

## **The academy strikes back: last fall, as official taste reigned at major international surveys in Beijing and Pingyao, avant-garde artists responded with spunky alternative shows**

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After the demise of Soviet-bloc Communism, sentimentalists on the left did a good deal of wishful thinking about a "third way" between that vast socio-economic fiasco and what they took to be the depredations of U.S.-style capitalism gone global. Anyone inclined to sympathize with this nostalgic view should take a hard look at contemporary China--where Party leaders, still partial to central planning and prescribed social goals, are struggling to control the world's sixth-largest (and fastest growing) economy and a populace that encompasses one out of every five persons alive today. If business experts sometimes joke that being half-capitalistic is about as feasible as being half pregnant, art critics can hardly avoid a similar observation about Chinese government attempts to program artistic expression.

The pathos of "approved" esthetics was particularly clear in two major art events in the People's Republic last fall. At the inaugural Beijing International Art Biennale and at the Pingyao International Photography Festival (PIP), in its third yearly installment, artistic officialdom held sway. In both cases, a paternalistic approach resulted in massive exhibitions that were perversely fascinating in their cautious propriety--though salted, inadvertently perhaps, with a number of livelier and more substantial works. These nearly concurrent Potemkin-village displays were counterposed, in Beijing, by several independent--indeed, officially disavowed--shows infused with creative rambunctiousness by artists, dealers and curators who more truly represent the intensity of artistic ferment in China at the outset of the 21st century.

### Beijing: The Forbidding City?

The first Beijing Biennale was clearly conceived as an orthodox corrective, if not outright rebuke, to the country's artistic avant-garde. Confronted with major surveys that now occur cyclically in Shanghai, Chengdu and, most recently, Guangzhou (to say nothing of beyond-the-pale Hong Kong and Taipei), government authorities decided not only that the PRC's capital city should have its own global showcase but that the work on view should reflect a "true" Chinese sensibility. In concrete terms, this meant spending roughly \$1 million to enable a team of 27 Chinese curators to mount two complementary exhibitions--one mostly national, the other mostly international--under the artistic direction of three high-ranking cultural officials: Jing Shangyi, chairman of the Chinese Artists Association and former president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts; Liu Dawei, vice chairman of the Chinese Artists Association; and Feng Yuan, director of the art section of the ministry of culture. Advice on international selections came from the Italian independent curator Vincenzo Sanfo, who previously helped organize exhibitions in Europe featuring Renoir, Sonia Delaunay and Frida Kahlo, and who aided the PRC in securing a national pavilion for the 2003 Venice Biennale (not used that year due to SARS). In all, some 400 works by 300 artists from 40 countries were included in the monthlong, dual-venue Beijing survey. Implicitly suggesting what counts as real art in official circles, exhibitions were limited to painting and sculpture.

The National Museum of Fine Arts devoted extensive gallery space to work by Asian artists operating within the academic system to extend and update Eastern artistic traditions. Here visitors could see, in objective form, the bland realization of the goal announced by organizers in the Biennale's introductory brochure: to present--in a weird conflation of Confucianism, social utility theory and Western

classicism--"a timeless aesthetic sense of truth, goodness and beauty, as well as the cultural values beneficial to the advancement of human beings." Ironically, much of the work on view seemed like nothing so much as journeyman versions of ancient precedents, late knockoffs of modernist formal innovations or a corny combination of the two.

A noble heritage was evoked by small retrospectives of two transitional figures: Japan's 91-year-old Takayama Tatsuo, who paints stylized figures, flower arrangements and landscapes on paper or silk; and Qi Baishi (1864-1957), who in 1953--four years after the conclusion of the civil war his work completely elides--was given the title Outstanding Artist of the Chinese People for his field-and-flower contributions in poetry, calligraphy, tradition-based painting and seal-cutting. International context was supplied, in part, by a show of contemporary Korean art in the same polite vein, with the illusionistic water-drops-on-paper paintings of Kim Tschang-Yeul as perhaps the most widely known component and the chunky, semi-abstract bronzes of Chung Hyun as the most formally challenging. The French Autumn Salon Association--the same group that the Fauves shocked in 1905--celebrated its centennial with a survey of works by 36 critically negligible Western artists.

In the main exhibition of Chinese art, a few pieces managed to go beyond being merely thoughtful and handsome, *The Chinese Roots* (1999-2003), by Guo Zhenyu and others, is an overpowering fabric wall sculpture--more than 13 feet high and 66 feet wide--in which rootlike linen elements intertwine in oceanic swirls and fans. Shi Zhongying's *Scene Netting Scene* (2003) features a smooth oval of marble imprisoned in a gently curved pyramidal cage of fine steel mesh. In Ren Guanghui's *Ink-and-Wash Time* (2003), barren, twisting, tightly crowded branches stand in tall, boxlike, open-sided frames. *Earth* (2003) by Wang Jiyi consists of a clear plastic supine human figure--veritable "hollow man"--filled with junk food in bright cans and wrappers. A triangular structure of cross-braced timbers, from which rocks shaped roughly like bells hang by thick ropes, gives apparent stability to the soundless *New Stone-Percussion Series 5* (2000) by Wang Hongliang. In all these works, sociopolitical commentary, though artfully sublimated to various degrees, seems at least arguably present.

Longing and fantasy predominate in Zhong Biao's acrylic *Art Life* (2002-03), a painting that would be perfectly at home in any Chelsea gallery. Rendered in a flat, bright style, the triptych suggests that a Caucasian boy's dreams, and thus the work's entire picture-world, correspond to a fictitious group-sex Web site called [www.eden.com](http://www.eden.com). One of the few other paintings of interest to a contemporary-minded viewer was Zhou Cangjiang's *Complementary*, April 2000 (2000), a yellow Twomblyesque abstraction.

More academic is Chen Yungang's statue *Lao-tzu, a Chinese Thinker* (2003), with the ripples of the black fiberglass sage's beard continuing into his robe and out across the floor. Li Xiuqin's *Chatling* (2003), in contrast, is a conversation grouping of nontraditional openwork bamboo furniture. The lifesize fiberglass caricatures of Chinese social types by Liang Shuo, like the tall cut-metal flowers with human heads by Ren Rong, are so broadly comic yet so unrelentingly earnest that one wonders if their creation--to say nothing of their inclusion in an international biennial--was some sort of coy esthetic joke.

No such tongue-in-cheek possibility could redeem the vast majority of international works at the Art Museum of China Millennium Monument. Installed in several curving galleries of the futuristic ovoid building, they ranged from the harmlessly pleasant--like American artist Colette Hosmer's valleyball-size earthen spheres--to the wretchedly silly, such as *News from a War* (1999), a smooth, armless plaster family group reacting in horror to a television set on their dining table, by Denmark's Bjoern Noergaard. In this mix, two full-length grisaille portraits of slacker youths by Tom Birkner (U.S.)--which might well have gone unnoticed in other shows--came off as fresh, honest and direct.

Many established names, including a laundry list of late '80s art stars, had been promised (if that is the right word) in advance publicity for the Biennale. Very few were actually represented. Most venerable was Sam Francis, with four paintings from 1966-86. Arman showed recent paintings of sliced-up

guitars and cellos, along with a similarly deconstructed life-size Discus Thrower (2002) in bronze. Several mottled, bright-color figure studies were offered by Sandro Chia. Enzo Cucchi had a round drawing mounted like a road sign on a metal red in front of Mimmo Paladino's triptych Laboratory (2000), consisting of drawing fragments affixed to heavy paper torn in three vaguely profilelike shapes and set in screened shadowboxes.

Though commendably catholic in its reach (artists from places like Mongolia, Syria, Lebanon, Serbia, Lithuania, Congo, Iran, Vietnam and even Monaco were given space), the Beijing Biennale as a whole was, curatorially, neither more nor less than an exercise in official taste--in other words, kitsch. It was predicated on the condescending assumption, articulated at several event functions, that the general public will eagerly embrace such "healthy" work in preference to the social provocations and rude smut of the misguided few. Indeed, the dubiously populist and "international" spirit of the event was perhaps best conveyed at the opening-day press conference, conducted entirely in Chinese with no translation. Ten top administrators, sitting presidium-fashion at a long table facing the audience, took turns praising the inoffensive--even uplifting--tenor of the work selected for the Biennale, and vividly deprecating the "perverse" and "elitist" independent shows one might happen to see around town.

### Freedom Factories

Like most forbidden fruit in China, these renegade exhibitions turned out to be readily accessible and irresistible. Two of them were mounted by the indefatigable Gu Zhenqing, who, in addition to organizing a group survey as part of the 2002 Pingyao photo festival, put on multiple alternative shows during the Shanghai Biennale in both 2000 and 2002 [see A.i.A., July '01 and Sept. '03]. This time, his endeavors--in widely separated venues--were sponsored by the Today Art Gallery, which is backed by a private real-estate development firm. (It is not unusual for commercial outfits in China to promote an "art center" as an amenity calculated to attract high-end clients to new business of residential spaces. Once the buildings are filled, the art programs tend to evaporate.) The theme of the two-part survey was, poignantly, the derealization induced by contemporary media overload.

"Secondhand Reality: Pre-Reality," showcasing 14 artists at Pingod Space, home to the Apple apartment-complex sales office, included a huge billboard photo that is both a sexy ad for the company--featuring the Chinese phrase "I want ... I want" scrawled in lipstick red over a shot of short-skirted legs propped up in a swank living room--and an element in photographer Chen Lingyang's ongoing semi-autobiographical "She" series. Myriad fluorescent tubes hanging vertically from the ceiling create a shower-of light effect as part of Yung Ho Chang and Wang Hui's sleek architectural conversion of the former brewery. Tang Hui presented several gray-toned paintings of his fantasy blob-shaped megalopolis enclosures. Wang Mai's phallic, person-size wooden construct Rising and Falling Tower (2003) is composed of a stela, carved with TV-show scenes, that can be slipped inside a pagodalike casing. Two stiff-backed security guards, wearing soldiers' uniforms at Gu Zhenqing's request, gave a creepily militaristic air to the viewing experience.

Further evidencing his flair for showmanship, Gu Zhenqing enlivened the Pingod Space with San Yuan and Peng Yu's huge digital photo of two pit bulls at each other's throats, then announced that a live face-off between fighting dogs would take place at the opening of the complementary Today Art Gallery exhibition "Secondhand Reality: Post-Reality," housed in a spiffy new office building on Wenhuiyuan Road. There, while waiting for the bout, attendees enjoyed wine and canapes as they took in the more sedate works on view. Standouts included Gu Dexin's cacophonous pile of tiny portable radios bearing BMW logos; Lu Hao's 1/5-scale models of the doorways of four major international museums (MOMA, Tate Modern, the Centre Pompidou and Beijing's National Museum); several massage chairs stripped down to their bizarre-looking inner mechanisms by Yang Zhenzhong; and works from Wang Xingwei's comic painting series in which he inserts his own likeness into famous art-historical scenes (Courbet's workmen, for example, do their stone-breaking on his stomach). The most impressive work in the 15-person show was Yin Xiuzhen's Weapons (2003), consisting of long knife-tipped poles, their

horizontally suspended shafts wrapped with bright fabric and yarn. These components, punctuated by disks that give them a form reminiscent of knights' lances, allude to the TV signal towers that have contributed so directly to the recent mass-marketing penetration of Chinese society.

As final preparations began, long after the appointed time, for Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's canine performance, two human actors in Sasquatch costumes worked the crowd, occasionally dropping to their knees before random victims to cry out "Mama" or "Baba" in a running gag orchestrated by Xu Zhen. When the guard dogs were finally brought in, they were tethered to treadmills that confronted each other in four pairs. At a signal, cardboard dividers were removed and the animals set the treadmill tracks spinning as they strained futilely to get at their opponents--thus giving substance to the work's wry title, *Controversy Model*.

"Alternative Modernity," an eight-person show at X-Ray Art Center (funded by the Guorui Investment Company), was dominated physically by Zhuang Hui's installation *Steel Workshop (2003)*, a full-scale reproduction, in utterly convincing Styrofoam, of the factory area where the noted photographer once labored. Other highlights included Shen Shaomin's pony-size hybrid insect made of animal skeletons and bone dust; four aquariums by Weng Peijun filled with doll-figure terrorism scenes; Peng Donghui's wall-filling photo grid, *My 999 Internet Friends*, composed of self-portrait snapshots (most of them sultry and glamorized) sent by young chat-room participants; and a black-and-white Yang Fudong video in which an urban couple, both eligible for Chinese Vogue, moon about on a fishing boat plying a river in the timeless countryside.

Courtyard Gallery, the city's top commercial venue for contemporary Chinese art, held a show of paintings by Berlin-based Ling Jian. The round close-up portraits--some of them displayed on walls thickly dripped by the artist with red-orange paint--are wry composites uniting Asian and Caucasian, male and female facial traits. According to gallery director Meg Maggio, a long-term American expatriate, they constitute an investigation, with implications for both secular and religious idealism, of the elusive nature of physical beauty and moral perfection.

Probably nothing better exemplifies the independent art scene in China at the moment than the startlingly rapid development of the new Dashanzi Art District--more widely and informally known as Factory 798, after its single largest exhibition space. In the past two years, leaseholders such as Xu Yong (a commercial photographer and travel-service owner) and Huang Rui (artist, designer and cafe proprietor) have transformed this sprawling complex of low-lying industrial buildings, several still used for light manufacture, into an evolving conglomeration of commercial galleries, alternative spaces, artists' studios, bohemian-chic restaurants, bars and boutiques reminiscent of mid-phase Williamsburg. The down-and-out rattiness of a previous generation's Beijing East Village has been replaced by an urban-pioneering, but thoroughly cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial ethos. One striking example of this is Timezone 8, a new shop boasting a global selection of contemporary-art books and magazines--a spinoff of the English language publishing firm and Web site, both dedicated to cutting-edge Chinese art, that U.S.-born Robert Bernell founded in 1997. All such enterprises lead a tenuous existence at present, since the area is subject to the city's intense urban renewal pressures. In a preemptive act of self-defense, the privately funded Beijing Cultural Development Foundation this spring launched a would-be "annual" festival, encompassing both the visual and performing arts, with special emphasis given to exhibitions and seminars on adapting former industrial spaces for cultural use [see "Artworld," May '04].

During the Beijing Biennale period, exhibitions in Dashanzi ranged from "Not for the Public," a clutch of deliberately grim-and-crude figurative paintings by Lu Shun, Yuan Guolei and Gao Yang, shown in a dark, non-refurbished space and described in an accompanying brochure by critic Li Xianting as exemplary of the positive and negative aspects of China's new artistic freedom, to delicate scroll abstractions by Lu Qing at the elegant commercial gallery Beijing Tokyo Art Projects. In "Bare Androgyny," curator Zhang Zhaohui--who trained at Bard College as well as several premier schools in

China--brought together gender-bending works by 20 artists. Among the usually sardonic pieces were Hu Ye's customized wall urinal for women and fake machine gun with tampon bullets, as well as Li Wei's large color photographs of a young woman literally playing with a man's head--sometimes like a teddy bear, sometimes like a soccer ball. The most technically impressive work in the show was Wang Qingsong's *China Mansion* (2003), a 12-by-118-inch color photo in which dozens of women models, playing both female and male roles, replicate the figure groupings of 21 iconic Western paintings such as Rubens's *Three Graces* and Manet's *Olympia*.

In a raw, cavernous building, University of Chicago scholar Wu Hung, chief curator of the First Guangzhou Triennial in fall 2002 [see A.i.A., Sept. '03], assembled a survey of photographs by famed East Village chronicler Rong Rong and his Japanese wife, Inri. Though the artists' more romantic works--featuring their own nude bodies in various bleak interior and exterior locales--are sometimes skeptically regarded by local art-scene veterans, the images showed well in the tough industrial setting.

Commanding the most space and attention, though, was "Left Hand, Right Hand," a rambling show of works by 18 German and 32 Chinese artists, organized by independent curator Feng Boyi, one of Hu Wung's three principal advisors for the Guangzhou Triennial. Installed in a former East German-built munitions factory, the exhibition highlighted a number of super-size pieces. Sui Jianguo's concrete statue of the right shoulder and raised arm of Mao remained wedged in the freight doorway it was too large to traverse. A score of fiberglass human figures by Zhang Dali, previously known for his graffiti profiles, dangled by their ankles from the ceiling above a deconstructed, red-painted truck and jeep by Chen Tong. Zhang Wang dubbed an old howitzer, positioned in the middle of the factory floor, his *Bonsai Weaponry* (2003). In Liu Jinghuo's *Sub-Health*, three full-scale figures, painted gold and surrounded by spilt pills, sprawl on a table before a headless bust. Xu Bing's square word calligraphy "art for the people" banner dialogued with painted slogans--"Mao Zedong is the red star in our hearts," etc.--left in faded characters on the 20-foot-high walls. Song Dong took up many yards of space with fake train cars and a row of lifelike policeman statues.

Works by the German-based artists were somewhat more compact: e.g., Sabine Gross's pink plastic blob topped by a monitor playing a video about art perception, or Constantino Ciervo's installation in which two men on separate video screens conduct a vociferous argument over Israeli-Palestinian issues. But the Chinese participants could be cuttingly effective on that scale, too, as seen in Wang Wei's tape of smiling, puzzled kids reciting old Maoist slogans in contemporary settings, and in Gu Dexin's household refrigeration units--one filled with frozen animal hearts, the other with frozen brains.

These last two works, like so many others in the freelance shows now proliferating in China, expose the blunt irony in official efforts to preserve dynastic traditions and the "Chineseness" of mainland culture. During the Cultural Revolution, after all, political ideologues did their best to eliminate both these legacies and thereby created, for the country's younger generations, something of a clean intellectual and emotional slate--upon which a great many ideas from the democratic, consumerist West have now been indelibly inscribed, to the commissars' rue.

### Pingyao Populism

The Pingyao photo festival offers another illustration of the two-steps-forward, one-step-back syndrome that currently afflicts the nation's contemporary-art agenda. In 2001, veteran photographer Si Sushi, working closely with authorities responsible for the 2,800-year-old walled city in Shanxi Province, established an annual survey of fine-art, news, travel and fashion photography calculated to bring new awareness--and more free-spending outsiders--to the UNESCO-listed world heritage site. The plan worked, producing greater media attention (Pingyao had long suffered a woeful lack of publicity even within China) and an increase in tourism from 600,000 to 2 million (mostly domestic) visitors annually. In 2002 a bold new element was added. To complement the international selections

overseen by French codirector Alain Jullien, Chinese photographer and architectural designer Gao Bo was commissioned to mount a survey of cutting-edge work by the country's best young camera artists. With the help of designer Shu Yang and independent curator Gu Zhenqing, he presented a wide-ranging, high-quality overview of what is known in China as "new" or "conceptual" photography [see A.i.A, Apr. '03].

Such was the success, or at least notoriety, of Gao Bo's project, however, that resentment immediately ensued. A formal debate was held at the 2002 festival between champions of the avant-garde work and spokesmen for the more established documentary and "beautiful scene" schools of photographic practice. In 2003, at the behest of regional politicians and members of several photographers' unions, Si Sushi, himself editor of the government-run People's Photography, reasserted primary artistic control, retaining Jullien's less threatening international section but completely eliminating the maverick New Photography division. Thus in 22 scattered venues, intellectually prosaic (though sometimes artsy) reportorial images increased exponentially--constituting the bulk of some 6,000 pictures grouped in 100 exhibitions. As a result, truly interesting pictures--which could, with diligence, be discovered in considerable quantity--had to be sought for amid a cascade of visual clichés.

The strongest concentration of adventurous Chinese work was found, as in the previous year, at the Cotton Textile Mill. At the rear of the complex, on the upper floor of the last building, the Centre Photographique d'Ile-de-France presented examples collected through the French ministry of culture's contemporary-art fund. (As in 2002, major financial support for the festival was supplied by the French firms L'Oreal and Alcatel.) Despite authoring a brochure essay drenched in old-style Sino-exoticism ("China--forever so diverse, so contradictory, so secret and fascinating ..."), curator Agnes de Gouvion Saint-Cyr assembled prime works by 13 New Photography stalwarts. Participants included Zhao Bandi (with images featuring his Baby Panda doll), Wang Ningde (carny dancers), Yang Fudong (his iconic beat-up yuppie in *The First Intellectual*), Shao Yinong & Mu Chen (their genealogy scroll), Shi Guorui (pinhole shots of the Great Wall) and Wang Dongfeng (disused provincial opera houses). Downstairs was a riveting exception to the festival's more anodyne documentary works--Jia Yu Chuan's black-and-white series "Female Drug Taker," chronicling the unusual trajectory of a heroin-addicted prostitute from lurid shooting up sessions through agonized withdrawal to group treatment and eventual smiling, well-fed recovery.

Elsewhere in the compound, "It Is I," a gathering of self-portraits by 21 Chinese artists, also skirted a cultural platitude--curator Monica Dematte's concern (expressed in an accompanying booklet) over the "common opinion" that "Western thought and behaviour are based on strong individualistic grounds while, in the East, the individual exists only in relation to the community." As she observes, that shopworn notion has been complicated into near oblivion by artists responding to new social realities in the People's Republic. Among the strategies of self-presentation employed in this show were Hai Bo's modest record of his own shadow; Jiao Jian's shots of himself curled, fetuslike, into impossibly tight wall niches; Wang Xingwei's views of his figure on a bicycle receding among tall buildings; Gu Zheng's multiple small snaps of his surroundings and possessions (shades of Sol LeWitt's 1980 *Autobiography*); Qin Siyuan's close-ups of body parts in deliberately bad focus; Hong Lei's digital prints of himself as a Buddhist apsara (angelic being) afloat with fighter jets or the U.S. Space Shuttle. A sad-eyed Mo Yi, as if to deliberately refute any suggestion of self-effacement, placed his bearded, red-lit visage in the foreground of multiple street scenes. In the same mid-complex venue, Ma Han offered a meditation on modernization in the form of color studies of traffic congestion, digitally merged into dizzying composite patterns entirely covering the walls and floor of the gallery space devoted to his mini-solo.

A dank building near the Cotton Textile Mill entrance housed Yang Qian's stylish, soft-focus interior shots, with superimposed English text ("Hotel," "Whispering," "A beautiful girl," etc.), that look like picture-phone versions of hip lifestyle ads. Cang Xin, with tougher artistry, presented color views of himself as an incongruous nude presence in unlikely settings: stretched out on a machine-shop floor, on a couch in the middle of a flat green field, inside a ring of fire on an ice floe, faceup amid lily pads, on

a red cot at a construction site. Across the entrance court, in a facing structure, could be found technically superb color close-ups of coiled cables and baby-doll parts by the widely exhibited Xing Danwen, whose work appeared recently in "The American Effect" at New York's Whitney Museum. Zhou Hai's series of black-and-white worker portraits, "The Unbearable Heaviness of Industry," was cannily installed in a room housing a huge machine left on-site in the former textile factory. Indeed, throughout the rambling mill, hundreds of images by scores of Chinese photographers were displayed propped on hulking mechanical spinners and looms or hand-clamped to metalwork racks. The no nonsense effect was particularly helpful to such works as Song Chao's overly Avedon-like portraits of coal-smudged miners. Other novel installations included photos by children laid on the ground beside an outdoor walkway and surrounded by the youngsters' chalked messages and designs. Works such as Wei Bi's figure studies and Luo Kaixing's heartfelt "Setting Sun of Hometown" series, meanwhile, were exposed to the elements on the walls and looming smokestack of an inner courtyard.

Around town, other Chinese photo-artists occasionally turned up among the documentarians. Notably, at the Confucius Temple, Zhuang Hui showed not his well-known group panoramas but a series of portraits of himself side by side with various workers, farmers and children. Yang Yong, a perennial bad boy of the Nan Goldin/David Armstrong school, represented Beijing's China Art Archives & Warehouse, directed by the legendary artist-provocateur Ai Weiwei, at the festival Warehouse (a.k.a. the Local Products Company). Yang's color images, for all their louche suggestiveness, are evocative more of discontent than of decadence: girls in high heels and jeans, seen from behind as they stare through, or hall climb, cyclone fencing that separates them from distant high-rise apartment blocks; a stylish woman in a bright red top standing, for no apparent reason, on the low counter of a neighborhood fruit stand.

The Warehouse, where the incursion of tourism was evident in the addition of a cafe selling \$3 coffees (the cost of a full dinner in a normal Pingyao restaurant), was the principal venue for Alain Jullien's foreign-artist picks. Sebastiao Salgado, with images of life in the remote reaches of South America, was the only major-name practitioner included, but engaging work came from a number of other sources. Lori Grinker (U.S.) submitted large, sharp-focus color observations of the aftereffects of war: former conscripts at the funeral of a fellow Dogon vet in Mali; a long-retired Nazi soldier with a picture of his army unit superimposed over his tired, middle-class figure; a maimed youth walking through a Thai village on the healed stumps of his legs. The series "Basketball in the Cities of France and the USA," by French photographer Jean-Francois Castell, features such juiced-up color scenes as a red-and-blue court with the Eiffel Tower in the background of kids playing in an urban lot with a shopping cart fixed to a wall for a basket. American Sylvia Plachy contributed oblique, sometimes motion-blurred takes in both color and black and white of nondramatic subjects such as three geese waddling across a winter field. John Demos (Greece) commemorates anachronistic village events in high-contrast black and white--e.g., an old woman in a black babushka with a box tied to her back crawling, as part of a religious ceremony, across the forecourt of a church where two young girls are at play. Malayan portraitist Diana Lui specializes in dramatic-looking individuals, often of mixed ethnicity, in culturally charged settings a schoolgirl (French with Colombian and Indian heritage, according to the wall label) standing in front of a tropical hammock; an Israeli performance artist alone in a dark city square, holding a white flag and dressed like a character out of Les Miz.

Here and there in the Old City, known for its 3,800 residential courtyards, a few other international artists managed to stand out despite the lack of lighting and labeling that plagued many installations. At the Qingxu Taoist Temple these included France's Alexandra Sa, who brought coals to Newcastle by importing her color lightbox "Chinatown" studies captured in the 13th arrondissement of Paris, and Christopher Taylor (England) with his haunting black-and-white views of abandoned buildings, empty rooms and piled-up stones. Classic portraits of 20th-century jazz greats like Chet Baker, by the veteran U.S. photographer William Claxton, were on view at the Confucius Temple, as were British artist Martin Parr's aggressively colorful tourist satires and wry close-ups of individuals asleep, sitting upright, on Tokyo subway trains.

In fairness, national documentation--the main thrust of the festival--certainly does have its virtues, especially in a country as varied and rapidly changing as present-day China. There was real historical resonance, as well as hokey charm, to the launch of the Pingyao International Photography Museum in an existing structure on the Confucius Temple grounds, Fronted by newly erected statues of photographers Sha Fee (1912-1950) and Wu Yin Xian (1900-1004), the facility opened with a sobering show of their up-close-and-personal images of Mao, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and the common soldiers and workers of the country's titanic 1926-49 armed struggles.

But current Chinese reportage works in PIP 2003, mind-numbing in their abundance, tended to be formulaic. Countless gritty black-and-white pictures brought home the truth that life in the hinterlands is still impoverished and grim, while an explosion of Western-style consumerism in the major cities has given rise to many odd visual juxtapositions (a Louis Vuitton bag next to a stone Buddha, etc.). At the other extreme is the color-fantasy utopia evoked by the veritable calendar art in festival shows like "Mountain and River."

Entirely absent from this pictorial account, despite the inclusion of some serious photojournalism, is the kind of political self-scrutiny represented by the uncompromising book *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution* (London and New York, Phaidon Press, 2003). Freshly released in the West at the time of the festival and much discussed by visiting critics, this compendium contains 285 images of public denunciation, punishment and execution during China's 1966-76 ideological frenzy Sobering vignettes--e.g., a provincial governor indicted before a hostile mob for offenses that included owning three watches--are interwoven with a personal reminiscence by the photographer Li Zhensheng, then a staff member of the northeastern Party run Heilongjiang Daily.

The quasi-journalistic nature of PIP 2003 did, however, foster some nonroutine experiences for art world visitors. Foreign press representatives included a former head of the U.S. Peace Corps in Borneo; a young man fresh from entering Kabul with the Northern Alliance (and now doing a story on basketball teams in the People's Republic); and a female British reporter, once an international development volunteer, who could discuss the various flavors of horse milk in Outer Mongolia. But relatively few Western viewers are inclined to spend, say, 13 hours by air plus 10 hours by train or bus to reach Pingyao. Fewer still are enthralled by the prospect of attending an official opening ceremony that resembles a combination political rally, folklore pageant and outdoor pop concert run by Party cadres (complete with bussed-in masses divided into color coded cheering sections). Fortunately, it is easy these days to find much more judiciously selected shows of contemporary Chinese art photography closer to home. For example, "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China," a major survey opening New York this June at the International Center of Photography and the Asia Society, is designed to provide a wide-ranging introduction to the field [see page 124].

The future of the Pingyao photo festival as a stimulus to significant photographic art-making now seems in doubt. L'Oreal, obviously attuned to the tastes of regional officials, gave its Best Chinese Photographer Award to Hei Ming for a colorful--and utterly innocuous--series depicting friendly looking Buddhist monks. (No hint here of earlier religious persecution of of recent clergy-led resistance in Tibet.) Already some art-scene observers in China report a backing-away from photography, as adventurous artists perceive more opportunity for impact in installation, painting and video. One can only hope that this chill may pass with the next shift in the PRC's erratic cultural policy.

Despite the academicians' revenge felt in Pingyao and Beijing last fall, it is important to bear in mind that things have been worse in the past--and could easily be so again in the future. Artificially sustained traditionalism, used as a socially mollifying agent, is at least better than outright repression. Though an occasional work is still censored, a show here and there forced to close, no one currently gets carted off for "reeducation" over an unapproved painting. There have been no exhibitions of "degenerate" art. Socialist Realism is no longer de rigeur for every artwork granted a public venue. If national and

regional ministries have done nothing to aid avant-garde artists, they have mercifully left them more or less alone. This benign neglect has fostered--or anyhow failed to squelch--a globally noted renaissance in Chinese art. Now it remains for the country's cultural bosses to take the radical step, as was done at the Shanghai Biennale in 2000 and 2002 and the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002, of putting responsibility back in the hands of curators who actually know and enjoy vanguard art.

The Third Pingyao International Photography Festival took place Sept. 16-22, 2003, in Pingyao, Shanxi Province. The First Beijing International Art Biennale was held Sept. 20-Oct 20, 2003. Both events were accompanied by dual-language catalogues in Chinese and English.

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