China(’s) Images on Display.
Contemporary Chinese Art and its Western Reception in the Age of Globalization

The thesis examines the art historical developments, complex socio-political as well as cultural conditions and specific forms of display that shaped the reception of contemporary Chinese art abroad since the 1980s, when it began to appear in Western European and Northern American exhibitions. It also analyzes the related social, political, and economic conditions and changes which characterized the presentation of contemporary Chinese art in the People’s Republic of China at the same time.

The thesis treats the modern art exhibition as an active mediator, which decisively shapes the arrangement of objects and related discursive attributions, which it simultaneously presents and enables. In the case of Chinese art on display in the West, the exhibition conceived as such a complex medium is also a participant in transcultural processes. It is characterized by agents, concepts, and institutions that work across national and cultural boundaries. They support constructions of identity that often produce new demarcations as well as exclusions of the “other”. Artistic and cultural differences are therefore continuously negotiated in these exhibitionary processes.

The first chapter of the dissertation theorizes the modern art exhibition as a dispositif, a term coined by Michel Foucault and developed in media studies. Foucault has defined the dispositif as a heterogeneous ensemble of discursive and non-discursive elements that is marked by specific relations of power, which generate the content of our art related knowledge and are conditioned by it at the same time.

Analyzing over 20 exhibitions in an art historical, media and cultural studies-related interdisciplinary perspective, the book shows that the dispositif of the exhibition changed considerably after the end of the Cold War era and since the Chinese policy of the Open Door. In Western Europe and North America exhibition practices transformed responding to the “post-colonial turn” that prominent agents of the academic discourse claimed at the time, while a young generation of artists challenged the restricted official exhibition practice in the People’s Republic of China. These artists began to work in diverse, more experimental ways, often referring to Western art forms and concepts as well as older Chinese ones, which were previously forbidden.

Chapter 2 examines how pioneering group exhibitions in the 1980s showed works from the People’s Republic presenting them as “contemporary”, “avant-garde”, “modern” or simply “new” Chinese art. Although these exhibitions largely followed the pragmatically renewed economic exchanges with China reforming under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership and were small-sized events that were hardly ever noticed beyond their immediate environment, they nonetheless triggered a Western reception that rapidly broadened at the beginning of the 1990s and challenged previous Euro-American undertakings in this field. The summary of six early American exhibitions, which featured a circle of around 100 artists, is introduced by an overview that explains the history of exhibition making in the People’s Republic under Mao Zedong until 1989. It shows how the Chinese dispositif of the exhibition in
contrast to the Western one is marked by political programs until late in the 1980s while commercial considerations, powerful institutions and individual agents – except those of the authoritative state – did not play a major role. The second part of this chapter analyzes the characteristics of the following most prominent and large Western group exhibitions, their catalogs, curatorial concepts and the limited circle of the promoting agents. This first peak of exhibitionary activity in 1993 became an important shaping factor for later events: the European show *China Avantgarde*, the first panorama show travelling from Hong Kong to Australia called *China’s New Art, Post-1989* as well as the debut of Chinese contemporary artists at the *Venice Biennale*. Together they exemplified a significant turn in the exhibition making on both sides, which had become visible already in the show *Magiciens de la terre* in Paris on the one side and the *Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan. China/Avant-garde* in Beijing in 1989 on the other. Four years later, the travelling panorama shows proved how substantial these changes really were.

Chapter 3 clarifies that the popular as well as scientific attributions supported by these exhibitions were often entangled processes, in which mutually mediating European and Chinese agents played a decisive role: critic-cum-curators such as Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Chang Tsong-zung, Hou Hanru or Fei Dawei obtained a forum in Western catalogs, which they used to sketch a historiography of the “new” art movements. Their narratives contested the official art historical accounts of the PR China and were often uncritically integrated by the European and American partners. They in turn filled the considerable gap of knowledge that was caused by the long standing absence of contemporary Chinese artworks in Western museums since the 1950s. In ambivalent attempts to categorize the latest works from China, they presented them as “modern”, “contemporary” or “avant-garde” art following the Western reading, but also distinguished them as socio-politically or culturally specific, in this case “Chinese” and therefore “different” art. This process quickly led to a very stable canon of “contemporary Chinese art” as the analysis of exhibitions demonstrates, which were realized during the 1990s by emigrant Chinese curators outside of China (*Out of the Centre* in Finland; *Chine demain pour hier* in France; *Inside Out* in America) on the one hand and European curators on the other (*China! and Die Hälfte des Himmels* in Germany; *Another Long March* in the Netherlands).

Chapter 4 focuses on another prominent social agent of the dispositif: the private collector exemplified by the Belgian couple Ullens and the Swiss collectors Sigg, who began to buy artworks almost at the same time while travelling in China as businessmen and diplomats during the late 1990s. Often they were consulted by the curators and critics mentioned above and allowed their objects to enrich the exhibition displays in Europe. After the turn of the century, these collectors even organized their own exhibitions (*Paris–Pékin; Le moine et le demon; All under heaven; Mahjong; China Now!* ) and in one case also opened a museum for contemporary art in Beijing (Ullens Center for Contemporary Art). Examining their roles shows how they influenced the general reception of their collections and works from China. While the collectors openly manifest their power, the dispositif paradoxically cloaks their
(power) strategies as much as it presents them as a supposedly natural part of the exhibitionary complex.

The observed change at the social level of the dispositif was not accompanied by transformations at the institutional level of the exhibitions owing to the many political restrictions and the lack of infrastructure and non-commercial support by the Chinese government that prevailed until late in the 1990s as chapter 5 shows. While in America a meta-exhibition in 2001 treated the problem of censorship related with Chinese art (Canceled. Exhibiting Experimental Art in China), in the PR China the officials still tended to shut-down exhibitions and certain forms of curatorial self-censorship were common. Experimental artists often preferred to curate their works themselves, using public spaces and conceptually conceived interventions that enabled a direct contact the urban population even if only for very short time spans. The example of a taboo breaking show of Chinese body art makes clear that these local activities in spaces not designed for art were however well informed, media conscious displays that also took into account a potentially global viewership (Post-Sense Sensibility). The contested exhibits were subject to very different debates in China and Europe. Their analysis makes clear that artworks on their way between China and Europe or America often encounter diverging social, economic and political contexts as well as related art concepts.

Chapter 6 contrasts these findings by examining the official cultural politics at the institutional level in China. It considers homogenizing tendencies of large-scale international exhibitions that exist despite the ongoing differences that are discussed in the previous chapters. In the light of the expanding economy of the country, for the first time the Chinese government in 2000 announced its intention to promote the „cultural industries“ including contemporary art. As a consequence, the state supported the funding of international bi- and triennales as an examination of the Third Shanghai, the First Beijing Biennale and the Third Guangzhou Triennale shows. Furthermore, China began to organize bi-national exhibitions of contemporary art in cooperation with European partners such as France (Alors, la Chine?) and Germany (Living in time). Examining their characteristics – also in light of those described in the previous chapters – helps to understand why the changing institutional conditions do not automatically transform earlier mechanisms of the dispositif, which remain effective.

The summary finally questions how the dispositif of the exhibition looks today in view of the examined transcultural circulation of agents and works at three main levels. It suggests a glimpse of future developments considering the results at the social level of the exhibition agents (curator, collector, artists – chapters 2, 3, 4), at the institutional level of museums and cultural politics (chapter 5 and 6) and at the conceptual level of exhibition practices (chapter 1). It is based on key aspects of the dispositif and its transformations, which the book has elaborated in a systematic as well as chronological manner, and which will also decide on the future of contemporary Chinese art on display.