing Ming Contemporary to become part of the artwork. In the exhibition, artistic duo Annie Vigier & Franck Apertet (Les Gens d’Uterpan) presented an artwork, *Stimulation*, which invited participants to sign a “moral agreement,” or contract in triplicate, with the exhibition’s sponsors. By signing, participants agreed “to give up my individual autonomy during *Stimulation*,” to “be photographed and filmed during *Stimulation*, and give up, without compensation, the exclusive rights to their use...”, and to “sign this agreement as one of *Stimulation*’s collaborative authors, and give the artists the exclusive rights to its use.”⁵

5. Annie Vigier & Franck Apertet (Les Gens d’Uterpan), *Proposals to Surrender* (Ming Contemporary Art Museum, 2020), p. 30.

The artists thus reminded the more than 1800 viewers who signed the agreement that their participation “activated” *Stimulation*, that they were co-authors of it, alongside the artists, and thus enjoyed joint

ownership of it; but at the same time, they had ceded their individual rights, allowing the artists the exclusive rights to own and use it. In truth, the conditions that the terms of their contract allegorized obtain in most exhibitions. Here, just as Ciric points out, the artists merely use the act of contract-signing to create a certain situation and occasion; they attempt to “redefine certain parameters,” to blur the contours of words like “performance,” “art,” “visitor,” “artwork,” and “artist.”

The words “performance,” “institution,” and “critique” have another genealogy in China: in its modern political mobilizations, performance has always been linked to critique. Denise Y. Ho’s monograph, *Curating Revolution*, argues that in Shanghai’s class education exhibitions and the Panguaxiang community’s exhibitions, tour guides’ sharing of their personal thoughts (such as “remembering past sorrows and savoring present joys” and “self-criticism”) formed an important part of the total experience; viewers also had to demonstrate their [class] consciousness, criticize the Ancien Regime, and undergo a revolutionary awakening. These “proletarian” exhibitions, in which tour guides’ and viewers’ narratives mingled together, formed an exhibition tradition—and a method of critique—that differed from Western ones; this might serve as another point of reference for contemporary Chinese museums engaged in self-reform. Similarly, the state of Chinese museums, such as Ming Contemporary, which must rely on patronage from real estate corporations, makes direct comparison with public museums and private foundations in the West impossible; in China, “critiquing institutions” and “challenging existing exhibition spaces and exhibition protocols” must be a more realistic form of analysis and praxis.

“How can we successfully fuck up?” This is the question that “Post-sense Sensibility: Spree” insolently asks. In his exhibition, “Re-Sculpt,” at Ming Contemporary, Thomas Hirschhorn takes a different approach to the question, quoting Gramsci’s famous words, “destruction is difficult, indeed, it is as difficult as creation.” Hirschhorn’s exhibition was mounted during the Shanghai Biennale; for three days before the show opened, he held an “open house,” during which visitors could see the installation process. I and other curators from Berlin, Beijing, London, Hamburg and Istanbul all scurried into a Ming Contemporary that had



Thomas Hirschhorn: Re-Sculpt installation view at McaM, 2018

been “vandalized” by Hirschhorn and the museum staff and volunteers. We gathered at the mouth of a waterfall formed by yellow tape; below our feet were white shreds of cut-apart Styrofoam blocks, cardboard, painted gray—the pile crowded to the ceiling in some parts, crowding the once-towering exhibition space. This was the “ruin,” or upside-down Potemkin Village, that Hirschhorn had conjured.

“Potemkin Village” refers to the Tsarist minister, Grigory Potemkin, who, in preparation for Catherine the Great’s visit, built a fake village around the Crimean peninsula in order to conceal local realities. The goal of this Potemkin Village was to present a vision of present conditions that were better than reality; the same is true today. To speak precisely, my artworks and their “ruin form” are a kind of “upside-down Potemkin village.” Namely, these artworks present the worst, not the best, situation. The point of an “upside-down Potemkin Village” is to allow those hidden relationships, disguised connections, and gatherings the eye can’t see to reveal themselves.⁶

6. Thomas Hirschhorn: Re-Sculpt exhibition booklet, (Ming Contemporary Art Museum, 2018), p. 13.

Hirschhorn is against the model of museum as facilitator of cultural consumption. He hoped to use this free “exhibition” to transform the museum into the “worst possible” space of resistance, the furthest removed from reality. In his pursuit of an ideal “real,” he was compelled to use “fake,” temporary, broken materials: cardboard, tape, paint, Styrofoam, sheets of paper and blocks of wood. At the time, Ming Contemporary truly did become ruins and audiences, who found themselves as in the wake of a recently departed hurricane, touching materials, sitting haphazardly, scribbling on surfaces, began to explore independently in the absence of a concrete program or designated path. But because they are affordable, easily obtained, and easily re-sculpted, these “fake” materials are used in abundance in the real space outside the museum. To people who live in “perpetual temporariness,” plastic and Styrofoam are much more ready-to-hand than concrete and bricks—these are the textures that abound in their lives.

By introducing these “fake” materials into the museum, Hirschhorn revealed the truth of the soil on which the museum was built—**hardly immaculate, it was like reality itself, with all its fanfare and mobilization, its getting on and eking by, its dirtiness, wisdom, revelry and destruction. Now, rather than saying we ought to critique institutions, we might instead muster the courage to admit that institutions here are always already broken; their structures are not as clear and stable as a factory that is passed down generationally, and those who are a part of them are filled with the desire to destroy and create.** Though “institution” is a self-identical term, the shapes and surroundings of most institutions are utterly different from one another, and in flux. To critique institutions and ourselves does not mean reproducing a certain logic, but rather to allow the present reality to reveal more openings, allow people to see how art is made, and show with greater fidelity the details of its production. Hirschhorn encourages us to free our desires, to fearlessly and relentlessly interrogate and negotiate, to work together in real conditions. Sustained destruction will accumulate into new geologies, grow into new structures; amidst this continuous labor, perhaps we will find a brief, temporary respite, one in which to lose ourselves to ecstasy.