

## Material, Global, and Storied

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I am honored to have had *A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China* been given such thoughtful and probing reviews by Dianna Su and Wenxuan Shi. Since it was written in light of art that has been seen in the last decades in the United State and England, it has been invaluable for me to see how the book is received by Chinese critics and to see what should be looked at more closely. In this short piece I can only begin to explore three issues. The first is that of the materials that make up the works of art. They are at the same time the subject of the work, either because of what they are in themselves or what they refer to. The artist chose them because of what resonates in them. This resounding can be glossed either through the first principle of art of Hsieth Ho or through what the Welsh poet Gerard Manly Hopkins says in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1855) that each mortal thing does.

The second issue is that of the relation between the local and the global in the new Chinese art. While all of the works have been made by Chinese artists, their Chinese-ness goes beyond this in various ways, among which are, for example, the concrete particularity of the contents of Song Dong's mother's home during the Cultural Revolution and being a member of a particular kind as are the Ming Dynasty chairs used by Ai Weiwei. Some works have a connection to the artist's life. Ai Weiwei has been a refugee in Berlin since 2015 when China returned his passport after four years. The rubber used in the 197 foot raft carrying 300 refugees, *The Law of the Journey* (2017), was manufactured in the Chinese factory that manufactures the rubber used for the boats refugees use to cross the Mediterranean. Xu Bing was in New York when the Twin Towers were destroyed on 9/11. He collected some dust that was there and used it to make *Where Doe the Dust Itself Collect* (2004), which is a line from a Zen poem. These expressions of Chinese-ness raise the question of how and why these works, replete as they are with references to China and things Chinese, can have the vital global presence they do have.

The third issue is that of language, which has two roles in the new art. One is

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the attention paid to its material side, the marks and sounds used in writing and speaking, respectively. Wittgenstein argued persuasively that there can be no private language, and language must be seen in writing or heard to be public. The second role language has in the new art is to articulate the significance of the materials. The description is a story whose end is the appearance of the material in the work. There is a *prima facie* conflict between the necessity of language to say why the art's material is what it is and the claim that material has come to the fore in the new art precisely because it lies below the level of language. The clash between the two is more apparent than real, but no matter the challenge, *The Allure of Matter*—the title of a 2020 exhibition in the United States curated by Wu Hung—in its independence of identity-conferring language persists for contemporary Chinese artists. Materials and material things are what they are, a common denominator.

## 1 Materials

Sometimes they are utterly particular like the bronze shards from Tibetan statues of Buddha shattered during the Cultural Revolution and used by Zhang Huan to make statues of parts of Buddha's body, a train damaged in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the names of children killed in the earthquake, a series of photographs of menstrual blood on Chen Lingyang's body in her *Twelve Flower Months* (1999-2000). In other works, the materials are any items from a particular class, like ash from a Buddhist temple in Shanghai. In still other works, the material is of a kind that refers to something in the artist's past, as the white cotton thread Lin Tianmiao uses in her photographs and sculptures refers to the thread salvaged from worn clothing that she had to rewind into balls when she was a child, or the art made from tobacco and its related products by Xu Bing that refers to his father's death from lung cancer. His father's medical records are included in exhibitions of the art. The white cotton thread, and the tobacco bring the artists' pasts into the present.

There are many examples of the use of random members of a particular kind in works of art that do not refer to the past of China or its artists. Two examples are the live insects and small creatures that prey on them in Huang Yong Ping's *Theater of the World* (1993) and Wang Guangyi's *Things in Themselves* (2000), which are 8000 bags of unhusked rice stacked up from floor to ceiling against the walls of a room. They are both about food. The one animal, the insects, the other, plant, the rice that feeds the Chinese people. On display in the *Theater of the World* is the never-ending activity of eating and being eaten, and *Things in Themselves* without

which, Kant avers, there would be no world, are sacks of food, without which there would be no life. Omnipresent and necessary for the existence and survival of the individual, the species, and a social world are, respectively, food, women's bodies, and speech and writing. And each of these figures in the new art from China.

These materials are not of interest for their materiality, but for their histories as well as for their roles in the on-going of the natural and social worlds and for what about them led artists to make them subjects of art. It is the spirit of life or vital movement that resonates, in them in the words of the 6th century critic Hsieth Ho. In the words of the Welsh poet Gerard Manley Hopkin, it is that each mortal thing "finds tongue to fling out broad its name." In saying what it is, each thing says that it is. The existence of the materials and material objects in the new art is of greater moment than are their names in the sense of definite descriptions that uniquely identify them. The definite description of the train in Zhang Huan's *Hope Tunnel* (2000) is "a train destroyed in the Sichuan earthquake that Zhang had his team bring from Sichuan to his studio in Shanghai where it was made ready to exhibit." In presenting the train to the world as a work of art, Zhang Huan "flings out broad its name." The name referred to is, however, not a descriptions, but an index. Each thing says "I am this." The distinction between a description and an index will be seen to be important later on.

The sheer presence of the damaged train is a stark witness to the history of the earthquake. For an artist to choose a material out of which to make art, she has to be open to it, to its presence, which for Hopkins is its existence, while for Hsieth Ho it is its *qi*, the energy that pulses through all there is. Einstein quantified the relation between an object's mass and energy, but we do not need physics to shore up our intuitive grasp of the connection between the existence and energy of the items that comprise, the material world. On Hopkin's account, things cry out their names and our job is but to listen. On Hsieth Ho's, the artist who would capture the presence of his subject must quiet his mind, freeing it from associations he might have with the subject, thereby opening himself to the present-ness of the subject. It is to let the subject take over. So too can the viewer be taken over by what is exhibited. The choice of media and appropriate subjects for art was limited for the classical Chinese artist as it is not for the contemporary artist, who is as apt to make a sculpture or installation or performance art as a painting.

A significant difference between the two is that the contemporary artist is using the art to say or do something, while her classical Chinese counterpart used it to celebrate the **presense** and the beauty of the rivers and mountains that structure China's world. History has moved so fast for the contemporary Chinese artist that reflection on rivers and mountains, water and stone, gives way to the need to deal with the introduction of Western capitalism into Mao's socialism, where the virtue

of competition is at odds with that of cooperation. The equivalent of the classical artist's opening himself to nature is the contemporary's opening himself to what lies below the disparate languages of capitalism and socialism, namely, matter and material things. The artist's job is to look through the changes that capitalism has wrought in a communist world to see the real and the raw, untouched as they are by the -isms. This, however, is not all they do. They direct their attention to what others, thanks to the business of their lives, do not do, language's marks and its sounds, its material side. This will be discussed later, but, first, a brief look at what it means to be global. Perhaps it is little more than to be known and appreciated all over the world. Perhaps this is tied to the electronic revolution and social media that have made the world smaller and have come to characterize the contemporary. The British philosopher Peter Osborne argues in his aptly titled book, *Anywhere or Not at All* (2013) that the contemporary and the global are co-extensive.

## 2 Global

The least that an object's being local can mean is that was made in a certain locale. This does not mean, however that a dress designed by an American for an American market and made in China is Chinese or is local to China. Neither is it global. It is an instance of the globalization of manufacture. The journalist Thomas Friedman pointed out that a Lexus, like a dress, can come from anywhere whereas a lemon tree, unless raised in a hot house, cannot. Something beyond its being made in China is needed for something to be identified as Chinese. The material used, like silk or gunpowder, could place a work in China, as would a work's material coming from an event in China's history. These relations mark it as Chinese, but it can still be global, albeit not in the narrow sense that it bears no trace of its origin. A wider sense of global is being able to be understood and appreciated across the globe, as the Chinese art of the last four decades has been.

This is because the art is material and storied. It is trivially true that all visual art is material. Marks are made on a surface with something, and some material is shaped into a sculpture. Things are needed for installation art and people for performance art. It is through their materials that the new Chinese artworks express an attitude towards their subject, which are what the work is about. The material either is or is essentially connected to what this is. The material of *Things in Themselves* is food, necessary for the existence of life and what cannot get much further below the networks of language. The work says that food is a thing in and of itself. No more need be said. Zhang Huan's larger than life statues of Buddha's

body are about the impossibility of destroying Buddhism. They refer not just to the violence of the Cultural Revolution but also to the Buddhism that could not be practiced under Mao. Zhang's statues are more powerful than those shattered in Tibet, showing Buddha to persist and have power in the least part of his body the intentions of the Cultural Revolution notwithstanding.

The art made by Ai Weiwei using Ming Dynasty chairs and Zhang's statues are works of material history, which is itself storied. Material, independent of language as it is, is like a common denominator in arithmetic. All people live in a material world and are in a position to appreciate art whose subject is material or material things. The artworks whose subjects are their materials have an aesthetic dimension that brings visual pleasures. These, together with the viewer's recognition of the materials, are still not enough for her fully to engage with the work. More is needed, and the more is language in which is told the stories that are part of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese art.

Each of the materials in the art comes with its story, often displayed on a plaque on the wall of the art's exhibition. These stories have a global appeal because people throughout the world relish stories that have a beginning, middle, and end, each step related to the next either as cause or reason. Children's stories, myths, and folk tales are used to educate and inform, often by invoking emotion. It is easier to take stories to heart than it is to take arguments or abstractions. Cai Guo Qiang's *The Ninth Wave* (2014), named after an 1850 Russian painting of survivors of a shipwreck barely holding onto a mast for survival, showing human helplessness in the face of nature's forces. Cai has 99 fabricated tigers, pandas, camels, and apes clinging wearily to a worn ship sailing past the bund on the Huangpu River in Shanghai. High levels of smog in the area had led to 16,000 dead pigs being found floating down the Huangpu. Whereas the 1850 Russian painting depicted the effect of nature's forces, Cai's installation depicts those of human negligence and indifference.

Identification with the suffering of the animals on the boat can lead viewers to infer that this level of pollution is unacceptable. This work refers to the recent history of Shanghai and, through the story it tells, makes a plea for care of the environment. It is particular; it is about the 16,000 dead pigs found in the Huangpu River and can be understood by anyone, as can virtually all of the storied works made in post-Mao China. Neither they nor the emotions they elicit are limited to Chinese viewers.

### 3 Storied

We are left with the claims that the materials used in the new work are outside the networks of language and yet it is only by virtue of their stories can they function in the works whose subjects they are. The worry is that if something is outside language, it cannot be identified and so cannot figure in a story. This is not the case, however. The fact of the existence of the material world and all that it affords is not dependent on language. The presence, the present-ness, of any individual declares itself, in Gerard Manley Hopkins' words, in finding "tongue to fling out broad its name;/ Each thing does one thing and the same:/ Deals out that being indoors each one dwells:/ Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells ...". Little there is that does not belong to a kind, but Hopkins has it that the name of each thing is "myself." In its there-ness it does what each thing of its kind does, as "kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame." It is individuals that are and do what every member of its kind is and does and thereby "Deals out that being indoors each one dwells." No language is needed here. Yet it is needed to show why this dust, these bags of rice, this menstrual blood, a boat carrying 99 fabricated animals are the subjects of works of art.

There is a precedent for words being part of an art object. It is the poems that share the silk or paper surface of ink paintings in classical Chinese art. The stories that accompany the new art can fairly be considered part of the work. The second role of language in the new art, to highlight the material side of language, is nicely presaged in the calligraphy of the poems that appear in many classical paintings. Such works exemplify the three arts of calligraphy, painting, and poetry. Calligraphy is the first art of China, and ink painting grew out of it. The material dimensions of language, script and speech, can capture the rhythm and music of the world, as calligraphy does better than most other of the world's scripts. Xu Bing, whose mother was a librarian, spent a lot of time as a child among books he could not read, and in 1987 he began to make a book that could not be read, *Book from the Sky* (1987-1992). He hand-carved 4000 wooden blocks and said the activity was like meditating. Pages were printed and bound into books as they would have been printed and bound in the Song Dynasty. Connected pages hang from the ceiling, pages festoon the walls, and lie on the floor behind a row of bound books. Every stroke is *bona fide*, but they do not combine to make legitimate characters that convey meaning.

The movements of hand and wrist in carving or writing characters and in turning the strokes into paintings exemplify the *qi* that courses through everything and the "being indoors each thing dwells." So does the activity of making art whose subjects are material objects exemplify the *qi* and the being of each object whose

resonance the artist transfers to the work, saying only “I am this.” Then, with visual clues and artists’ statements, the viewer comes to grasp the artists’ intention, which is the story she is using the material to tell. The charge the new artists in China have given themselves is to invite the viewer to appreciate the material out of which the world has made itself and to criticize or make a plea. The materialism of the work of Chinese artists in the last four decades grounds us in the material world without which, so far as we can know, there would be nothing.