

A personal reflection on building a collection

THE ART ITSELF

Two Hundred Artists, Fifteen Years, One Argument

*The aesthetic genealogies, strategies, and key works
of DSLcollection's 1997–2012 arc in Chinese contemporary art.*

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350 works · 200 artists · 6 lineages · 1 closed historical argument

Why I Am Not a Historian, and Why That Matters

This document is not art history. I want to be clear about that from the first sentence, because the text that follows is dense with dates, names, and critical references, and it would be easy to mistake it for scholarship. It is not. It is the record of a question that Dominique and I have been asking ourselves for nearly thirty years: why did Chinese contemporary art, at a specific historical moment, make a claim on us that no other art did? And what did we build in response to that claim?

We are collectors, not curators. We did not set out to document a period or represent a field. We set out to understand what we were looking at. The collection that became DSLcollection – approximately 350 works by 200 artists, acquired between 1997 and 2012 – is the material record of that process of understanding. It is built from studio visits, from conversations, from early morning flights to Shanghai and long evenings in Beijing galleries, from arguments between Dominique and me about what we had seen and what it meant, from the slow accumulation of looking that is the only real training a collector has.

The historical argument you will find in these pages – the thesis that 1997 to 2012 constitutes a bounded, irreversible window in Chinese contemporary art, enabled by Deng Xiaoping’s economic opening, sustained by his Shanghai-faction successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and closed by Xi Jinping’s ascension in 2012 – was not the argument we began with. It is the argument we arrived at. Looking back at what we had built, we found that the collection’s shape was not accidental. It corresponded to a political dispensation we had lived through as collectors without fully articulating as historians. The analysis came after the act.

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What drew us in, in the beginning, was simpler than any thesis. It was the quality of seriousness. Chinese contemporary art in the late 1990s had a quality of formal and intellectual seriousness that felt earned rather than institutional – the seriousness of artists who had no safety net, who were working in conditions of radical uncertainty, who were making forms adequate to experiences that existing forms could not hold. Ding Yi’s X-marks were our first acquisition, in 1993 at the Venice Biennale, and they told us something we would spend the next fifteen years verifying: that an

artist could build an entire world from the most neutral possible mark, if the conviction behind the mark was absolute.

Our first studio visit in China was in Shanghai in 2005, facilitated by Lorenz Helbling of Shanhart Gallery. From that moment, the collecting became direct – not mediated by the secondary market, not filtered through the auction room, but built from the encounter between two collectors and the artists themselves. That directness is not a virtue we claim; it is simply how we understood what we were doing. You cannot build an argument from works you have not spent time with.

In 2012, we stopped acquiring. Not because Chinese contemporary art stopped being interesting, but because the argument was complete. The political window that had produced the art we were drawn to had closed. What came after was genuinely different – made by a different generation, under different conditions, with different formal tools. We recognised the difference and respected it by not extending the collection beyond its natural boundary.

What follows is our attempt to articulate, in one sustained text, what that fifteen-year argument contained. Our children Karen and Raphaël have grown up with this collection; the transmission of the argument they will carry forward is what makes this act of articulation necessary. This is written for them first, and then for anyone else who wants to understand why a family from France spent thirty years looking, in the most serious way they knew how,

at one of the most consequential artistic moments of the late twentieth century.

Sylvain Lévy Paris, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The Argument Before the Works

Every collection is an argument. Not every collector knows this. Many begin from enthusiasm, accumulate from opportunity, and end with a warehouse full of objects that have no relationship to one another except the fact of being owned. DSLcollection began differently: from a question. The question was not ‘what is Chinese contemporary art?’ but ‘why does this specific body of work, made in this specific place during this specific period, make a claim on us that we cannot dismiss?’ This document is the most sustained attempt we have made to answer that question.

The answer has two parts. The first is historical. The art produced by Chinese artists between 1997 and 2012 was enabled by a configuration of political, economic, and cultural conditions that was singular and unrepeatable: the creative latitude opened by Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, sustained by the Shanghai-faction governments of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and terminated by Xi Jinping’s installation of a fundamentally different cultural politics in 2012. The artists formed by the Cultural Revolution, the ’85 New Wave, and the shock of Tiananmen worked within this window with an intensity that the window’s uncertainty

made necessary. Art produced under constraint, when the constraint is generative rather than merely repressive, achieves a density that freer conditions do not always produce.

The second part is aesthetic. The density is in the works themselves — not as historical documents, not as political symptoms, but as objects that have formal autonomy sufficient to outlast the conditions that produced them. Ding Yi's X-marks do not require knowledge of Shanghai's abstract art revival to generate their optical argument. Jia Aili's vast post-apocalyptic canvases do not require knowledge of northeast China's industrial decline to communicate their emotional weight. Zhang Huan's ash paintings do not require knowledge of Beijing's Buddhist temples to demonstrate what it means to make a substance the embodiment of collective memory. The historical argument explains why these works exist. The aesthetic argument is why they matter.

This document moves through both arguments in five sections. The Formation examines what made these artists: the Cultural Revolution as negative inheritance, the '85 New Wave as collective idealism, 1989 as rupture. Six Artistic Lineages maps the aesthetic territories of the collection, from the old ghosts of historical reckoning to the young talents of a digitally native generation. The Recurring Strategies identifies the formal vocabulary that crosses lineages: displacement, material radicalism, the body as political territory, abstraction as freedom, irony as survival. Artists in Depth presents seven artists in extended focus, preceded by a first-person account of the night in 2017 when the Guggenheim

Museum brought this argument to the Western institutional stage — and the night's complexity. Finally, *What the Art Proves* closes with four propositions about what this body of work demonstrates, not about China, but about art itself.

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A note on what this document does not do. It does not offer a comprehensive survey of Chinese contemporary art. It does not position the collection against market valuations or auction records. It does not claim that DSLcollection's choices were the only defensible ones, or that the artists represented are the only significant artists of the period. What it does claim is that the collection constitutes a coherent argument — that its 350 works hang together intellectually and aesthetically in a way that illuminates the golden years of Chinese contemporary art and demonstrates what art can do when it is made under specific historical pressure by artists formed by a specific cultural catastrophe and released into a specific window of possibility.

That window is closed. The argument is complete. What remains is transmission.

I · THE FORMATION

What Made These Artists

The artists in DSLcollection were not made by the market that eventually discovered them. They were made by the Cultural Revolution, by its end, by the shock of Deng Xiaoping's opening, by the traumatic rupture of 1989, and by the specific creative pressures of living and working in a society undergoing one of the most compressed modernisations in human history. To look at a work by Zeng Fanzhi, or Huang Yong-Ping, or Jia Aili, without understanding this formation is to see only the surface of the object – the paint, the pixels, the installation hardware – and miss the historical argument compressed within it.

The Cultural Revolution as Negative Inheritance

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) functioned, for the artists who came after it, as both wound and raw material. For the generation born in the 1950s and early 1960s – the core of what became Chinese contemporary art – the Revolution was the defining experience of childhood and youth: the burning of books, the persecution of teachers, the destruction of cultural objects, the enforced collective performance of political loyalty. When Socialist Realism was the only permitted aesthetic and art functioned as an instrument of mass mobilisation, the suppression of individual

expression was total. When the suppression lifted, the release was volcanic.

This negative inheritance is visible throughout the collection. Gu Dexin's ritualistic handling of organic matter — pork pinched daily until desiccated, bananas left to rot on gallery floors — encodes the Revolution's violence against the body in a practice that appears ceremonial but carries the charge of desecration and survival simultaneously. Huang Yong-Ping's destruction of art-historical texts in a washing machine — literally pulping together one book on Chinese painting and one on Western modern art — converts the Revolution's method into an artistic proposition: what remains when you dissolve both traditions at once? The result is a muddy indecipherability that is itself a statement about cultural identity after catastrophe.

The Cultural Revolution did not produce silence. It produced artists for whom silence was the enemy and form was the only available weapon.

The 1985 New Wave: Collective Idealism as Artistic Engine

Between 1985 and 1989, seventy-nine self-organised avant-garde groups comprising more than 2,250 artists mounted 149 exhibitions across twenty-nine provinces. The '85 New Wave was not a

movement with a manifesto or a centre; it was a nationwide eruption of creative energy made possible by Deng's partial opening and fuelled by the sudden availability of Western philosophical and artistic texts in translation. Nietzsche, Sartre, Freud, Warhol, Beuys – all arrived in China within a few years, read by artists who had been starved of any discourse outside Socialist Realism. Gao Minglu, who documented the movement with authoritative precision, has described it as the largest decentralised avant-garde of the late twentieth century. The New Wave's characteristic move was to take Western modernism not as a model to reproduce but as a set of tools to repurpose against specifically Chinese conditions.

1989: The Rupture That Organised Everything After

The June 4th crackdown terminated the New Wave's collective idealism instantly and permanently. Artists who had operated in a community of shared aspiration were forced, overnight, into individual strategies of survival. The collective was now dangerous. The individual – rendered with sardonic precision, with bruising honesty, with bitter irony – was the only defensible territory.

The artistic consequences were immediate and distinctive. Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline series depicted Chinese family portraits in a flattened, spectral palette – individual faces connected by thin red lines of biological inheritance that were simultaneously bonds and wounds. Political Pop turned the iconography of the Cultural

Revolution against itself: Wang Guangyi's Great Criticism series placed Maoist revolutionary workers alongside Western brand logos, using the grammar of state propaganda to expose the ideological emptiness of both systems — communism that had become a brand, capitalism that functioned as a new collectivism.

The Diaspora: Making Chinese Art from Elsewhere

A parallel thread runs through the collection's formation: the artists who left and did not return, or who returned changed. Yang Jiechang left Guangdong for Heidelberg and Paris in December 1988 — weeks before Tiananmen — and decided not to return after June 4th. He has since worked between Europe and China for thirty-five years with a practice that refuses to resolve the tension between calligraphic tradition and European conceptualism. Chen Zhen, who moved to Paris in 1986 and coined the term 'transexperience' to describe the consciousness born of permanent cultural displacement, worked with the urgency of someone who knew his time was short — he died in 2000, aged forty-five. Huang Yong-Ping moved to Paris in 1989, stayed after Tiananmen, and spent three decades using the collision between Eastern and Western philosophy as the raw material of a formally radical practice. These artists did not illustrate displacement. They made displacement itself into a formal principle — as rigorous and generative as any other artistic method.

II · SIX ARTISTIC LINEAGES

The Collection's Architecture as Aesthetic Argument

DSLcollection's six sections — Old Ghosts New Spirits, Cantonese Connection, Hong Kong Artists, Shanghai Style, New Media, Young Talents — present themselves as curatorial categories: generation, geography, medium. Read as artistic arguments, they are something more consequential: a map of the distinct aesthetic territories that Chinese contemporary art occupied during the golden years, each with its own formal vocabulary, its own relationship to history, its own set of concerns that could not have emerged from any other cultural formation.

Lineage 1 — Old Ghosts New Spirits: The Art of Historical Reckoning

The first lineage gathers artists formed by the '85 New Wave and its aftermath. What distinguishes them aesthetically is the depth of historical implication in every formal decision. These are artists for whom making art was, necessarily, an act of cultural archaeology: digging up what the Cultural Revolution had buried, confronting

what Socialist Realism had suppressed, finding forms adequate to experiences that existing forms could not hold. Gu Dexin's refusal of gallery conventions, Shen Yuan's frozen tongues as commentary on the impossibility of communication, Yang Jiechang's ink paintings that flood Western conceptual art with Chinese calligraphic tradition until neither survives intact — these are artists for whom formal decisions are never merely formal.

Lineage 2 — The Cantonese Connection: Art from the First Laboratory

Guangdong Province was Deng Xiaoping's experimental ground. The Big Tail Elephant Group — Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, and Xu Tan — were the first artists to make this new economic and social reality their primary artistic material. Lin Yilin's performances of laying and re-laying bricks in public spaces while cars passed within inches used the literal material of Guangzhou's perpetual construction as both medium and subject. The brick was the unit of China's physical transformation; Lin's obsessive, dangerous repetition of its placement made visible the human cost of the speed at which that transformation was occurring.

Lineage 3 — Hong Kong Artists: Art from the Fault Line

Hong Kong's inclusion is not a geographic supplement to the mainland focus; it is an aesthetic argument about a specific form of

artistic consciousness. Hong Kong artists — working in a city that operated simultaneously within and against both British colonial culture and Chinese political authority — developed a distinctive formal language for inhabiting ambiguity. Tsang Tsou Choi, the self-proclaimed King of Kowloon, covered the city's urban surfaces with his calligraphic claim to sovereignty: a one-man territorial act enacted in public space, using the most classical Chinese art form against the colonial authority that refused to acknowledge him. Lee Kit's quiet, domestic installations proposed an aesthetic of intimacy and withdrawal that was a formal response to the noise and pressure of Hong Kong's density.

Lineage 4 — Shanghai Style: The Aesthetics of Metabolised Modernity

Shanghai's artistic tradition — the first city in China to have modern art institutions, the centre of the abstract art revival in the 1980s — produced an aesthetic sensibility quite distinct from Beijing's conceptual intensity or Guangzhou's urban radicalism. The qualities the collection identifies as characteristic of Shanghai style — inner restraint, lucidity, delicacy, detachment, elegance — are not decorative attributes. They are the formal signature of a city that had metabolised modernity more thoroughly than anywhere else in China. Ding Yi's X-mark paintings refused cultural coding with absolute formal consistency. Yang Fudong's films translate classical Chinese painting's atmosphere into cinematic form with a temporal practice that is distinctly Shanghai in its elegiac quality.

Lineage 5 – New Media: The Form Adequate to the Moment

Chinese artists were among the earliest and most inventive adopters of new media internationally, partly because the forms were new enough to be politically neutral and formally open in ways that traditional media were not. Zhang Peili, working in Hangzhou and later Shanghai, produced among the earliest Chinese video works. His 1993 Venice installation of different people singing Happy Birthday in Mandarin – a seemingly joyous subject rendered with the awkward, unnatural quality of enforced collective performance – captured something essential about the relationship between individual expression and collective demand. Cao Fei’s work – from early video performances in Guangzhou factory districts to later explorations of virtual reality and digital culture – traces China’s transformation through the lives and desires of its new urban population with a wit and formal sophistication that earned her a place in international contemporary art’s first rank.

Lineage 6 – Young Talents: The Art of a Different Formation

The Young Talents section – approximately 100 artists born in the 1980s – documents a generation whose formation differs fundamentally from the previous five lineages. They grew up without direct experience of the Cultural Revolution, with access

to the internet and global cultural production from early adolescence, and with a relationship to Chinese tradition and Western contemporary art mediated by screens rather than by translation delays and ideological constraints. Their art is not lesser. It is differently constituted. Hao Liang's meticulous ink paintings engage with classical Chinese landscape tradition simultaneously with international contemporary discourse, without resolving the tension. Guo Hongwei's intimate paintings refuse both market-legible scale and ironic distancing, finding a third position that is neither nostalgic nor avant-garde. Cheng Ran's moving-image works blend art cinema, genre film, and the aesthetics of the smartphone screen into formally hybrid objects that could only have been made by someone formed equally by Hou Hsiao-hsien and YouTube. For this generation, the digital is not a new medium imposed on an established practice; it is the native formal vocabulary. Background, not wound.

III · THE RECURRING STRATEGIES

How Chinese Artists Navigated Productive Constraint

Across the collection's six lineages, a set of recurring formal strategies appears — not as stylistic convention but as shared responses to shared conditions. These strategies are among the aesthetic signatures of the golden years. They are also points of genuine art-historical debate: critics have contested where one ends and market adaptation begins, which is precisely why they require analytical precision rather than celebration.

Displacement, Material Radicalism, the Body, Abstraction, Irony

The most pervasive strategy is aesthetic displacement: the use of historical, allegorical, or formally non-realist modes to address contemporary political and social reality obliquely. When direct address is constrained, obliquity becomes a formal principle. Zhang Xiaogang's family portraits displace the trauma of the Cultural Revolution into the pre-revolutionary family photograph. Qiu Anxiong's animated films use the vocabulary of traditional ink

painting to narrate ecological catastrophe and social disintegration.

Material radicalism asserts its argument through the radical specificity of materials: culturally loaded media – traditional Chinese materials, the industrial materials of China’s transformation, the organic materials of biological life – used in ways that generate meaning through the friction between the material’s history and its new context. Liu Jianhua’s use of porcelain – China’s most prestigious export craft, the medium that gave the West its name for China – produces collapsed Nike sneakers and deconstructed branded goods: the most refined traditional craft producing the most disposable contemporary commodity. Zhang Huan’s ash paintings – incense sorted into more than twenty tonal gradations, applied by hand onto linen – are the most consequential materialisation of this principle in the collection. He has described the ash not as a substitute for paint but as ‘the embodiment of a country and its people’s collective blessing for the future and memory of the past.’

The body as political territory is a strategy born from the Cultural Revolution’s assault on individual existence and 1989’s demonstration of the state’s willingness to deploy lethal force against bodies in public space. Formal abstraction as freedom refused the demand for legible political messaging that Socialist Realism had imposed: Ding Yi’s X refuses symbolic loading absolutely. Yang Jiechang’s Hundred Layers of Ink transforms surface into object through sheer temporal commitment. He has

described the logic: ‘When you paint something so black that it cannot get any blacker, it begins to shine white.’ And irony as survival converted the impossibility of earnest collective commitment into a formal principle – though critics have rightly noted that the line between irony as strategy and irony as market appeal is not always easy to draw. That tension is part of the historical record.

IV · ARTISTS IN DEPTH

A Western Reckoning, Then Seven Works That Carry the Argument

A WITNESS ACCOUNT — NEW YORK, OCTOBER 2017

*I want to tell you something about an evening in New York in the autumn of 2017, because it is useful to understand what it means — for a Western audience — to encounter this art for the first time at scale. The Guggenheim Museum had just opened the largest exhibition of Chinese contemporary art ever mounted in North America: *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, curated by Alexandra Munroe with Philip Tinari and Hou Hanru. One hundred and fifty works. More than seventy artists. Two decades of production that, for the first time, asked a Western institution to look at the full argument rather than the market-selected highlights.*

What struck me, walking up Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral ramp that night, was not the works I already knew — Zhang Huan's ash paintings, Yang Jiechang's layered ink surfaces, Jia Aili's vast canvases, Huang Yong-Ping's cages and philosophical

provocations. What struck me was the audience. People stood for a long time in front of works they had no framework for, works that refused the two available Western categories: 'Chinese dissident art' and 'Chinese auction art.' They were encountering something that had no convenient label.

The exhibition did not survive its opening without controversy. Three works involving animals – including Huang Yong-Ping's *Theater of the World*, the cage of insects and reptiles that had given the show its name – were removed before it opened, under pressure from animal rights protesters whose petition gathered three-quarters of a million signatures. The Guggenheim capitulated. Ai Weiwei called it tragic. What the episode revealed was something that anyone who has spent time with this art knows: it makes people uncomfortable in ways they cannot immediately process. It is not reassuring. It is not decorative. It is radical in the precise sense: it goes to the root.

That discomfort is not accidental. It is the formal residue of real constraint. In June 1994, three years before we acquired our first work in China, police from the Chaoyang Branch raided the studios of the Beijing East Village – the slum community of artists where Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Cang Xin, and others had been living and working in conditions of radical poverty and creative intensity. They arrested artists, sealed studios, fined landlords 1,000 RMB each, and warned them not to rent to artists again. Rong Rong – the photographer who documented the community and who had photographed Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* just

days before – hid his negatives at a friend's house, wrote to his sister telling her to burn the letter after reading, and did not dare return to his room. The East Village was over in a single afternoon. The works the Guggenheim was hanging in 2017 were made by people for whom this was not metaphor. It was the actual condition of production.

The exhibition confirmed for me that the decade and a half Dominique and I had spent collecting – from Ding Yi's first X-marks to Jia Aili's apocalyptic canvases, from Yang Jiechang's ink meditations to Zhang Huan's ash prayers – had not been a private enthusiasm. It had been a bet on a historical argument. The Guggenheim show proved the argument had substance. It also proved that Western institutions were still, in 2017, struggling to see this art on its own terms rather than through the lens of political dissidence or market value.

What follows is my attempt to present seven of the artists in the collection not as representatives of 'Chinese contemporary art' but as individual intelligences formed by one of the most consequential historical junctures of the twentieth century. They are not exotic. They are not simple. They are not easily consumed. They are among the most serious artists working anywhere in the world during the period DSLcollection documents.

The seven artists below represent a cross-section of the collection's argument rather than a canonical ranking. Each carries,

in concentrated form, something essential about the golden years of Chinese contemporary art – its range, its depth, and its irreducible specificity.

DING YI

b. 1962, Shanghai · Painting · First acquisition, 1993

Works held: Appearance of Crosses series (1988–ongoing)

Ding Yi began his X-mark paintings in 1988 as a deliberate refusal: a refusal of the burden of cultural meaning that he identified as the shared problem of both classical Chinese painting and Socialist Realism. The X is the most neutral possible mark – universal, pre-semantic, resistant to being recruited into any cultural or political narrative. Over more than three decades the paintings have evolved from austere monochromes to complex, optically active colour fields, but the founding principle has never changed. What appears from a distance as a uniform surface reveals, on approach, an infinite density of individual marks – a formal model of the relationship between the collective and the individual that is entirely implicit, requiring no allegorical reading. That Ding Yi was the only abstract artist among China’s fourteen representatives at Venice 1993 – and that DSLcollection chose him as its first acquisition – locates the collection’s founding aesthetic commitment precisely: not the legible, the ironic, or the politically coded, but the formally radical.

JIA AILI

b. 1979, Dandong, Liaoning · Painting · Monumental canvases

Works held: We Are from the Century (2008–11, 6×15 metres); The Wilderness (2012)

Jia Aili grew up in Dandong, a cold northeastern city on the North Korean border defined by rusting factories, depleted landscapes, and the residue of a socialist industrial utopia that had not delivered on its promise. Nothing in his academic training at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts — rooted in the Soviet Social Realist tradition — predicts what he became. His paintings are vast post-apocalyptic landscapes populated by solitary figures in gas masks and hazmat suits, dwarfed by black skies and derelict industrial structures, conveying what he described as: ‘the desolation following a big group celebration, when the joyful laughter of a moment ago seems to linger.’ DSLcollection holds his masterwork *We Are from the Century* (2008–11), six metres high and fifteen metres wide, created over six months of public studio work in Beijing. Its scale forces a physical and perceptual surrender that smaller works avoid. It cannot travel, cannot be reproduced without losing its essential argument. The collection’s first virtual reality museum was designed, in part, around this single painting — the most direct evidence of the collection’s commitment to art at the scale of its ambitions.

ZHANG HUAN

b. 1965, Anyang, Henan · Performance, sculpture, ash painting

Works held: 12 Square Meters (1994); 65 Kilograms (1994); Foam (1998); Samsara (2007)

Zhang Huan's trajectory contains one of the most startling reversals in Chinese contemporary art. His graduation painting — called *Red Cherries*, depicting a mother peacefully nursing her baby next to a bowl of fruit — was made under the influence of Millet and the European classical tradition. It is tender, technically accomplished, and entirely unprepared for what came next. Moving to the Beijing East Village in 1992, living in extreme poverty alongside other artists and musicians in a rubbish-dump settlement between the Third and Fourth Ring Roads, he discovered a conviction that the distance from *Red Cherries* to *12 Square Meters* makes comprehensible: that the body is the proof of identity, and that the most direct form of artistic testimony is to subject that body to the conditions you are trying to describe. In *12 Square Meters* (June 1994), he sat naked and motionless for an hour in a fly-covered public latrine, covered in fish oil and honey, in thirty-eight-degree heat. The performance was not spectacle. It was testimony about what endurance requires. When police raided the East Village days later, sealing studios and arresting artists, the performance was over. The man who had made it had already crossed a threshold that could not be uncrossed. After moving to New York in 1998 and returning to Shanghai in 2006, Zhang discovered his defining medium: incense ash collected from Buddhist temples, sorted into more than twenty tonal gradations, applied by hand onto linen. He described the material as 'the embodiment of a country and its people's collective blessing for the future and memory of the past.' DSLcollection holds four works

spanning his entire arc: *Foam* (1998), *Big Buddha* (2002), *Peace 1* (2001), and *Samsara* (2007). They demonstrate what is rare in contemporary art: a practice that changed its form completely without losing its subject, which was always the relationship between the individual body and the weight of collective history.

YANG JIECHANG

b. 1956, Foshan, Guangdong · Ink, installation · Lives Paris/Heidelberg

Works held: Hundred Layers of Ink series (1989–1999); I Still Remember; Crying Landscape (2002–2003)

Yang Jiechang's pseudonym means 'who asks the sky.' Born in Foshan, Guangdong, trained in classical calligraphy by his grandfather from age three, he left China in December 1988 for Heidelberg and arrived in Paris in April 1989 to participate in *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou – weeks before Tiananmen. He decided not to return. His original works for the exhibition had been confiscated at the Shenzhen border; he created the *Hundred Layers of Ink* series in situ. The process involves thirty to forty successive layers of ink applied to Xuan paper, each dried before the next. The paper transforms from a flat surface into a shimmering three-dimensional object. He described the logic: 'When you paint something so black that it cannot get any blacker, it begins to shine white. When you paint black to death, a new life emerges.' Yang has lived between Paris and Germany for thirty-five years without learning French, by deliberate choice: 'If I learned French, I would lose myself, because French culture is very strong and deep.' He has described his

ambition as an artist in terms that exceed nationality: ‘I think artists should go further to be more free – to overcome notions like nationality, religion, ethnicity and gender.’ This is not cosmopolitan vagueness. It is a hard-won formal principle, paid for by thirty-five years of principled displacement. His wife Martina Köppel-Yang, a German art historian and sinologist, assisted in the conception and editing of the DSLcollection catalogue.

HUANG YONG-PING

b. 1954, Xiamen – d. 2019, Paris · Installation, sculpture

Works held: History of Chinese Painting Washed for Two Minutes (1987/1993); Theater of the World (1993); Un immigrant sans papiers (2005)

Huang Yong-Ping co-founded Xiamen Dada in 1986 with the motto ‘Chan is Dada, Dada is Chan.’ His 1987 work – literally pulping a book on the history of Chinese painting and a book on the history of Western modern art together in a washing machine for two minutes – is one of the most conceptually precise gestures in the entire Chinese avant-garde tradition. The Revolution had destroyed cultural authority by force; Huang destroyed art-historical authority by process, producing not rubble but an indeterminate substance that was neither Chinese nor Western. He described his method as ‘taking on the East with the West and taking on the West with the East.’ Theater of the World (1993) – the cage of insects and reptiles that gave the Guggenheim show its name, and that was removed before the exhibition opened under pressure from animal rights protesters – embodies his Daoist principle of non-intervention: a system left to run its own

Darwinian logic, watched but not controlled. DSLcollection holds *Un immigrant sans papiers* (2005), an installation about the loss of identity through globalisation. Huang knew displacement from the inside. He lived without documentation in Paris for years. The work is not a commentary on immigration. It is a self-portrait.

BIG TAIL ELEPHANT GROUP

Guangzhou, active 1990–1998 · Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, Xu Tan

Works held: Lin Yilin: Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road (1995); Chen Shaoxiong: Street (1994); Liang Juhui: Holiday Inn (1996)

The Big Tail Elephants worked in Guangzhou at the exact moment when Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms were transforming the city faster than any urban environment had previously been transformed. Their response was to use the city itself — its construction sites, its traffic, its newly privatised spaces — as both medium and stage. Lin Yilin's *Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road*, in which the artist repositioned bricks while traffic passed within inches, converted the most literal material of China's physical transformation into a performance of extreme bodily risk. The formal language was radically simple and irreducibly local: this work could only have been made in Guangzhou in 1995. Xu Tan's research practice traced the economic flows of the Pearl River Delta with a rigour that anticipated the documentary and research-based tendencies that would dominate international contemporary art a decade later.

CAO FEI

b. 1978, Guangzhou · Video, digital installation, performance, VR

Works held: Cosplayers (2004); RMB City (Second Life, 2007–11); Haze and Fog (2013); Asia One (2018)

Cao Fei's practice spans two decades and has tracked China's successive transformations with unusual precision. Her early *Cosplayers* videos, in which young factory workers in Guangzhou perform Japanese anime characters in the streets and spaces of their working lives, held the collision between China's manufacturing economy and the global popular culture it produces without resolving it into either critique or celebration. *RMB City* — a virtual city in *Second Life*, developed over four years — used the early internet's utopian social space to construct an imaginary Chinese metropolis that was simultaneously satirical, playful, and structurally serious about the relationship between virtual and physical urbanism. Her later film works — *Haze and Fog*, *Asia One* — have moved toward a more elegiac register, depicting the human consequences of China's automation and the emotional landscape of a generation that has lived through more change than any stable sense of self can easily absorb. Cao Fei inhabits the experience of her own generation from within. Her formal choices — the video game aesthetic, the *Second Life* architecture, the corporate-film language — are not ironic distance. They are the visual environment in which her generation's desires and anxieties actually live.

V · WHAT THE ART PROVES

Why This Body of Work Is Historically Significant

The question this document has been building toward is not historical but aesthetic: what does this art prove? Not about Chinese society, not about the political conditions of the golden years, but about art itself — about what art can do when it is made under specific historical pressure by artists formed by a specific cultural catastrophe and released into a specific window of possibility. These are propositions, not certainties. They can be contested. They are grounded in the evidence of the works themselves, and strengthened by the fact that parallel bodies of work — Soviet nonconformist art, Latin American conceptualism under dictatorship — have demonstrated versions of the same propositions under different conditions.

One: Constraint Is Generative

The art of the golden years demonstrates, with considerable force, that constraint does not produce lesser art than freedom. It produces different art — art that carries the pressure of its conditions in its formal decisions, that finds oblique paths to say what direct statement cannot, that develops formal density

precisely because directness is unavailable. The most ambitious works in the collection are not ambitious despite the constraints under which they were made; they are ambitious partly because of them. Remove the pressure, and the formal solution becomes unnecessary. What is specific to the Chinese case is the particular configuration of constraint and release — the Deng opening creating a window of productive ambiguity that was, historically, without precedent and, as it turned out, without successor.

Two: Locality Is the Condition of Universality

Every major work in the collection is irreducibly specific: to a city, to a moment, to a cultural formation that no other combination of geography and history could have produced. And yet this specificity is precisely what gives the work its capacity to address audiences with no shared Chinese cultural experience. Works formed by the most specific historical conditions — the Cultural Revolution, 1989, the Deng opening — proved to be among the most widely legible. This is not the universality of the generic. It is the universality of the deeply particular, which alone has the power to make audiences in different circumstances recognise something essential about their own conditions.

Three: A Generation Is an Aesthetic Event

The formation that produced the artists of the golden years — Cultural Revolution childhood, '85 New Wave formation, 1989 rupture, Deng opening, international engagement — is a historical

singularity. No subsequent generation will share it. The art of the golden years is therefore not simply historically important – it is historically located in ways that make it available to scholarly and curatorial scrutiny in a manner that ongoing contemporary production cannot yet be. The distance has become legible. The argument can be assessed.

“A collection of 350 works by 200 artists assembled across fifteen years is not a museum. It is a precise argument.”

Four: The Work Outlasts Its Moment

The golden years are over. The political conditions that produced them have been dismantled. The artists who defined them are in the second half of their careers. And yet the works themselves remain – formally complete, historically located, not reducible to any reading that would make them merely symptomatic of their conditions. Zeng Fanzhi’s Mask paintings are not documents of post-1989 Chinese social experience; they are paintings. Cao Fei’s films are not sociological evidence about China’s urbanisation; they are cinema. Ding Yi’s X-mark canvases are not illustrations of abstract freedom under constraint; they are paintings that make optical experience an end in itself. This formal autonomy – the capacity of the work to exceed the conditions that produced it – is

what art always is when it is genuinely art. It is also the only reliable basis for acquisition: not market position, not institutional certification, but formal conviction — the sense that a work will continue to mean something long after the specific pressures that generated it have passed from living memory.

CONCLUSION

The Argument Is Complete. What Remains Is Transmission.

In 2012, Dominique and I made a decision that many collectors find difficult: we stopped. Not paused. Stopped. The collection was closed. No further acquisitions within the 1997–2012 arc; no attempt to extend the argument beyond its natural boundary. The decision was not strategic. It was, in a way we have spent years trying to articulate, aesthetic. The window that had produced the art we were drawn to had closed. Xi Jinping's assumption of power in 2012 marked the end of the political dispensation — the productive ambiguity of the Deng-Jiang-Hu years — that had made the work possible. To continue acquiring after that point would have been to pretend that the argument had not changed. It had changed. We respected that.

What we have, therefore, is a bounded collection: bounded in time, bounded in subject, bounded by a curatorial logic that was articulated after the fact but that shaped every decision made during the fifteen years of acquisition. The boundary is not a limitation. It is the source of the collection's meaning. An argument

that goes on forever is not an argument; it is an accumulation. DSLcollection is an argument.

The question that now defines our work is not what to acquire but how to transmit. Karen and Raphaël have grown up with these works. They know the artists, the studio visits, the arguments between their parents about what mattered and what did not. They carry the collection's memory as something lived, not merely documented. But memory is not enough. What Karen and Raphaël will transmit – to institutions, to scholars, to future audiences – is not the works alone but the argument the works constitute. That argument requires articulation. This document is part of that articulation.

An argument that goes on forever is not an argument. It is an accumulation. DSLcollection is an argument.

The Guggenheim exhibition of 2017, whatever its limitations, demonstrated that the Western art world is still in the early stages of understanding what Chinese contemporary art of the golden years actually contains. The dominant frameworks – political dissidence, market spectacle, orientalist curiosity – are inadequate to the material. A more adequate framework will require the kind of sustained scholarly and curatorial attention that takes decades to develop. DSLcollection's role in that development is not to speak

on behalf of Chinese art – the artists speak for themselves, and have done so with considerable force and clarity – but to demonstrate, through the specificity of a coherent private collection, what it looks like when a sustained aesthetic argument is maintained over fifteen years without concession to market or fashion.

We do not claim to have been right about everything. There are artists we missed, works we should have acquired, judgements we would make differently with the distance of time. Collecting is not a science. It is a sustained act of attention, conducted under uncertainty, with imperfect information, by people who are affected by what they see in ways they cannot always fully explain at the time. What we can claim is that the attention was genuine, the commitment was sustained, and the argument that emerged from it is coherent enough to transmit.

DSLcollection holds that conviction, in 350 works across fifteen years, as a permanent record of one of the most consequential aesthetic moments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The argument is now complete. It can only be transmitted – which is to say, understood.

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