

Contemporary Chinese Art and Western Theory: The Question of Hospitality

Abstract: The paper takes a philosophical instead of a historical perspective to look at contemporary Chinese art, concerned with the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and “Western” theory. In the attempt to articulate the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and “Western” theory, the paper proposes “the question of hospitality” as its approach to the issue, asking who exactly the host and the guest are and what kind of dynamics is suggested by a relationship of hospitality. It begins by proposing a brief sketch of a philosophical theme or dilemma that is supposed to be crucial for the development of “theory” in the 1980 and reflects on its relationship to developments in contemporary Chinese art. The paper maintains that the “contemporary” implies a new position, a new orientation in relation to the circumstances and events of the present.

Keywords: hospitality; the contemporary; contemporary Chinese art; Western theory; subjectivity; the Other

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当代中国艺术与西方理论

——好客的问题

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摘要: 本文的关注点在于中国当代艺术与西方理论的关系,以哲学的而非历史的角度分析中国当代艺术。首先,本文以解构主义思维对于当代性的意味进行解析,提出当代性本质上意味着一种新的面向未来的取向、一种自我定位的方式。作者由此进入对于中国当代艺术的(非)界定,分析当代艺术与不同层面的关联,提出“好客”问题可作为论述中外主客关系的关键。在有关主客关系的论述中,首先从主体开始,进而以解构主义对主体的论述为基础梳理艺术中的凝视观念。这一独特的思路无疑使得本文具有较强的启发性。

关键词: 好客; 当代性; 当代中国艺术; 西方理论; 主体性; 他者

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Introduction: The Complexity of the Term “Contemporary”

To begin thinking of *contemporary* art (*dangdai yishu*), we need to remember that the term

“contemporary” does not have a simple location *in* time: the time of the “contemporary” is never strictly “new” nor is it a “now” in the narrow sense of the word. Bertolt Brecht puts this very concretely in a poem called “New Ages” whose first part reads as follows:

A new age does not begin all of a sudden.
My grandfather was already living in the new age
My grandson will probably still be living in the old one.
The new meat is eaten with the old forks. (Brecht, 386)

For Brecht, the meaning of the term “new” is not something that can be taken for granted because it is anchored in the complex structure of the “now.” The term “new” is always dependent on a certain understanding of what the “now” is; and since the “now” is never simple, the “new” or “the contemporary” cannot be addressed properly without remembering their internal complexity. Hence, we are first of all called to recognize that the “now” is not a homogeneous frame of reference. It is never simply what it is, but always contains more than it can coherently hold. The “now” is always already heterogeneous “the new meat is eaten with the old forks.” That is to say, that the eating of the meat, an action which, at first sight, may seem to be an immediate one, a simple event that is completely encapsulated in the frame of a “now”, is, in fact, complicated by the presence of a past that cannot be eliminated. In eating, we typically take the presence of the fork for granted. It is, for us, “simply given” and yet, the fork might bring with it a history of its own, a history that is part of our past and that, nevertheless, escapes us. We are never the masters of the cohesiveness of the moment.

As we turn to contemporary Chinese art, it is thus particularly fruitful to remember Brecht’s opening line. “A new age does not begin all of a sudden” and, similarly, it never ends in one specific point in time. The “now” of “the contemporary” neither begins nor ends in a clear and distinct way, but always involves a complicated dynamics whose multi-layered temporal structure must be taken into account. The situation is no different with the “contemporary art” of the 1980s in China that was the special concern of our conference. That is, while the art of this period is most obviously framed in terms of the manner it brings into crystallization processes that began in the 1970s and intensified after 1976, the significance of these processes is inseparable from older cultural dynamics such as, for example, those of pre-cultural revolution, but also, on the other hand, from what *will* become the “future” of the 1980s. In other words, the meaning of contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s is not given as an objective fact, but is constantly negotiating its essence within a dynamically changing horizon: the term “contemporary” applied to the art the 1980s takes on new meanings in the context of the mid 1990s as it clearly does for us today, 30 years later. To make this clearer, I am suggesting that the meaning of the art of the 1980s is precisely this movement of an ongoing articulation that continues till today and will continue further into the future. I believe that the relationship of an artwork to its future opens up important questions that are relevant to the way we conceptualize the “contemporary”. But, since I cannot develop my position on this here, I shall only say, at this point, that, in my view, the ability of an artwork to resonate a future, to bear a future, is essential to its being “contemporary”.

The term “contemporary” is not a neutral one, but typically resonates with an explicit or implicit statement regarding the need for a new position, a new orientation, in relation to the circumstances and events of the present. Set in the context of the post-cultural revolution, the meaning of Chinese “contemporary art” unfolds through a political and social matrix of interrelated forces, by which the art of the 1980s has differentially located itself in relation to official art, main stream academic art and traditional art. In this

context , there is a very complicated story — and probably more than one story — to be told about the dynamics and sub-dynamics that have been at work in creating the exciting developments that have taken contemporary Chinese art to its current positions: i. e. , about the relationship between artistic engagement and political or social engagement , between new and traditional forms of art , the place of the so called artworld , processes of internationalization and their effects on domestic developments , and then , more specifically , the exact “triggers” of the “contemporary” , the resistances , the possibilities and pitfalls of protest , the actions , reactions and counter-reactions , the hopes , frustrations , disappointments and new hopes , new achievements and new frustrations. These important issues call for the responsible work of the historian and indeed they have been addressed and treated by historians of art in different penetrating ways that will probably be developed further in the years to come. ^①

The perspective I shall offer here , however , is not historical , but philosophical , one concerned with the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and “Western” theory. I shall begin by proposing a brief sketch of a philosophical theme or dilemma that I find crucial for the development of “theory” in the 1980 and will reflect on its relationship to developments in contemporary Chinese art. Then , building on that dilemma , I shall propose a question that seems fruitful to me in the attempt to articulate the relationship between Chinese contemporary art and Western theory. This proposal is tied , as suggested by the title of my talk , to what I may be called: *the question of hospitality*. Hospitality is the way a host , who is at home , receives or treats a guest , a stranger , who comes from an outside. And , in the context of our discussion of contemporary Chinese art vs. western theory , we would ultimately want to ask: who exactly is the host and who is the guest here? Does Chinese art invite western theory into its home or does it search for a home within the horizons opened by western theory? And more fundamentally , what kind of dynamics is suggested by a relationship of hospitality? But , let’s wait with these questions and first turn to sketch the necessary background.

The Death of God and the Deconstruction of the Subject

In Europe and the US , the 1980s is a period in which post-structuralism and , more generally , postmodern thought has reached maturation. One of the clear signs of this maturation is the manner in which the work of a varied group of mainly French thinkers — e. g. , Foucault , Baudrillard , Deleuze , Derrida , Kristeva — dispersed itself through the different fields of the humanities and became part of what has been known as “theory”. The work of these thinkers has started to appear in the late 1950s and 1960s but its reception took time and their dramatic impact on art theory was felt only in the 1980s. ^②

One of the central traits of post-structuralist thought that echoed strongly in art theory is a wholesale critique of the “modernist subject” , that is , a critique of those conceptions of the human subject that grow out of the Cartesian tradition whose starting point for thinking is an autonomous , self-reflective , self-sufficient , pure “I” (a *cogito*) which grounds the possibility of meaning and upholds its space of possibilities. In many ways , the deconstruction of the unity and autonomy of this idealized subject echoes — and returns to — Nietzsche’s deconstruction of “the ultimate” organizing principle and measure of the meaningfulness of the word: God. Nietzsche (1844-1900) is a philosopher whose presence was consistently felt in continental philosophy also in the first half of the twentieth century and , in this sense , the manner in which post-structuralists embraced his thought , is also indicative of how they took to be more radical than their previous generation. But , let us recall , first , Nietzsche’s famous proclamation of the death of God in *The Gay Science*:

Haven’t you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the

marketplace crying incessantly, 'I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!' Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? Asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? Asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated? — Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Where is God?' he cried, 'I'll tell you! We *have killed him* — you and I! [...] Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again? Don't lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? — Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 119)

A godless world is a world with no organizing principle, one in which the possibility of meaning has neither ground nor measure. And as such, it is a world that can only sustain forms of human existence that are essentially uprooted. In the first half of the twentieth century, the story of continental philosophy may be told through the different attempts to respond and come to terms with the apparent consequences of the Nietzschean pronouncement. In this context, the uprooted-ness of the subject entails that selfhood and identity do not have any "inner" truth, but are always dependent on, constructed by, the anonymous differential matrix of public signification. In such a matrix, individuals can be "identified" (we say "he is X") but their individuality lacks any inner core. Everything is in the open. Nothing is hidden. Hence, while the conceptualization of the self as a social construct may be, in certain ways, reductive toward the enigma of subjectivity, it also allowed for a significant paradigm shift: it made it possible for theory to overcome the "myth of interiority" and give priority to dimensions of human existence that traditionally were understood as secondary to the essence of the subject: corporeality, gender, sex, temporality, history and class.

The development of these Nietzschean themes took on different forms and philosophical ramifications from phenomenology and existentialism to hermeneutics and critical theory. And, it is against this "thick" background, that post-structuralist deconstruction of the "monadological" subject can begin in the 1960s and mature in the 1980s. Hence, despite the clear influence of such thinkers as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, the new generation of post-structuralist thinkers (typically born in the 1920s-30s) was ultimately very critical of existentialism and phenomenology which was criticized for its failure to recognize the radical implications emerging from a critique of the modernist subject. According to post-modernist thinkers, philosophers of late or high-modernism (such as Heidegger or Sartre) uncovered indeed the essential embedded-ness of the self in public structures of significance and recognized the non-identity of the self, but, instead of fully deconstructing the inner kernel of the subject, remained committed to an ideal of an authentic subjectivity, that is, committed to the project of the self's radical realization of its individuality and freedom within the public space of power and anonymity. For the post-structuralist thinkers, the whole quest for authenticity has lost its meaning and needs to be abandoned. Authenticity or freedom no longer resonates as an option and is taken to reflect a naïve conception of the individual's position in the public domain, that is, a conception that fails to cope with the "death of the subject" or the "death of the author" whose other side is the articulation of the space of meaning solely in terms of what Foucault, for example, termed "regimes of power" or "regimes of truth".

Regimes of Vision

What is interesting for us, in this context, is that the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject has gone hand in hand with an anatomy and critique of a visual model that (allegedly) dominates the modern eye. This hegemonic model of vision — a “scopic regime” in the words of Martin Jay — is typically identified with the tradition of Cartesian rationality that is read in conjunction with Renaissance conceptions of perspective in the visual arts. Hence, from Lacan to Foucault to Irigaray, the postmodern deconstruction of the Cartesian subject also brings about a dramatic shift in the conceptualization of seeing, vision, and visibility. One of the clear signs of this conceptual change is the emergence of a predominant rhetoric revolving around the notion of “the gaze” which is articulated in terms of the constitutive role of “seeing” in the construction of identity and meaning. In this context, the eye (seeing) loses its traditional status as a receptive medium. It is no longer understood as that which simply mirrors the situations that it represents, but is granted a new role as an active participant in the shaping of that situation. This understanding has opened up a wide and variegated field of theoretical investigation into the manner in which the dialectics of seeing and being seen intersects with the relationship between power, construction of identity and the possibilities of resistance and subversion (e.g., Mulvey’s work on the male gaze, Foucault’s critique of sovereign power through the analysis of the *panopticon*).

In the context of art theory and artistic practice in the US and Europe, these themes were integrated in a wide range of varied forms that I cannot review here. Yet, to give one example of how these new positions were articulated within the rapport between art theory and the art-world, consider an important interview held in the late 1980s between art historian and critic T. J. Clark and photographer Jeff Wall. One of Clark’s main concerns in this interview is the question of how Jeff Wall understands the structure of subjectivity that underlies his work. Clark poses the question in the context of a possible critique against the manner in which Wall’s strong pictorialism may be said to conform to a regime of art, to a kind of gaze and a specific configuration of the relationship with viewers which are governed by a notion of a unified “monadic” subject (Clark et al). For Clark, it is not completely clear what kind of relationship exists between Wall’s pictures and the patterns of the gaze characteristic of that self-enclosed, self-identical subject whose inception is associated with Cartesianism and whose more contemporary and less conspicuous forms continue to dominate the age of late capitalism? Can Wall’s controlled, hypnotically powerful pictures challenge that “tremendous field of force pulling the art object back into a structure which reproduces the monadology of [its] maker” (Clark et al, 213) — or do they ultimately abide by it, dictating to the viewer a reading in terms of that entire ideological protocol, that “regime of individualism, personhood and representation” (Clark et al, 215). Wall agrees that “the modern political, social subject of bourgeois society [...] has gone through a devastating critique [...] from which everyone seriously involved in art has learned a great deal.” And, yet, he refuses to explain his work in terms of the binary opposition operative in Clark’s question. Wall’s interesting response to Clark deserves a separated discussion (see Kanaan), yet, for us, at this point, what matters more is the understanding of how dominant in the field of art was the intertwined rhetoric of deconstructing the subject and subverting the power of the hegemonic gaze.

Points of Intersection

Now, as we turn to look for analogies and points of intersection in contemporary Chinese art, the question

of the hegemonic gaze and the possibilities of its subversion, seems pertinent. In this context, the single act of taking a photograph — which has been trivialized in the West — has had the potential of becoming a subversive form of action, an act of resistance to the powers regulating the appearance of meaning and, in this sense, artistic action has carried direct social and political weight. And yet, in the context of the present discussion, what seems to me important to notice is that the “post-modern” concerns that have matured in the West in the 1980s, were not yet relevant, at that same period, for Chinese artists of the first decade after the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, with time, the deconstruction of images of sovereign power will become predominant in Chinese art, most clearly, perhaps, around the different (cynical, witty, elegiac, bitter, critical, nostalgic) forms of treating the figure of Mao. The political materialization of the “death of God” or the “dissolution of the law of the father” is, in many respects, *the* ultimate form of deconstruction. And, in the context of art, this dissolution of power-structure finds its expression in artistic action vis-à-vis the domination of the pictorial space and, more generally, the sphere of the imagination (or, the imaginary) by the captivating and deeply entrenched images of propaganda and official art (e. g., Wang Guangyi, Zhang Hongtu, Zhang Dali, Sheng Qi).^③ The critical artistic preoccupation with the image of an omnipotent and omnipresent leader has had clear parallels, as it is interesting to notice, also in Russia, starting with the Perestroika in the 1980s and most clearly with the dissolution of the Soviet Union (e. g. the work of Komar and Melamid). But, deconstruction of visual hegemonies can just as well take on more general forms, as has indeed occurred in Chinese contemporary art in the works of artists challenging the very structure and *telos* of the pictorial, that is, the presentation mode of “pictures”, i. e., visual totalities that are organized and regulated by a grammar of composition, a syntax, and the determining, delimiting, presence of an explicit or implicit frame (e. g. Wu Shanzhuan). And in this respect, we may find already in the first tendencies of abstract Chinese art after the Cultural Revolution, works that are artistically more radical than certain confrontational treatments of the image of Mao Zedong made twenty or thirty years later.

But, to return to the relationship with Western theory, we should notice that the artistic forms of opposition or antagonism to hegemonic (official) structures in the first generations of Contemporary Chinese art are usually not types of deconstruction, at least not in the postmodern sense of the term. The major concerns of the critical artistic practice developing in China in the 1980s and 1990s seem, in my view, to bear more similarities to social and existential themes that, in the West, are typically associated in the West with high modernism. My impression (indeed, only an impression which is based on the reading of just a limited number of art texts of the period, all in translation) is that during these years, the central concerns of the newly emerging artistic discourse in China (e. g., in the writings of Li Xianting) revolved around questions concerning the relationship between the individual and society, the meaning and possibilities of radical individuality or the singular identity of the artistic act. In a corollary manner, it is not surprising that the Western philosophical protagonists that play a role in Lu Peng’s and Yi Dan’s important book *Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989* do not belong to the post-structuralists of the 1960s generation, but are the pillars of high modernism, from Nietzsche to Freud to Sartre.

In addition to the kind of “delay” that is always part of an inter-cultural transmission of texts and ideas, we should also remember that in the 1980s Western (unlike Chinese) intellectuals, activists and artists operate with a sense that the “the big drama” is already behind them. The 1980s are a post-drama or a post-trauma: leaving behind the student’s revolution, anti-war protest movements, struggle for civil rights, hippie culture, etc. I think that for intellectuals, the 1980s brought with them a certain recognition of failure, of betrayal and even self-betrayal. The optimism of the protest movements ultimately did not bring about a better world and capitalism, only entered a new and harsher, a more sophisticated, all absorbing, phase, the so-called “late

capitalism". Hence, if you take the philosopher, sociologist and critical thinker Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), who in the 1970 still spoke about how individualistic action such as graffiti tagging, for example, can subvert the hegemonic structures of the sovereign power, by the mid 1980s, Baudrillard argues that criticism and protest have, in themselves, become symptoms of a new order of nihilism. This kind of nihilism is, according to him, "more radical, more crucial than any of its prior and historical forms" because it is "indissolubly that of the system, and that of all the theory that still pretends to analyze it" (Baudrillard, 159). In China, in contra-distinction, the 1980s are times that are, in this respect, completely different as the "big drama" or, again, "the big trauma" is in the process of unfolding and for art and artists new horizons are opening up for the first time after long years. Whereas the 1980s are, in many ways, the years of the "closure of the American mind" (to use Alan Bloom's title), it seems that for the Chinese intellectual or artist the situation is different, that despite great difficulties and uncertainties, these are years with a horizon of optimism, an open future (Am I right on this point?).

The Ethical Turn of Emmanuel Levinas

Postmodernism, however, had more than one kind of "afterlife". And, side by side, with a position such as Baudrillard's, we find a very different position in the thinking of French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), who is known above all for his ethics or, more precisely, for the ethical turn that he had created in philosophy, precisely in times where the ethical seems to have disappeared from critical discourse.^④ What is interesting for us in Levinas is his insistence on the centrality of a notion of "subjectivity" to philosophical thought, in spite of the postmodern critique of the subject. That is, Levinas, who clearly shares certain aspects of this critique, refuses to embrace it in any absolute manner. For him, the categorical rejection of the notion of the unified (modernist) subject is just as problematic as its unqualified acceptance. In other words, while rejection and affirmation are indeed diametrically opposed in their relation to the subject, the strict opposition between these positions ineluctably confines them to the same conceptual, fundamentally binary field — and it is precisely the parameters of this field that Levinas seeks to subvert.

The problem with both (positive and negative) positions is, according to Levinas, the manner in which they leave out of the philosophical picture an essential question: the question of the Other's presence vis-à-vis the self. That is, for him, both the affirmation and the deconstruction of the unified, self-identical, subject are philosophical acts that are structurally forgetful of an ethical demand whose origin is the unique presence of the other person. In other words, Levinas's ethics is based on a unique understanding of the concept of the "Other", on the recognition of a radical alterity toward which systematic-conceptual thought has remained closed and blind. According to Levinas, this closure of Western thought reproduces a central tendency in our daily life: the tendency to forget, to ignore, to turn one's back on the demand of an extreme otherness constantly present in our lives — the alterity of the other person.

Yet, the widespread deafness in the history of philosophy toward the radical presence of the Other, is not only a philosophical symptom. It is not "some abstract schema" but "it is man's ego." The erasure of otherness and the rule of "sameness" grow naturally from the ordinary and originate, more specifically, in patterns through which we live and organize — each one of us — our conception of selfhood. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas provides an intricate account of the connection between the banality of the everyday ego and the hegemony of identity and sameness. Consequently, he reads the central *logos* of Western philosophy as the "plot of the ego", emphasizing its continual concern for the affirmation of self-identity. "every philosophy is [...] an egology" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 50).

Against this background, Levinas seeks to develop a philosophical critique that “does not reduce the Other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same” (*ibid.* 43). He looks for a philosophy — and more generally of a human position in the world — that allows itself open and even shaken by dimensions of otherness that it cannot contain. This is what he understands as ethics. He writes:

A calling into question of the same which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other, ethics. The strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (*ibid.* 43)

The Question of Hospitality

The openness to the other person (*as an Other*) is the grounding condition of ethics. For Levinas, the inner form of such an openness is the relationship of hospitality. To put this differently, our openness to the unique presence of the other person can be made possible only within a certain structure of subjectivity that is, in its very essence, relational. That is, the concept of the human subject does not demarcate a closed monadic, being. But, a being that is always already — before anything else — in a relation with others. It is relational and, as such, hospitable. That is, hospitality is the relational inner structure of our subjectivity. This implies that to be a human subject is always already to have a relational structure whose measure is ethical. Hospitality, in other words, is the structure of what Levinas terms “an ethical subjectivity”.

Now, in what way can Levinas’s understanding of hospitality and ethical subjectivity illuminate for us the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and Western theory? Hospitality is a relationship by which one welcomes the Other into one’s home. At a first glance, this relationship seems to involve two completely separate autonomies: on the one hand, the existence of the one who has a home and feels at home and, on the other hand, an external existence of an outsider, a stranger to that home, who, upon decision, may be taken in as a guest. Yet, is this relationship really so clear and simple? If we take seriously the idea that the structure of subjectivity is, in its essence, relational, then we must also recognize that the condition of having a home and being hospitable is more complicated than it first seems. Indeed, if subjectivity resembles a home, then this home is not a space of a single identity closed within itself but, rather, an open heterogeneous space of which the outside, the stranger, is already part. Subjectivity means having a home which is never completely yours — a home which is always shared, in unexpected and unpredictable ways, by the outsider. The word hospitality comes from the Latin word *hospes*, an interesting word due to its plurality of senses: *hospes* means “host” (the one who owns the home and does the welcoming of the outsider) but it also means “guest” and “stranger” (indicating the one entering the home from an unfamiliar outside). In French, the word for “host”, *hôte*, functions in a similar way. Is this plurality of meanings just a linguistic coincidence or is there an internal connection between host, stranger and guest?

Derrida who, in his later writings reflected on and developed Levinas’ conception of hospitality, writes:

The host who welcomes, the one who welcomes the invited guest, the welcoming host who believes himself the owner of the house, is in reality a guest welcomed in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home, he receives hospitality from his own home — which ultimately does not belong to him, the host as host, is a guest. (85)

For Derrida, the condition of being a host is intrinsically unstable. While the position of the host seems to epitomize the secure identity of being-at-home, this condition is, in fact, one that challenges the identity of our internal space. In fulfilling our task as hosts, we wish to accommodate our guests; and yet, real guests are outsiders, strangers whose foreign presence is essentially disconcerting. The guest makes present the existence of an unknown exteriority, which it is never clear if the host can accommodate within the given rules governing the home's identity. The guest is a sign of the fact that we are masters of our home, but, at the same time, the guest's presence is precisely what calls into question the possibility of such mastery. The condition of being a host, of having a guest, of allowing a stranger in, is also a condition of an unresolved uncertainty — a crisis of knowledge — regarding the unity, identity and cohesion of our home. Can we really accommodate the stranger's ultimate needs without challenging the self-identity of our home? For Levinas, this dilemma of hospitality is precisely the paradox of responsibility. Hospitality is a structure of a relationship in which we have a clear responsibility toward the Other, without having any given code, a recipe or knowledge of what this responsibility means exactly. It is in this manner that we should also understand the connection between hospitality and subjectivity: to be a human subject is to be responsible for the Other, while the conditions of such a responsibility cannot be mastered and are never completely known.

Responsibility, however, is not an abstract condition. It is concrete and most clearly manifest in the need to respond to the presence of the other person, a presence that is an integral part of who we are.^⑤ A human subject is a being that is torn from its centre of gravity by the proximity of the Other. And, responsibility, in this sense, is not an external feature, a contingent option for, our subjectivity but, on the contrary, its inner form. “To be an I,” Levinas writes, “means then not to be able to escape responsibility” (Levinas, *Humanism* 33).

Conclusion

Now, how can this kind of articulation of subjectivity illuminate for us the question of the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and Western theory? This question is typically addressed in a historical manner, but it may also be posed, as I have tried to do, at a level of principle: Does Chinese art really need Western Theory as its guest? In what sense does it want to become a guest in the West? And, regarding the West: Can Western theory host contemporary Chinese art? Should it aim to make contemporary Chinese art a guest within its Western home? Is that possible at all? What would be the meaning of such a host-guest relationship?

Here, I think that our discussion of relationality, hospitality and responsibility carries a valuable lesson. First, to recognize the primacy of the relational is to understand that Chinese contemporary art and Western theory are always already in a relationship, regardless of the specific manner in which they actually relate — or avoid relating — to each other. Embodying the structure of hospitality, this relationship is essentially unstable. And, in particular, it leaves unclear who the host and who the guest is in this relationship. Moreover, it leaves open the more acute question of what it means, in this relationship, to be host or guest. And yet, against this background of uncertainty, one dimension of this relationship does show itself clearly: responsibility, that is, the need to respond to the Other who nevertheless remains an enigma. How can such a responsibility show itself in the work and compartment of a Chinese artist or a Chinese art critic (living in China or living in Europe or the US)? How can it show itself in the case of a Westerner looking at, theorizing about, or buying contemporary Chinese art? These are, as suggested, open questions. In our present global age of information, it is important to preserve a sense of unknowing. Acknowledging our responsibility in the face of such

unknowing is the imperative of hospitality.

Notes

- ① In preparing for the writing of this essay , I have learned a lot from , and am indebted to , the critical works of Li Xianting , Wang Nanming , and the comprehensive scholarship of Wu Hung.
- ② In this context , however , we also need to remember that in relation to the intellectual transformations of which we speak , “the West” is not one homogeneous entity with a homogeneous form of reception , but , a multi-level linking of very different kinds of sociologies and politics of knowledge. The “importing” of certain ideas , themes , questions that emerged in philosophical discourses in Europe into American theory of art had probably been the central axis for intellectual transformation that concerns us. Yet , French philosophy , for example , had found its way into other countries in East Europe , South America , North Africa or into my own country , Israel , also via alternative routes depending on other non-Americanized francophone cultural agents and processes.
- ③ In this context , the interesting relationship between the critical artistic treatments of Mao’s image and Andy Warhal’s images of Mao of the 1970s calls for a discussion.
- ④ I develop the connection between Levinas’s ethical turn and its implications for a new understanding of visuality in my *The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze* , I. B. Tauris , London & New-York , 2013.
- ⑤ “Response” and “responsibility” are words that are derived from the same root.

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