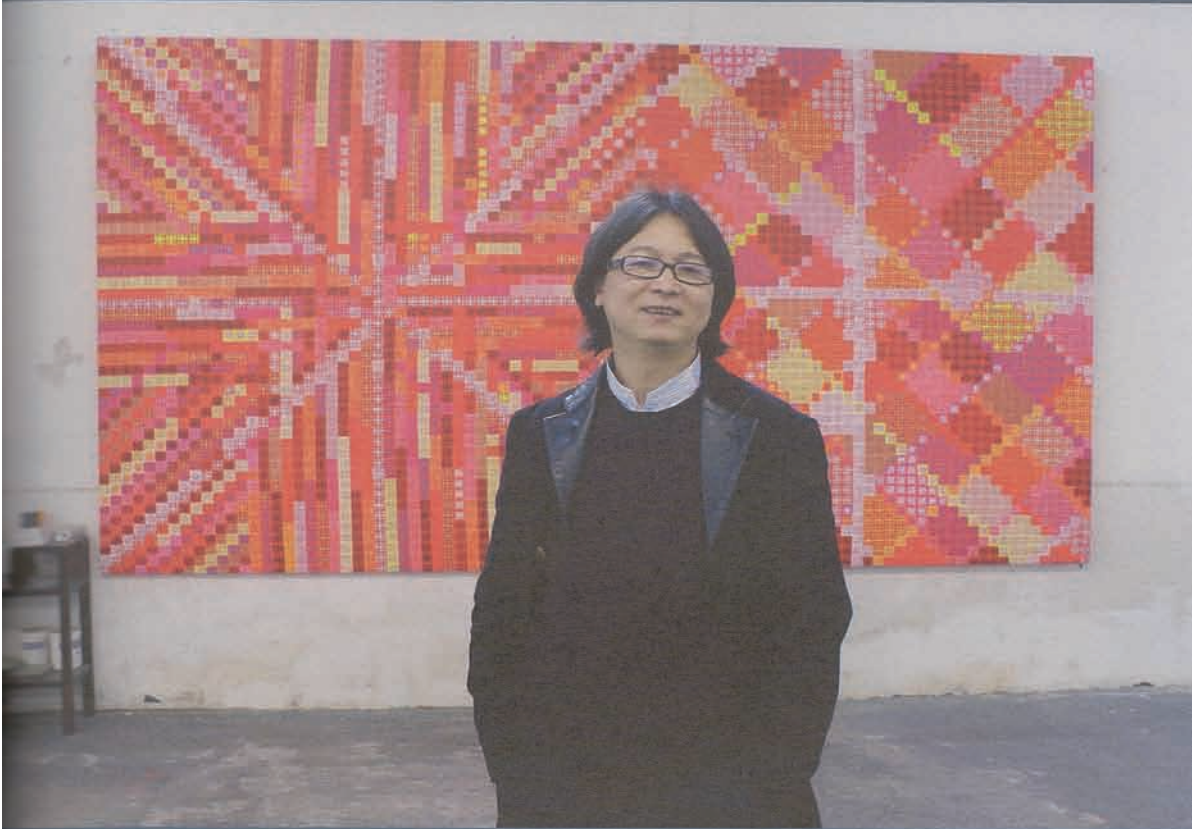


Ding Yi: The Magician of Crosses

Cao Weijun

The virtues of painting, therefore, are that its masters see their works admired and feel themselves to be almost like the Creator.

—Leon Battista Alberti¹



Ding Yi in his studio. Photo: Zheng Shengtian.

In many people's eyes, Ding Yi is a simple person: in his name, there are simply three brushstrokes;² in his works, he simply uses cross-shapes; and in his artistic career, some say he has simply never changed his style. "Simple," then, becomes something like a pronoun representing Ding Yi's unique spirit of self-discipline. In his paintings since the late 1980s, the crosshair—a shape most commonly represented as intersecting lines associated with precision devices such as telescopic sights and optical instruments used for astronomy, surveying, and graphic design—is the only visual element that he has allowed himself to use. Within each square inch of these markings, he leaves traces of his spiritual inner power on the canvas, stroke-by-stroke, layer-by-layer. But rather than say that this power is derived from his individual will, after twenty years of intense experimentation let us say that it originates from his own understanding and perception of life. Yet the dimensionality of these simple, seemingly boring, cross-shapes, as well as the grounds that support them, is constantly evolving. And it seems that this evolution, coupled with the artist's spiritual power that accumulates therein, expresses Ding Yi's reflection upon the era in which he lives.

Since 1988, Ding Yi has repeated the simple act of painting crosshairs again and again on his canvases every day, and this labour remains an extreme challenge for both his body and mind.

Ding Yi clings to this belief: painting is a gate that opens onto the contradictions of the real world, yet, truth is, in fact, impossible to attain. So the only thing that he can do is to experiment with myriad possible methods in order to seek a means of approaching truth,³ and the crosshair is the “fundamental doctrine” that he has chosen to employ in his attempt to open the gates to truth. The truth that Ding Yi seeks can only be attained through the complete liberation of the free will of the individual. Thus, for the past twenty years he has persisted in painting every possible variety of crosshair, and he has dedicated his life to pursuing the elusiveness of truth.

ARTISTIC ATTITUDES IN THE 1980s

When he was seven years old, Ding Yi, a naturally introspective person, began to develop an interest in art. In 1980, at the age of nineteen, he entered the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College. At that time, Chinese society was already being exposed to exhibitions of Western art which allowed the public to gain some knowledge of modern art from Europe and America. For example, it was at the exhibition *American Paintings from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts* that Ding Yi first saw works of American abstract art.⁴ *Painting for the 80s*, an exhibition of Chinese artists organized by the Shanghai “Grass Grass” group at the Luwan District Cultural Hall in February 1980, made apparent the desire of the Shanghai art community to experience new artistic styles.⁵ Joan Lebold Cohen has written that “this exhibition was remarkably strong; it included both Cubist and Expressionist experimental works, based on styles the artists had seen in books. . . . The exhibition . . . showed the [germination] of a new Chinese style.”⁶ About that era, Ding Yi once reminisced, “At the beginning of the 1980s, I was studying at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College. My classes were beginning to include a few imported elements of Western modern design. Naturally, some ideas of modern art also filtered in. This had an impact on me.”⁷ At that time, groups of artists were spontaneously forming throughout China. The members of these groups were filled with illusions about the West—about Western ideologies, Western lifestyles, and Western artistic concepts. Wu Hung has noted that “the exhibitions of the Stars Group in 1979 and 1980 marked the beginning of post-Cultural Revolution experimental art by defining an unofficial position in the Chinese art world.”⁸ From that moment on, the influence of Western art, in conjunction with the influx of new ideologies and transnational capital, began to inundate Chinese society. What Ding Yi felt was not merely excitement; in fact, to an even greater degree, he experienced perplexity, a perplexity derived from the conflict between the burdens of tradition and the self-expressive style of the West. To fulfill the aspect of self-expression, he desired to possess a personal language that would allow him to manifest his deep affection for art.

Over the course of both the history of modern China and its urbanization, Shanghai has always assumed the role of a pacesetter in the reception of Western culture. At the end of the 1970s, under the influence of the political and economic policies of openness to the West, Shanghai regained its past splendor. In reviewing Shanghai’s embrace of foreign cultures over the course of its history, it became, during its time as a semi-colonial city, the most “international” metropolis in Asia. The modernist qualities that it began to accrue were never completely buried during the Cultural Revolution; they were merely waiting to be re-awakened. The consciousness fostered by this city’s civil society—which possesses a tender and self-controlled temperament—has given rise to a cultural environment of independence and plurality among the city’s intellectuals and artists.⁹ In truth, Ding Yi’s works embody the artist’s different emotions regarding urban culture, especially that of Shanghai, and the rapid transformations of this outer world merge with the artist’s own inner experience of them and create a precise, comprehensive response to these phenomena. Since his youth, Ding Yi has constantly studied Shanghai’s peculiarities both present and past, and this early research foreshadows his later works that take this city as their subject.

THE EARLY MELODIES OF "CROSSES"

Besides those painter-peers who often discuss their artistic viewpoints with him, there are two people who have had a particularly important impact upon Ding Yi's artistic practice. They are Yu Youhan and Hans van Dijk.¹⁰

In 1981, when Ding Yi was studying at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College, he met Professor Yu Youhan, who was, without a doubt, a torchbearer on the path of Ding Yi's early artistic development. For example, Ding Yi first learned about the art of Maurice Utrillo when he borrowed a catalogue of paintings from Yu, and he immediately became fascinated with this French painter. For several years, Ding Yi was attracted to the depth of desolation in Utrillo's work from the early twentieth century, for, through Utrillo's brushwork, common Parisian street scenes received profound interpretation. If Ding Yi's study of the paintings of Utrillo allowed him to gain a deeper understanding of both painting and urbanism, then it was Yu Youhan's interpretation of the works of Paul Cézanne that truly opened the door to modern art for him. Ding Yi has noted that Yu Youhan "taught us to figure out what Cézanne was. At that time, to be able to understand Cézanne was a watershed. It was extremely important."¹¹ Studying and researching the art of Utrillo and Cézanne was something that many Chinese artists did when pursuing a manner of creating that would combine materials and philosophies from both China and the West. The artistic style that mixed Chinese traditions with Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Western influences—a style developed by Chinese artists of an earlier generation, such as Zao Wou-ki, Guan Liang, Wu Dayu, and others who traveled to France—also made a strong impression upon Ding Yi.



Ding Yi, *Heroism*, 1983, oil on canvas, 78.5 x 95 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghaiART, Shanghai.

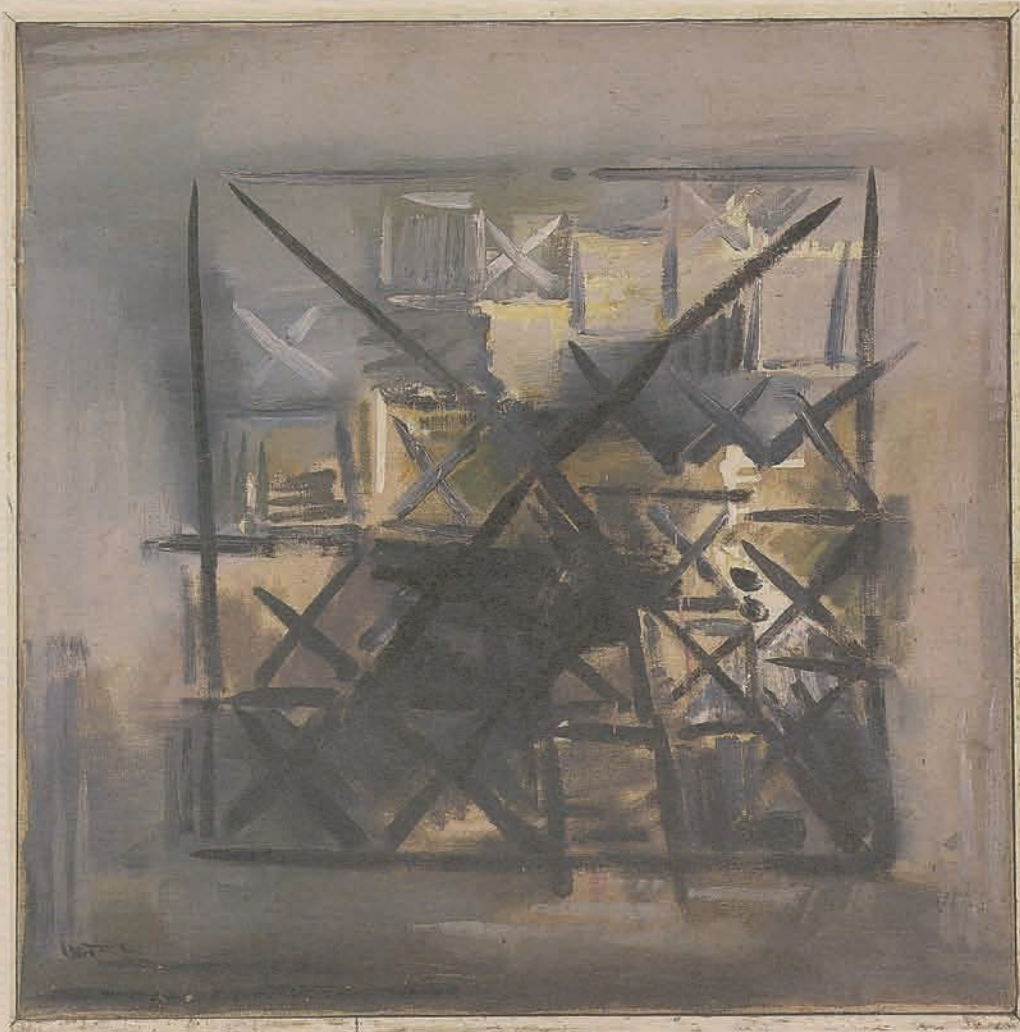
Ding Yi, who has always maintained a certain distance from the mainstream, began to notice that the mainstream works being produced at this time (1980–85), and the questions about which he himself most cared, were becoming uncomfortably close.¹² Seeking to maintain his artistic independence, Ding Yi began to grow weary of following the well-trodden paths of others, be they the paths of Chinese tradition or of the West. He decided to rid himself of these burdens, resolving instead to use the simplest means of expression to communicate his inner perceptions. By 1983, the painterly elements taken from Utrillo and Cézanne were

already beginning to vanish. In *Heroism*, for example, an important early abstract work, he was influenced more by the rebellious spirit of Latin American revolutionary films, which constituted an attempt to create a stirring atmosphere of fearlessness and valour.

During the early 1980s, Ding Yi struggled intensely with confusion about his philosophy and art practice. This was a moment when everything, from the development of his thinking to the practice of his artwork, was filled with experimentation. While his first *Appearance of Crosses* paintings were not exhibited until the Shanghai Art Museum's Exhibition of Today's Art in 1988, the crosshair had already been revealed in his 1986 work *Taboo*, a hint of things to come.¹³ 1985 was an important year in Ding Yi's artistic career; having experienced a certain doubt and despair regarding any possibility of creating a combined style of Chinese and Western art, he had by now completely abandoned his adherence to Utrillo and Cézanne.

EQUIVOCATION ABOUT PAINTERLINESS

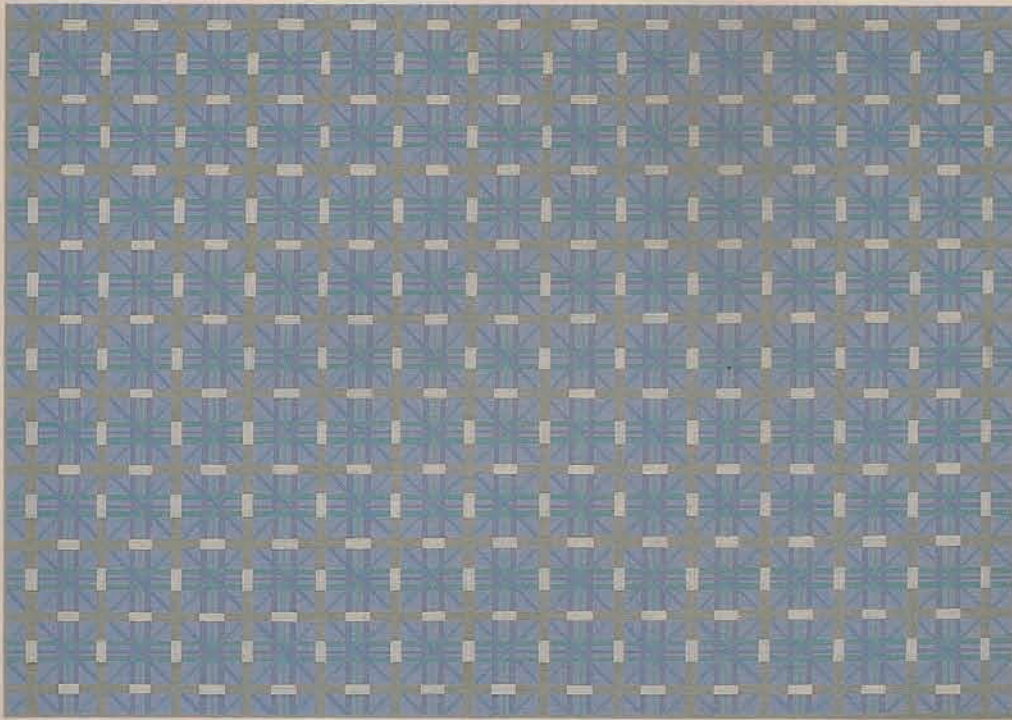
The developmental path of contemporary Chinese art after 1979 is inseparable from the transformations that have taken place in Chinese society and politics. The principal goals pursued



Ding Yi, *Taboo*, 1986, oil on canvas, 84 x 84 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

at that time were demands for social change and freedom of speech. Meanwhile, in new Chinese art, the mania of the “Cultural Revolution” was quickly transformed into another sort of feverish emotion. During the post-1979 period, many artists uncritically accepted foreign culture; more precisely, they began to blindly adopt Western modern art theory and practice as their point of reference. In an interview after the first Stars exhibition in 1979, Wang Keping summarized this attitude: “Käthe Kollwitz is our banner-carrier; Picasso is our herald.”¹⁴ The first critical turn in the history of Chinese avant-garde art after the economic reforms of the 1970s was the China/Avant-Garde exhibition, held in Beijing in February 1989. Almost all major styles of Western modern art invented over the past century could be found in this exhibition; Ding Yi’s works, too, were included. The two paintings that he displayed used the crosshair motif, and, seemingly the calmest pieces in the whole exhibition, he was able to maintain a sensibility that was distinct from the other work.

Certainly, the fact that the crosshair is pure, allowing little space for associative interpretation, was a major reason for his choice of this motif. Ding Yi rejected the Symbolist and Expressionist art forms that were popular at the time, for he did not relate to the emotion that permeated these two styles of art. He hoped that his own works would, both in their conceptual and visual aspects, exhibit a greater sense of rationality. Caught between Chinese traditional art and the myriad materials and styles of art “imported” from the West, Ding Yi experimented extensively with everything from pencil on paper to ink painting to performance art. Yet, having done this, he decided that he would “simply [seek to] return painting to the essential quality of form, of form as spirit.”¹⁵



Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses 89-6*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

THE ORIGIN OF *APPEARANCE OF CROSSES*

Ding Yi recalled that, “at that time [the mid-1980s], I was pondering two questions. One was the question of breaking through the Expressionist style that was popular then; the other was the question of transforming inner energy.” He continued, “The possibility of breaking through was to make art in a manner that was not art-like, to sift away all skill, all narrativity, all painterliness. That most familiar printer’s mark, the crosshair, then became my symbol. People often ask me what its meaning is. Actually, in my paintings, it has no meaning.”¹⁶ In Monica Dematté’s opinion, the use of the crosshair constitutes a sort of accident that was made theoretical by Ding Yi. He has transformed the simplicity and practicality of the cross design into a colourful and visually rich material,¹⁷ and he rid his work of the complication and burden of cultural meanings and forms.

Ding Yi has said, “When I began to paint *Appearance of Crosses*, I chuckled to myself, for no one understood my paintings. They thought this was mere fabric design. But this was exactly what I wanted. Hans [van Dijk] understood my work. He saw that exhibition [in 1988], and in 1989, he explicitly came to my studio and extensively discussed with me the structure and spirituality of my works. This had a great impact on my later development.”¹⁸ In an interview, Li Xiaofeng once asked, “Over the course of Chinese avant-garde art, it almost seems that there has been a certain taboo—namely, [a taboo against] the craft-like nature of works. . . . Is this accidental? Or is this a result of deep consideration?” Ding Yi replied, “Only art that isn’t art-like is art. I am convinced that breakthrough requires that I make use of other elements.”¹⁹

APPEARANCE OF CROSSES: THE PERIOD OF TECHNICAL PRECISION

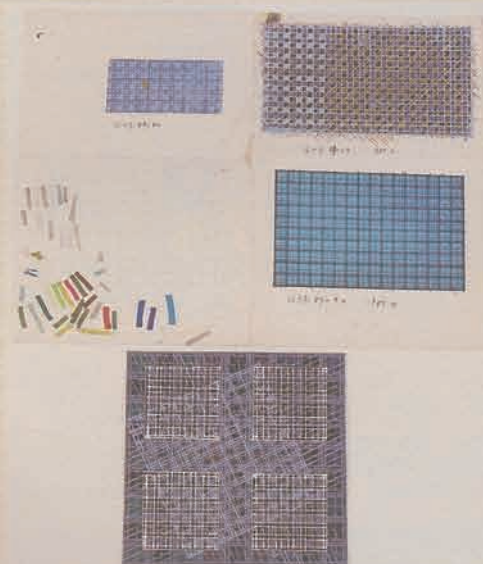
Having had a starting point that was not adopted by his peers is something that brings satisfaction to Ding Yi. Non-painterly painted works were something inconceivable for almost every artist in China during the late 1980s. From conception to execution, he made nearly impossible demands upon himself in developing simplicity and precision in his work. In his first work, *Appearance of Crosses I*, the picture plane was divided into three strips—red, yellow, and blue, respectively. The crosshair design element that he had appropriated from the printing industry filled the canvas with its black forms; in fact, the process of completing each of his works during this period was

not unlike the working process of a graphic designer. In order to ensure the greatest precision in his lines and colours, he made use of a ruler, tape, and drafting pen. Ding Yi forcefully controlled the pictorial effect of the painted canvas and cleared away any possible stray traces left on the canvas. The dimensions of his works were generally large, and given the demands of such a precise manner of creating and completing the paintings, the physical and mental burden of such a process was intense.

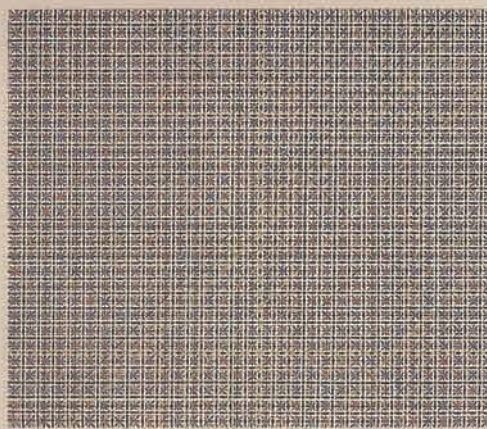
After more than four years of experimentation during this early period, the language of a rational art that Ding Yi employed found full embodiment on his canvases. His art thus approached what he understood as the spirit of the times. However, the question of whether or not the precision of his technical execution would be able to aid him in giving greatest expression to spiritualism quickly confronted him. On the one hand, excessively careful execution almost inhibited the possibility of the aleatory—yet the aleatory was precisely what Ding Yi unconsciously sought to create on his canvases. On the other hand, the greater freedom that “precision within freedom” offered—a form of discipline that Ding Yi created for himself that seeks precision and accuracy through a free artistic style—also attracted Ding Yi, so he decided to abandon the extreme technical precision that he had been using, bid farewell to the harsh, cold colours and the rigid lines that he had been employing, threw out the tapes and rulers and other tools, and decided instead to rely only his hands to make the marks on his paintings.

APPEARANCE OF CROSSES: THE PERIOD OF HAND CREATION

The emergence of more evident brushwork in Ding Yi’s works is the most obvious characteristic that differentiates the second phase of his work from the preceding “precision period.” Ding Yi has said that “the paintings from the precision period look more solemn, as though one were using diplomatic language to speak. The phase of hand creation is more like a colloquialized period.”²⁰ *Appearance of Crosses 91-4* was the first work of this second phase. On the canvas, all straight lines have been eliminated. The absolute verticals and horizontals of the past works still exist, but now, these lines form an underlying structure that is periodically revealed and periodically hidden. In the sketch *Appearance of Crosses 89-B*, of 1989, forty-five-degree diagonal lines were obviously retained behind the crosshairs. This not only greatly increased the richness of the colour and the sense of the space on the painted surface, but it also differentiated the work’s visual effect from the quieter, more stable quality of earlier works. The insertion of such diagonal lines caused the layered markings to become richer and the tonality softer. In *Appearance of Crosses 92-4*



Ding Yi, sketches for *Appearance of Crosses 89-B*, 1989.
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.



Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses 91-3*, 1991, acrylic on canvas,
140 x 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

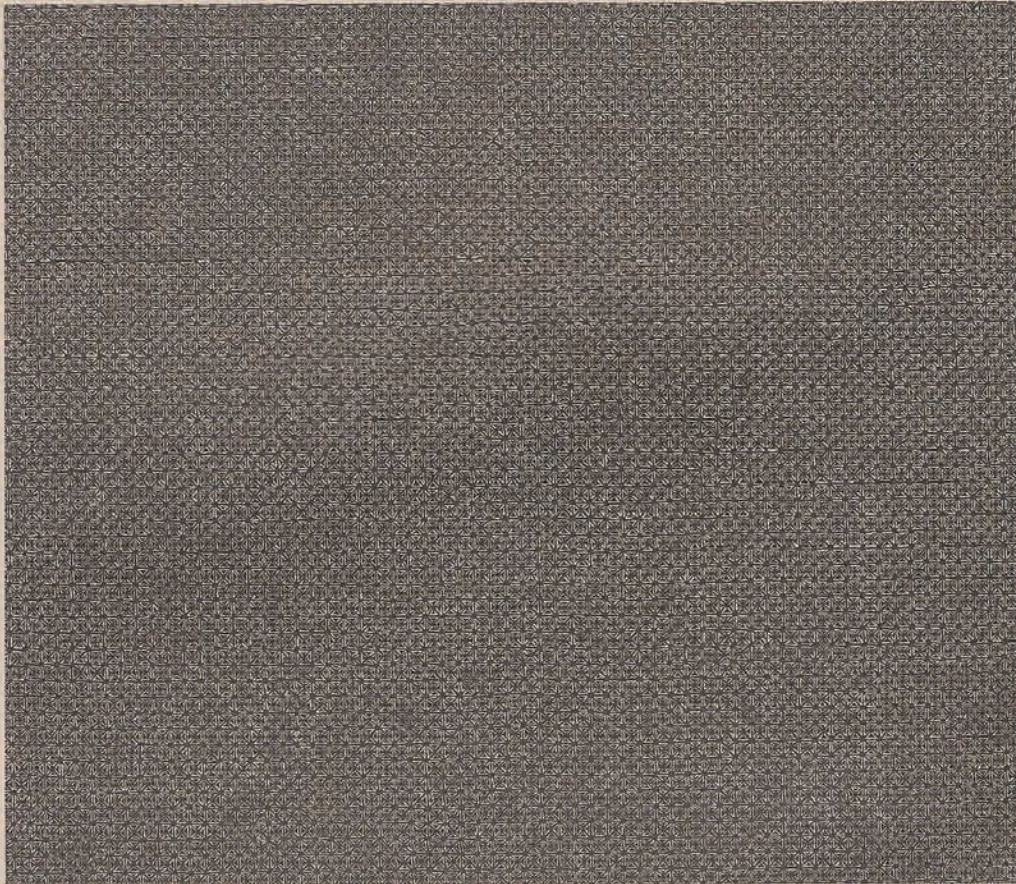


Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses 92-15*, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

and *Appearance of Crosses 92-15*, one can clearly see that within the surfaces, underpainted with red, blue, and grey, Ding Yi has created greater complexity in the relationship between the hues of the colours and their complements. Moreover, he has simultaneously diversified and unified the relationship between the lines and colours within each painting.

The “colloquialized” style during this period of creation brought unprecedented relaxation to Ding Yi’s body and mind. This was the result of two factors. One was that the means of applying paint during the “precision period,” often for more than eight hours a day, had strained his body and brought challenges to his physical well-being. The second factor was his new philosophical understanding of a “spiritual quality” in painting—namely, the notion of using direct brushstrokes to enunciate clearly, mark-by-mark, the problems that faced him.²¹

After entering the period of freehand mark making, Ding Yi’s most obvious pleasure in creating his works arose from the process of calmly painting every crosshair by hand. The former ruler-straight lines began to warp slightly, at times losing their shape, and, by the second half of 1992, it was already becoming difficult to make out the crosshair markings on his canvases. We should, moreover, consider differences in the colours that he was employing. If we were to say, for example, that the *Appearance of Crosses* works that he produced at the beginning of 1988 were produced under the premise of his idea of “automatic colour selection”—choosing his colours freely—then during his hand creation period it might be said that he attained an even more extreme degree of leeway in his usage of colour.²² Ding Yi, who in fact has always been a strict self-disciplinarian, gradually became anxious about his feelings of relaxation during the process of making these hand-created works. He once considered returning to using a ruler when painting, for he feared the possibility that he would “paint sloppily,”²³ but rejected it as this idea would merely constitute a means of giving himself more restrictions.



Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses 92-20*, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

APPEARANCE OF CROSSES: THE PERIOD OF MATERIAL EXPERIMENTATION

Ding Yi's true period of "colloquialization" was based on experimentation with a variety of materials as a means of seeking new possibilities for creation. This period is what he calls his "phase of material experimentation" and was the result of enriching his concept of "precision in freedom." At the same time that he was sampling new materials, he did not forget problems that manifested themselves in his recent works. What he sought to correct first was the way he selected the colours for his paintings. In a letter to Bo Xiaobo, he wrote, "Now, I feel that I can no longer float along in this habit of using light blue, light green, and fire red." He continued on to remark that "after *Fire-red*, I paused while painting the canvas and created two small sketches on paper which had the feeling of free line drawings."²⁴ At first, he arbitrarily used a crayon to draw directly on the surface of the painting, sensing, with surprise, a sort of spirit of the "vestigial" in the unexpected outcomes from this process, and he decided to continue to experiment with this.

Ding Yi had made use of the crosshair for nearly six years, and his desire to experiment with various materials became stronger. His introduction of charcoal, corrugated paper, and chalk established a new point of departure. The use of different materials brought different pictorial effects. In truth, this kind of appreciation for materials had already made a deep impression on Ding Yi in his sketches on paper from the previous several years. It was precisely the leisureliness and openness of the sketch period between 1991 and 1998, which sometimes resulted in a rough pictorial effect, that allowed Ding Yi to enter a frame of mind that is unique to the practice of writing Chinese characters. He decided to transfer this inspiration directly to the canvas and to transform his large panels into spaces for a process of "direct writing." At the same time, Ding Yi hoped to make use of the greater flexibility that the materials gave to him as a means of engaging in a sort of dialogue with his inner spirit.

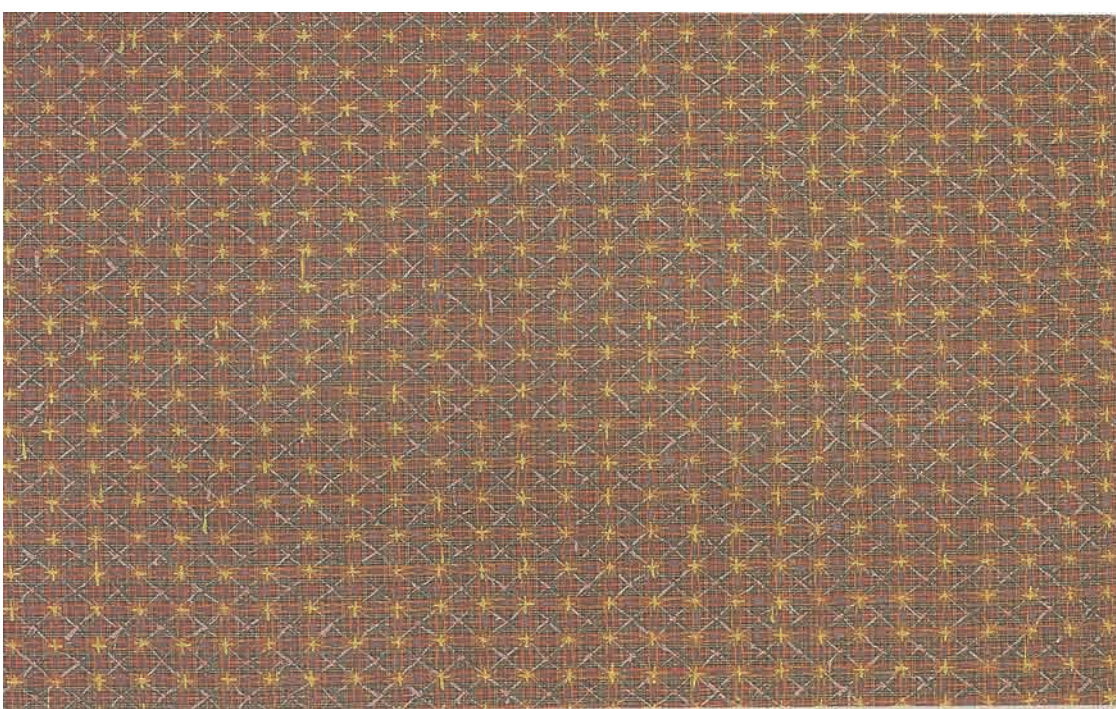
Ding Yi's series of material experiments began in 1993; in them, he used canvas without the mixture of glue and water with which he usually primed it. Then he randomly dripped paint onto the surface of the stretched canvas, but the dry, coarse texture of the untreated surface inhibited the smooth, easy motion of the brush as it moved across the surface, a feeling that recalled writing on blackboards with chalk. He quickly discovered that charcoal and chalk, when used together to make drawings on unprimed linen, looked extremely natural and complementary, even conveying a bit of a "primeval" feel. Abandoning glue and water, as well as the attempt to harmonize pigments, the glossy appearance of his previous paintings completely disappeared; what replaced it were the diffuse, powdery margins that remained around every brushstroke. On the surface of the coarse linen there emerged an illusion of blurriness, resulting in a painting that appeared more intuitive and animated. In order to emphasize this pictorial effect, he even left the four edges of the canvas blank while allowing the chalk to extend its presence outside of the main area. This resulted in an effect around the edges of the canvas to resemble, to a certain extent, "silk manuscripts" or antique textiles.



Ding Yi, exhibition view of *Appearance of Crosses 1989–2007*, Museo d'Arte Moderne di Bologna, Italy, Courtesy of Museo d'Arte Moderne di Bologna, Italy.

For Ding Yi, this was not only a process of coming to understand new materials, but also of becoming reacquainted with traditional Chinese art forms. During his "hand creation" phase, Ding Yi used dozens of different supports for painting. These included linen, finished canvas, cardboard, watercolour paper, and corrugated paper; he even painted on the surfaces of furniture. He also used pencil, felt marker, chalk, watercolour pen, ball-point pen, charcoal, oil paint, acrylic paint, and other pigments. With all of these materials he conducted his experiments. After coming to recognize the light feeling that characterized the colourful works from the later part of his "hand creation" phase, he attempted a return to a grey scale. Ding Yi's appreciation of this experiment aroused a desire to indirectly reconstruct traditional Chinese painting. The forms of displaying traditional painting are many: besides single hanging scrolls, album leaves, and other forms with which many people are familiar, sets of scrolls, fans, and screens are also formats that allow viewers to appreciate the traditional painted arts. With regard to their function, fans and screens may be seen as articles for daily use, and the calligraphy and painting that they bear on their surfaces often reveal a narrative.

In *Appearance of Crosses 97-B21/B-24*, which adopts the classical Chinese format of a set of four hanging scrolls, Ding Yi created a panoramic work of art that carries the vestiges of traditional Chinese art. This 1997 work was based on the complex appreciation of tradition that he had developed since his time studying traditional Chinese painting in college in 1986. Importantly, this appreciation involved everything from the grand historical tradition of Chinese painting to the use of arduous techniques such as the creation of "atmospheric rhythm," one criterion for judging the success of traditional Chinese painting, and the employment of the "five shades" in the application of ink. But in these four scrolls, which compose a complete entity that is 260 centimeters tall by 320 centimeters wide, this appreciation was completely "pulverized," made vestigial. On all four sides, the smoky grey corrugated paper still reveals its original colour, creating a frame-like effect. Through Ding Yi's use of charcoal and chalk, traditional motifs and genres—such as "the four gentlemen;" that is, the plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum which often appear in traditional sets of scrolls, and genres such as landscape painting and depictions of birds and



Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses 1997-3, 1997*, acrylic on fabric, 140 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

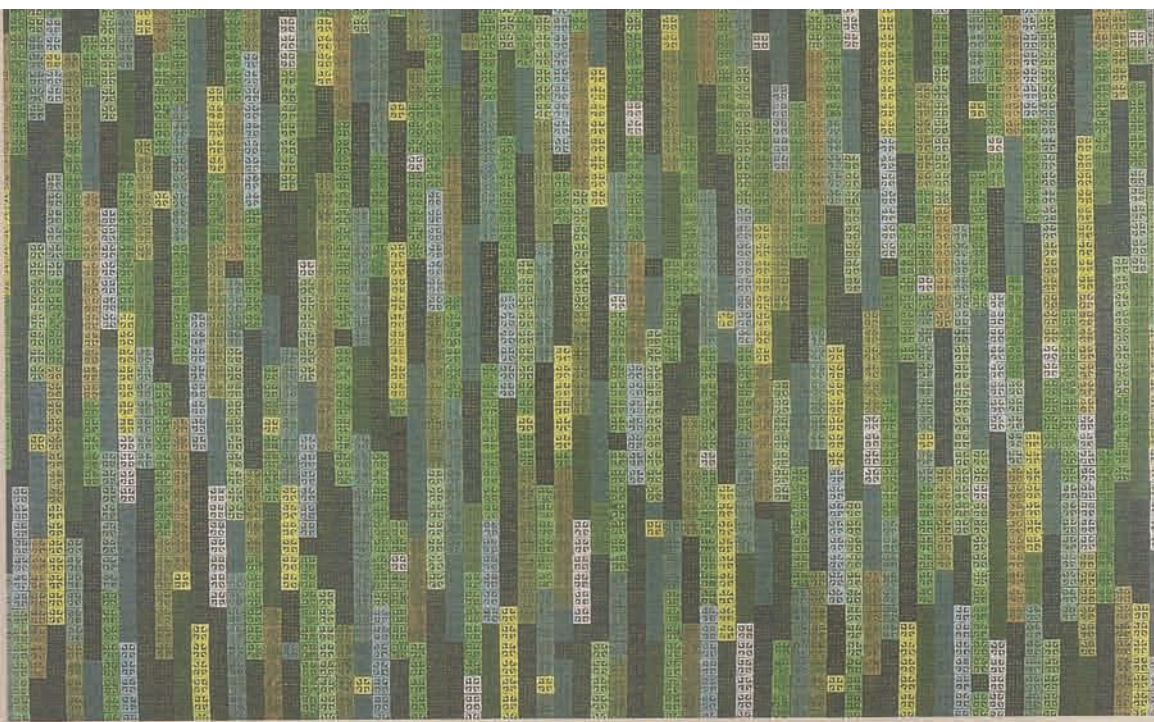
flowers— were carbonized. Even the genre of human figure painting, with its portrayals of Zhong Kui, beautiful women, and others, was not spared. Ding Yi has written that:

... the integrality of traditional culture is currently being challenged by the essence of contemporary society... The deepest significance of this culture is being deconstructed, rendering it unreal in real life. It has already been transformed into a sort of spiritual memory or a material trace... To care about the vestiges of concepts supported by non-mainstream, traditional culture is to adopt an archaeological position as a means of cutting into the traces left behind by history... to reconsider their inexpressible material meaning.²⁵

CHECKED CLOTH—THE INTRODUCTION OF READY-MADES

What Ding Yi has called the “harsh” joy of “directly writing” on canvas and paper underwent a new development in 1997. He replaced the raw linen he had been working on with finished fabric. For him, the introduction of Scottish tartan, for example, was not merely a change in material; even more, it constituted a new point of conceptual origin. In particular, the use of this finished fabric brought about an investigation of relationships between cultures. Scottish tartan has been upheld as the true symbol of Scotland, the various patterns of tartan supposedly having once been used as emblems to differentiate clans. In China, however, tartan is simply a textile produced in factories. At first, Ding Yi simply intended to use the colour and patterning of the fabric as a ground—the fabric’s structure and his own cross-shapes possess a certain formal affinity. Yet, after this work was completed, the original appearance of the fabric, all of which he covered in pigment, was almost impossible to discern. But because of variations in the density of the crosses on the canvas and in the thickness of the layering of paint, one could still vaguely make out the plaid’s original pattern. “The colour and patterning of the fabric itself became a sort of restriction on Ding Yi’s creation, yet this sort of restriction has also provided him with a new direction.”²⁶

Still, according to Ding Yi, the grid-patterned fabric functions not merely as a piece of canvas. What is more important are the cultural associations that the fabric symbolizes that I alluded to earlier, as well as the struggles that occur within the new contexts intimately related to them. Ding Yi believes that the realities created through cultural fantasies and misunderstandings occupy positions of principal importance within history. For example, the course of the establishment and



Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses 2007-3*, acrylic on fabric, 200 × 280 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

development of contemporary Chinese art is also a process of misinterpreting Western modern art, an art form that has served as a primary point of reference for many contemporary Chinese artists.²⁷ The superposing and melding of cultures was an essential point that Ding Yi explored during this period.

In his canvases, Ding Yi has grasped consideration of tradition and of contemporaneity in a focused and dynamic manner. Although the crosshair has been the only expressive element that he has permitted himself to use, through the precise and nuanced exploration of the potentialities of everything from materials to forms, he has given full expression on his canvases to the questions that concern him. It is only in this way that he gives visual form to his artistic thinking and to the strength of the spiritual sources behind his works. Indeed, the pursuit of spirituality was precisely Ding Yi's original intention in beginning the *Appearance of Crosses* series. Moreover, Ding Yi's evaluation of the "vestiges" of traditional Chinese art during his period of material experimentation contributes to our appreciation of the wisdom that is contained at the very edges of the canvas, at the physical margins of his works.

The primary element of these works—namely, a vision of Chinese social life made visually abstract by the artist—is placed atop this foundation. Is this an example of the intercultural "hybridity" that Homi K. Bhabha often mentions in his cultural critiques?²⁸ Or should we use Samuel P. Huntington's concept of "band-wagoning"; that is, following upon the heels of super powers, to interpret the profound markings that have accumulated on the surface of Ding Yi's canvases?²⁹ This underlying socio-political concern is the reality that has been made visual by Ding Yi.

THE SMOG OF THE CITY—THE NEW SUBJECT IN THE BACKGROUND OF *APPEARANCE OF CROSSES*

One might say that during the first ten years of his career, Ding Yi made use of *Appearance of Crosses* in an attempt to find interpretation for certain questions that have long been accumulating in his heart and mind. During the following ten years, then, *Appearance of Crosses* has been used to participate in a discussion of contemporary questions—questions of cultural politics, survival, and urbanization, among other things. It is especially the urban upheaval that is transforming Shanghai that caused Ding Yi in the early 1980s to reconsider his fascination with the works of Utrillo and to examine his infatuation with the cityscape. But the contrast between the contemporary moment and the past is difficult to articulate. In another respect, it is precisely the great space opened up by this contrast that gives Ding Yi the opportunity to explore and savour

the history of Shanghai as well as his personal memories and feelings about his life in this city. In a certain regard, Ding Yi's crosshair and the city of Shanghai are alike: as concepts, they have never changed, yet they are now completely different from what they were in the past.

To evaluate and to represent the cultural configurations forming around oneself is not an easy task. Yet Ding Yi has noted that "to adopt a neutral viewpoint and record the traces left behind by this historical period during which the city in which I live has been developing at extreme speed—this is exactly what I am supposed to do as an artist."³⁰ During the 1980s, Ding Yi engaged in a theoretical investigation of the process of perceiving the artistic forms and ideologies of Western and Chinese traditional art. In a certain sense, however, he had a feeling of observing all of this with indifference. So beginning in the mid 1990s, Ding Yi observed and experienced every facet of his life being influenced and stimulated by the urban upheaval taking place in Shanghai. This Chinese form of societal development, which takes as its referent the course of urbanization and industrialization in Western modern history, has taken an infinitely more convulsive path than that of Western art history. With full vigour, Ding Yi accumulates and transfers his perceptions and his understanding onto canvas. Yet he continues to use his crosshairs to interpret the strength of the Chinese spirit in this age of tremendous flux.



Ding Yi, exhibition view of *Appearance of Crosses 1989–2007*, Museo d'Arte Moderne di Bologna, Italy. Courtesy of Museo d'Arte Moderne di Bologna, Italy.

Ding Yi's post-1997 works might be interpreted as indicative of going beyond his inner spirit, of his beginning to observe the phenomena of the world around him with determination and earnestness. Ding Yi recently recalled, "I have lived in Shanghai for more than forty years, and every day I have looked at her appearance. Beginning in the mid 1990s, you could clearly feel that this city was changing and expanding at an alarming speed. . . . Thanks to this 'urbanization movement,' nothing is left of the [city's] Utrillo-like, gloomy, elegant grace." Instead, he continued, ". . . what this metropolis now gives us are neon lights,

streams of cars, crowds of buildings, display screens for stock reports, and billboards everywhere."³¹ Certainly, in today's metropolitan China, the relationships among people, as well as between people and societal structures, are changing. So how can artists in this historical period express the particular qualities embedded in this sort of atmosphere? It was more or less at the turn of the millennium that Ding Yi's work began to be more colourful. While he still painted on checked cloth, glaring fluorescent and metallic colours began to appear; the psychedelic visual effect of excess, the wantonness, the chaos, the disorder, the stimulation, and the sense of urban life entered his paintings. The colours and compositions of his recent works all are very different from his earlier paintings. What has replaced them are asymmetrical designs in which there exist "paintings within paintings," or serrated forms of brilliant, commingled colours, coupled with irregular, curvilinear images. The carefully defined, rectangular outline of a single canvas impeded Ding Yi's expression of the power of the city. Thus, as a means of displaying the strength and brilliance radiating from the core of the city, he combined six canvases of different sizes. Because of the changes in the colours and compositions, the paintings have become richer and more dynamic, and as there are now so many more layers of crosshairs, irregular forms have appeared as well. Shanghai is no longer a calm, drizzly city, and in his recent works, he hopes to echo the noise and excitement of the city. But behind the crosshairs, one can still sense the chaos and emptiness of rootlessness begun with the reform campaign in China. Such is Ding Yi's interpretation of this

urban phenomenon. Like a magician, he continues to build his world of crosses. Independently, he strides along a path towards truth.

Translated by Phillip Bloom

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Notes

- ¹ Leon B. Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 61.
- ² Ding Yi (丁乙) was originally named Ding Rong (丁荣). He has called himself Ding Yi since 1985. This could be a reflection of his obsession with simple forms in art, which began during the mid-1980s.
- ³ Hou Hanru, "An Excessive Minimalist," in *Ding Yi: The Appearance of Crosses* [catalogue for Ding Yi's solo exhibition at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham] (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2005), 21.
- ⁴ In October 1981, the Shanghai Museum exhibited works from the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Here, Ding Yi saw original works by American abstract artists like Jackson Pollock and Hans Hoffmann for the first time.
- ⁵ In the fall of 1979, Qiu Deshu initiated and organized the Grass Grass group in Shanghai. In February of the following year, he organized an exhibition called Painting for the 80s at the Luwan District Cultural Hall in Shanghai. The exhibition included the works of Qiu Deshu, Chen Juyuan, Yuan Songmin, and eight other artists, all of whom painted in styles strongly influenced by Cubism and Expressionism.
- ⁶ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949–1986* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 67.
- ⁷ Quoted in Li Xiaofeng, "Undercurrent of Calm Water: Interview with Ding Yi," *Xiandai Yishu* [Modern Art] no. 4 (2001): 22.
- ⁸ Wu Hung, *Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Smart Museum of Art/University of Chicago, 1999), 17.
- ⁹ Hou Hanru, "An Excessive Minimalist," in *Ding Yi: The Appearance of Crosses* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2005), 17 [catalogue for Ding Yi's solo exhibition at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham].
- ¹⁰ Hans van Dijk, known in Chinese as Dai Hanzhi, was born in Deventer, Holland, in 1946. In order to conduct research on Chinese contemporary art, he began taking Chinese language classes at Nanjing University in 1986. He collected, organized, and founded the largest archive of materials about Chinese contemporary artists at the time. In 1993, he opened the New Amsterdam Art Consultancy in Beijing. That same year, he and Andreas Schmid organized the China Avant-garde exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen in Berlin. This was the first exhibition of Chinese contemporary art of such a large scale to be held in the West. In 1998, he, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, and Belgian collector Frank Vyterhaegen founded the China Art Archives and Warehouse. Hans van Dijk died on April 29, 2002, at the Peking Union Medical College Hospital.
- ¹¹ Zhao Chuan, "Yu Youhan he ta de xueshengmen" [Yu Youhan and His Students], in *Shanghai chouxiang gushi* [The Story of Shanghai Abstraction] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2006), 49.
- ¹² The Chinese art world of the 1980s was more or less divided into two camps: one was that of the mainstream style, which received official governmental support and which included both traditional Chinese painting and the Socialist Realism that originated in the Soviet Union; the other was a type that took Western modern and contemporary art styles (everything from Post-Impression to Abstract Expressionism, for example) as its inspiration, that received almost no official support, and that, moreover, gave greater expression to the deepest feelings of the individual and to desires for freedom.
- ¹³ This exhibition, which was organized by the Shanghai Art Museum in May 1988, included nine abstract painters. They were Yin Qi and Meng Luding of Beijing; Yu Youhan, Ding Yi, Pei Jing, and Xu Hong of Shanghai; and Liu Anping, Tang Song, and Yan Lei of Hangzhou.
- ¹⁴ Li Xianting, *Zhongyao de bu shi yishu* [What Is Important Is Not Art] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Meishu Chubanshe, 2000), 198.
- ¹⁵ Ding Yi's notes in *Jiedu chouxiang* [Decoding Abstraction] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2007), 25.
- ¹⁶ Interview between author and Ding Yi, for the catalogue *Mondrian in China*, curated by Hans van Dijk (Beijing: Beijing International Art Palace, 1997).
- ¹⁷ Monica Dematté, "Appearance of Crosses: The Process of Making Chance Theoretical" in *Ding Yi* (Shanghai: ShangART and New Amsterdam Art Consultancy, 1997), 2. This catalogue accompanied two exhibitions: Ding Yi: Crosses, 97 at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1997, and Ding Yi: Crosses, 89–98 at the International Art Palace, Beijing, in 1998.
- ¹⁸ Interview between the author and Ding Yi, October 2007, Ding Yi's studio at 50 Moganshan Road, Shanghai.
- ¹⁹ Li Xiaofeng, "Undercurrent of Calm Water: Interview with Ding Yi," *Xiandai yishu* [Modern Art], no. 4 (2001): 22.
- ²⁰ Interview between the author and Ding Yi, October 2007, Ding Yi's studio at 50 Moganshan Road.
- ²¹ Ding Yi's notes, "Yishu zalun [Random Thoughts on Art]," included in "Fei zhuliu huihua te ji [Special Compilation on Non-Mainstream Painting]," *Jiangsu Huakan* [Jiangsu Painting Journal], no. 2 (1993).
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ This word appeared in a letter that Ding Yi sent to Bo Xiaobo, published in "Zai chouxiangzhong yintui de ren" [A Person Who Retires into Abstraction], *Shanghai chouxiang gushi* [The Story of Shanghai Abstraction] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2006), 72.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ding Yi's notes in *Jiedu chouxiang* [Decoding Abstraction] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2007).
- ²⁶ Qian Naijing, "Ding Yi: 'Shi shi' de duanzhang", manuscript page 16, forthcoming in *Dangdai yishujia congshu* [Contemporary Artists Series], edited by Lü Peng (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2007).
- ²⁷ Wu Hung, *Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art/University of Chicago, 1999), 15.
- ²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 219.
- ²⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 236.
- ³⁰ Ding Yi's notes in *Jiedu chouxiang* [Decoding Abstraction] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2007).
- ³¹ Interview between the author and Ding Yi, October 2007, Ding Yi's studio at 50 Moganshan Road, Shanghai.