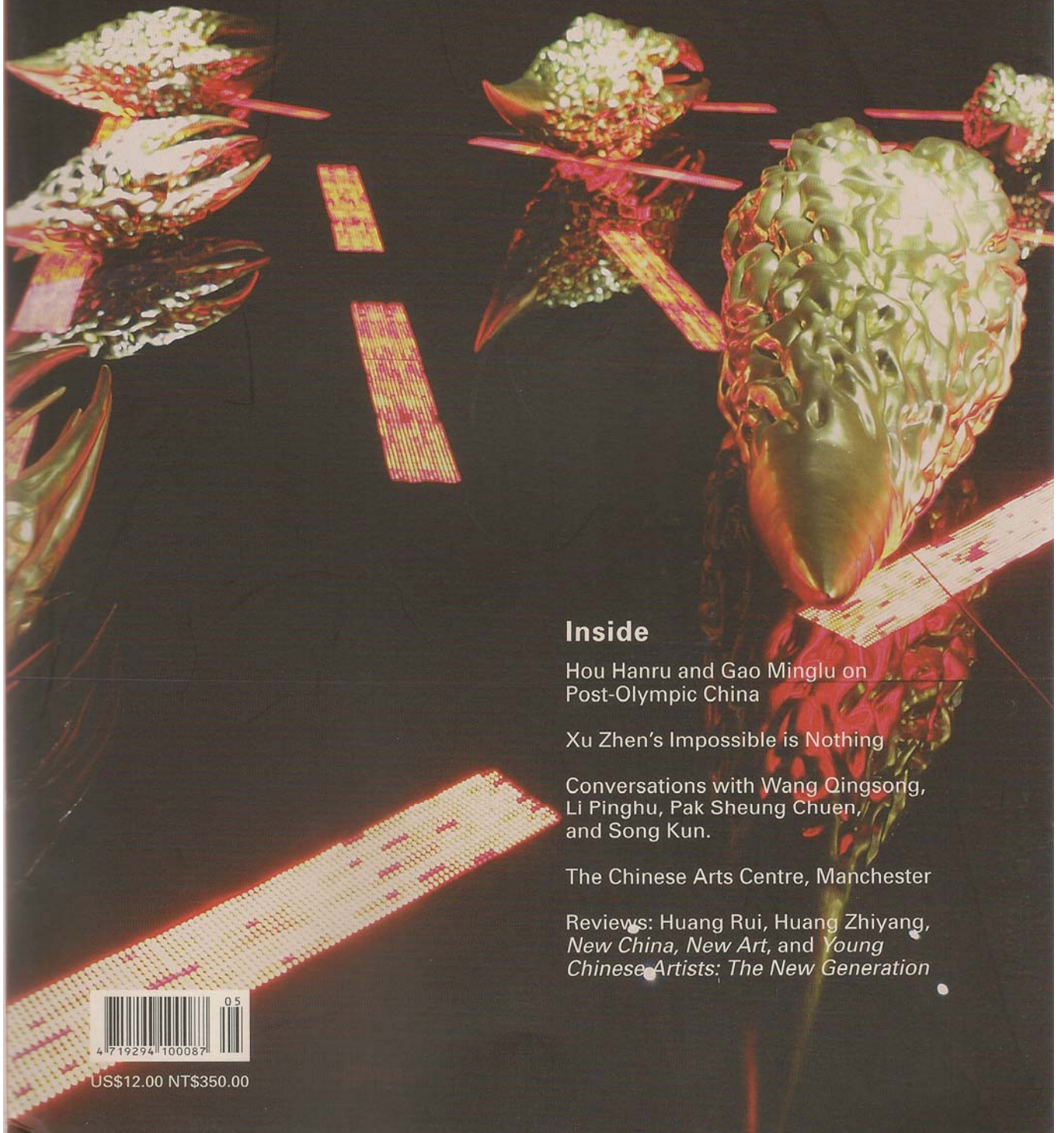


# Yishu

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## Xu Zhen's Impossible Is Nothing: A Discussion

November 11, 2008  
Long March Canteen

Participants: Fu Xiaodong, Gu Zhengqing, Han Yuting, Li Hongyu, Lin Tianmiao, Liu Wei, Lu Jie, Colin Chinnery, Wang Gongxin, Wang Jianwei, Wang Wei, Zhan Wang, and Zhu Yu



Impossible is Nothing was held at Long March Space, Beijing from November 1 to December 20, 2008.

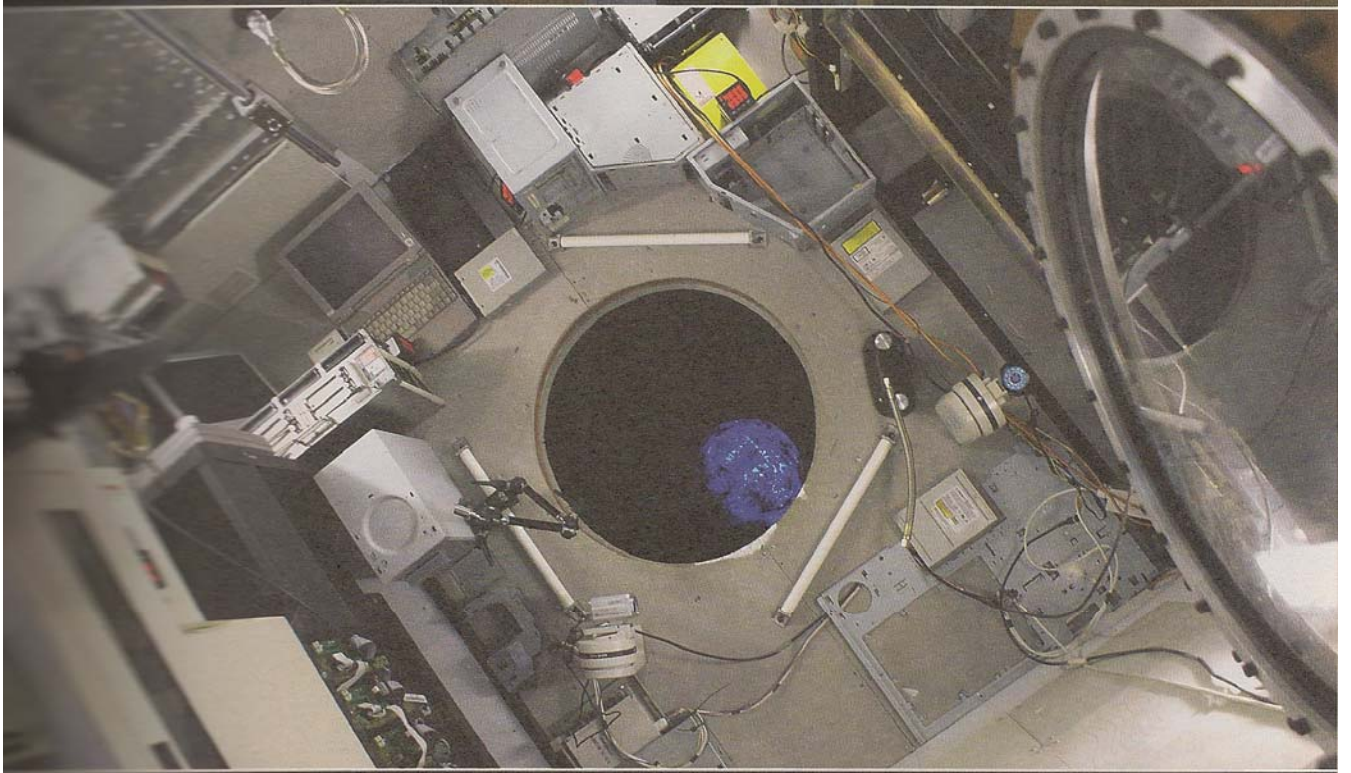
### *Decoration*

A large-scale aircraft, likened to a spaceship, is suspended in the air, whirring in front of a small globe of the earth, which is turning in the dim light. In an adjacent space, on four small digital screens, the audience can see a man and a woman—the two astronauts—working inside the aircraft. The banal act of placing this aircraft inside an art gallery begs the audience to ask if what they are seeing is real. Here, Xu Zhen confuses reality (real people living for five hundred and four hours in the aircraft during the exhibition) with fiction (the only image of earth visible to the people in the aircraft is a spinning fake). In a contemporary world where international finance consists of a game of speculation, where political procedure is a battle of words, and where one is surrounded by a visual economy that circulates the virtual image, copied and distributed, over and over again, such an investment of trust in the simulated, or the intangible, is questioned. In *Decoration*, Xu Zhen refers to the spectacle of the media as motivated by human ideals of self-interest, rather than the stereotypical notion that outer space might offer answers for the betterment of mankind.

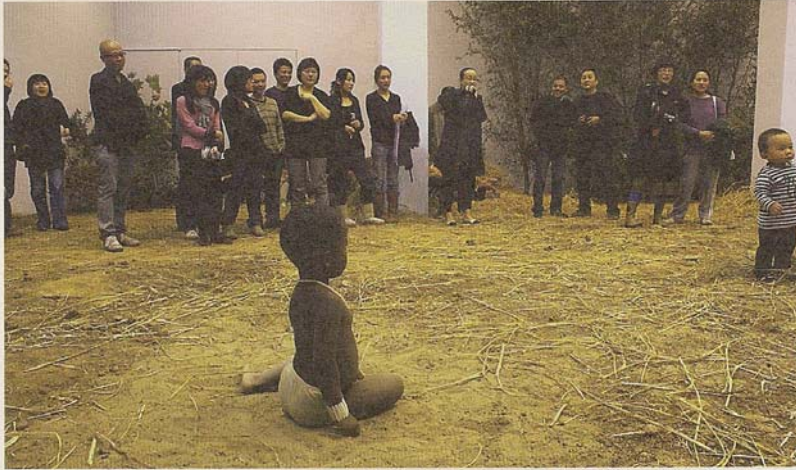
Top: Participants talking at the Long March Canteen. Courtesy of Long March Space, Beijing.

Opposite: Xu Zhen, exhibition views of *Decoration*, 2008, installation. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space, Beijing.









Xu Zhen, exhibition views of *The Starving of Sudan*, 2008, installation. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space, Beijing.



### *The Starving of Sudan*

In a four-hundred-square-metre space, Xu Zhen staged *The Starving of Sudan*, an installation/performance that re-enacted a scenario photographed by Kevin Carter that won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1994. Kevin Carter committed suicide not long after he was given this award. Xu Zhen considers this photo by Kevin Carter to be problematic, but the problem does not reside in the photograph itself. Instead, it lies in the complex system of interpretation that was subsequently built around how and why this photograph was taken in the first place. Xu Zhen states that he wishes to “refresh” this system (a term he uses in reference to the way Web pages are refreshed or re-loaded), raising the following questions: What needs to be refreshed? For what reason and by what method was this system of interpretation built? When and where was this system formed? These questions move beyond an interrogation of human ethics and its associated visual system of study. What needs to be questioned is why society utilizes systems of power (for example, political power, social power, or, for that matter, the creation of the Pulitzer Prize) as reference points for validating history. Xu Zhen employs such confrontations in order to question the relationship of power between the viewer and the work, between the concept and ethics, and between passivity and subjectivity.

**Lu Jie:** Since the opening of Xu Zhen’s solo exhibition *Impossible Is Nothing*, I have continually heard news of ongoing heated discussions about the work, some private and some public, including online forums. Perhaps none

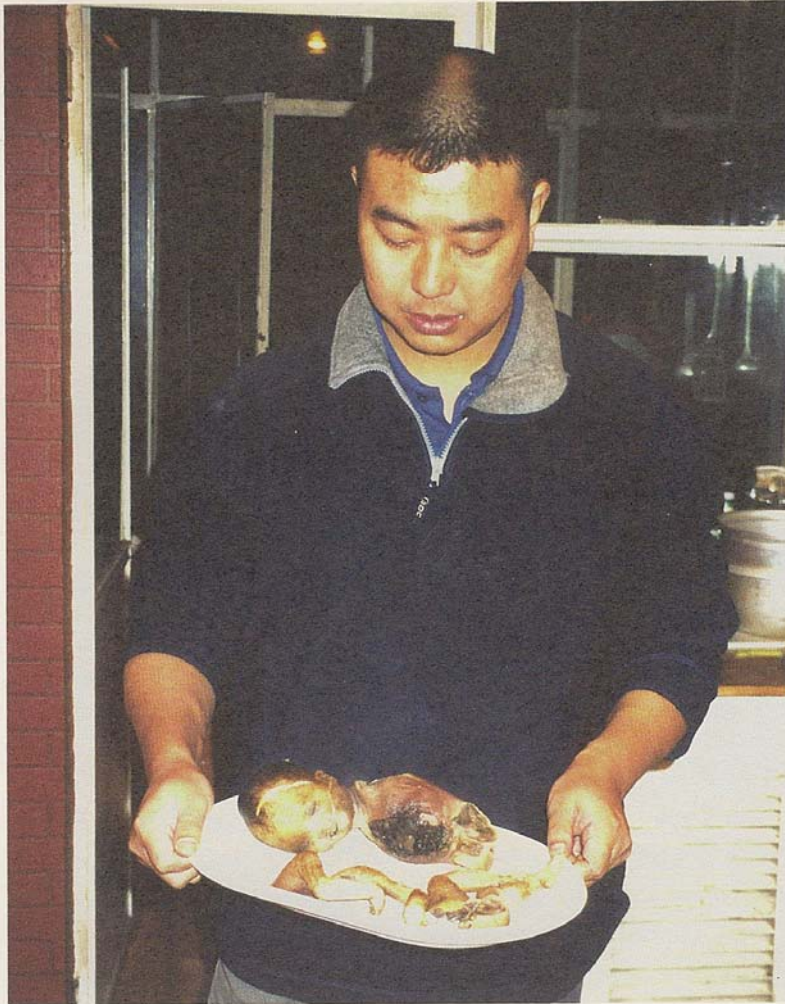


were more heated than within the Long March itself, where an internal staff meeting questioned our understanding of art, the role and purpose of an art space, and, ultimately, what the Long March is. I am particularly pleased this exhibition has achieved a contemporaneity in the way that it touches upon our present condition as well as prescient issues of the time. The works in this exhibition take a comprehensive look at the issues that we (the contemporary art world in China), have been discussing for the past several years [in relation to art production], such as approach, theme, and methodology, and combine it with a re-ordering of ideas about conflation, appropriation, the signified and its signifier, reality, spectacle, rough workmanship, and interpretation. Xu Zhen's statement that this exhibition is an attempt to reset the standards is not self-aggrandizement and competitive rhetoric. Rather, the "reset" that he is speaking of is directed at the relationship between the contemporary Chinese art community's collective knowledge and the possibilities for art. Xu Zhen, and, in particular, the work in this exhibition, are examples of how the perspectives and spaces for artists working today are changing and differentiating, and, in turn, how the perspectives for those of us that view and discuss the artwork must also change.

**Colin Chinnery:** Coming from a Western background, if I did not know Xu Zhen, my initial visceral reaction to this exhibition would be to see the work *The Starving of Sudan* as extremely problematic. This is due to a certain ethical perspective common to the educated middle class in the "West" (United States and Europe) that derives from the mixture of a guilty conscience with regards to the history of the West's colonialism and oppression, merging with a Christian ethical value system, and is characterized by a heightened sensitivity to the issues of human rights, oppression, and exploitation. From this perspective, questions of economic inequity and power structures will be pushed to the fore and attention will be drawn to the examination of oppressive and exploitative relationships. This is a rather superficial and reactive understanding that reveals itself as a "dead end" as one enters into the many layers of the work. Today, many practices achieve the status of "artwork" through the use of particular mediums (material and concept), but more often than not, this proves to be an empty gesture, as the medium engages the viewer to think of other relationships whilst the artwork itself is overlooked. Our uncertainty on how to engage with or think about a particular work, in this instance *The Starving of Sudan*, is not an issue with the medium—for it is easy to make readings from "material objects." Rather, the medium forces us to look back at the artwork itself, which is engaged with the politics of viewing, and the relationships between viewing and experience, seeing and being seen.

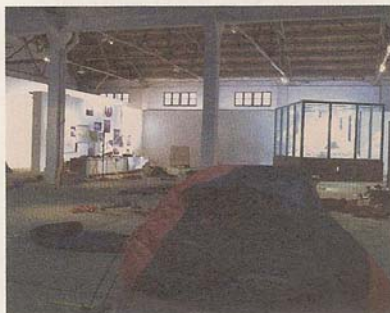
All artworks participate in some way with the politics of viewing, but they are not always about, and do not investigate, the politics of viewing and the power relationships that viewing implies. If we compare this work to the seminal and infamous work *Dinner—Eating People* (2000), by Zhu Yu, we see that they share many similarities in terms of medium, spectacle, and investigation of consumption, but Xu Zhen's work is focused on the politics of viewing itself.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this exhibition by Xu Zhen is extremely self-aware. It questions itself and in turn is questioned by others. Therefore,





Zhu Yu, *Dinner—Eating People*, 2000, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

in the strict sense of the word, the exhibition is not a “spectacle,” because it makes the viewer aware of its existence and conceit. Rather, much like the plays of Brecht, it refuses to continue to “deceive” the viewer. Whether or not we can consider this exhibition a breakthrough, I am hesitant to say, because it is not so much a question about direction, but, rather, time. Contemporary art has already become a new “tradition,” revolving but not moving forward. When everything is permitted and accepted, it’s brutal for artists. It’s fatal for artworks that seek to “overturn.”



**Fu Xiaodong:** Looking at both pieces in this exhibition, as well as Xu Zhen’s previous work *8848-1.86* (2005), it is clear he is attempting to create a kind of “spectacle” or “scene.” This type of transformation comes from the internal logic of his artistic language, going beyond any external social issues. Ultimately,

Xu Zhen, *8848-1.86*, 2005, installation view at the 2nd Yokohama Triennale. Courtesy of the artist.

what is real and remains is what is experienced and understood by the three people who took part in this work: an experience of being present. Xu Zhen is attempting to recreate this “image” that has been manipulated and falsified through the process of media by using a classical method of deconstructing the spectacle through its re-presentation in attempt to return to underlying reality.





Xu Zhen, 8848-1.86, 2005,  
 Type C photographs.  
 Courtesy of the artist.

**Lin Tianmiao:** Initially, I was quite saddened by the work *The Starving of Sudan*. This had little to do with artistic or academic concerns. Rather, the reaction resulted from the thought of the substantial impact that this half-month performance would have on the memory of the black child. In the future, would the child hate Chinese people? Hate Asian people? Hate her mother for having agreed to do this performance? However, artistically speaking, I do like the work. In the works of Chinese artists from the previous generation (born in the 1950s) who are based overseas and have achieved success, personal identity and identity politics, something “Chinese” or “feminist,” always remained and could not be abandoned. This exhibition is without this type of posturing or psychology. His perspective is very even, pure, and self-confident. We can talk about China, the world, anything, but there is not this demand for expressing a personal identity.

If we want to compare *The Starving of Sudan* with Zhu Yu’s work, what’s particularly “naughty” about Xu Zhen’s work is the forced inclusion of the audience—just viewing the work gives the feeling that you are taking part in the exploitation of that child, not to mention if you are taking pictures. At the same time, I think that the two works in this exhibition are more “seasoned” than before, but in a somewhat problematic way. It feels like he has covered all the points: he not only understands what the media,





curators, and critics will think, but how they think and operate within their systems of understanding and judgment. It's very astute on Xu Zhen's part, but perhaps a little too smart.

**Wang Gongxin:** Walking through the exhibition, at first entering into an icy cold darkness and being confronted by a giant space station, and then, suddenly, as if transported to a dreamlike Garden of Eden, entering into a luminescent room with a beautiful black baby playing in the reeds, it was as if I had dropped into the middle of a classical Renaissance painting. Perhaps this was related to my interest in classical painting that, I must admit, is a unique and personal aesthetic taste, but it was a delightful "spectacle" that I quite enjoyed. However, after understanding more about *The Starving of Sudan* and its background, I began increasingly to dislike the work. Once social elements, ethical judgments, and political background enter into context of discussion, the work treads on the same ground as many previous works, but, beyond that, there is nothing new. Was this really the original motivation for Xu Zhen to make this piece? Truly meaningful works are those that are able to surpass the old issues and from a new higher vantage point bring to light new issues. I personally have great expectations from younger contemporary Chinese artists. It is an expectation that they will be able to produce something outside of the current rules of the game.

**Gu Zhenqing:** This exhibition fulfills both formal elements of presentation, with a *shan zhai*<sup>2</sup> space station and a *shan zhai* African landscape, and engages with current pressing social issues: Sudan and genocide in Darfur, and the rise of China as a global player represented by the Shenzhou Seven space launch. From concept to execution, and onto its engagement with

Xu Zhen, *Untitled*, 2007, fibreglass, glass, metal, animal viscera, two components, each 1000 x 200 x 310 cm, installation view at the NONO exhibition, Long March Space, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space, Beijing.



real political events, the relationships are closely knit and extensive. What it initiates is not a simple issue of judgment and experience. Zhu Yu's work is very important because its realization at that time challenged the power of many artists, as well as the ethical bottom line of society, issues that Zhu Yu had fully anticipated before realizing the work. In this exhibition, there are probably many things that Xu Zhen did not anticipate. For one, I doubt he desired the ethical question to gain so much attention. Rather, he was asking us to make a value judgment about art, about what the direction of contemporary art is, and how it should and can continue.

For me, that these works were realized at the Long March and in China actually aided them. For if these works were executed in London, it would seem a little bit like being site specific.<sup>3</sup> This work is not about how a Chinese artist should respond and produce works for exhibitions in London; rather, it raises questions about how works should be conceptualized.

Xu Zhen's work provides a glimpse of the "spectacle" when you are able to see through to his point: he is falsifying, and that is his method. Xu Zhen's works are super-sized, from *8848-1.86* to the *Untitled* (2007) dinosaur in a tank *à la* Damien Hirst to the works in this exhibition. From a certain perspective, we can say that Chinese socialism, Chinese modernization, and the draw and attraction of contemporary Chinese art are all "supersized." In contrast to international artists who are able to make the size of the work conform to an artwork's function, Xu Zhen fully capitalizes upon the resources in China to upsize. Production on this scale, I feel, has its advantages and provides a relative value. Does this amount to a questioning of our current cultural condition? Or are we able to put aside contemporary art that is characterized by this type of production and cultural system to continue to talk about the possibilities for art?

**Zhu Yu:** When an artwork is in its conceptual stage of development, it resides in the imagination, and thus artists are more likely to seek and resolve their own internal problems. However, once the work is realized, it is like first digging a "pit," and afterwards everyone comes to this "pit" to take a look before choosing their own method to "jump in." This raises the question of the effectiveness of the work; does it remain on the level of thought and imagination, or does it open and expand outwards, and, if the latter, to what degree? This has to do with how well the work has been conceptualized and executed.

**Wang Wei:** In evaluating this work, there are some things that are more intuitive, based on the feelings arising from the exhibition space, and other more rational thoughts. Xu Zhen said that he chose to reproduce the photograph by Kevin Carter for *The Starving of Sudan* instead of the perhaps more powerful and infamous *Execution of Prisoner in Saigon*<sup>4</sup> because the image of the latter, although more aggressive and brutal, was less problematic. As for the exhibition and the space being cold or hot, I think that this was an unintended result that ended up working to the exhibition's benefit, although it was not necessarily a purposely sought-after result.



**Liu Wei:** For me, the biggest thing that detracts from work is that it is too logical, too rational. The photograph presented many problems, so it was reproduced here, but the result is that all the methods chosen were very rational and logical, and in the end, the artwork/performance becomes an unproblematic reality within itself. With regards to the exhibition, one space being dark, the other bright, one being cold, the other hot, these are all excessive and again too logical. Regardless of what Xu Zhen is thinking, our explanations are unable to go beyond our own contexts. Both works can be explained in the same way that we have been doing, and all explanations seem plausible. The work is pretty good, in as much as I cannot present a reason for saying that it is not. Maybe it is that once the work is realized and presented, it raises too many problems, there are too many elements, but in actuality it is just a “naughty” work: it doesn’t know what it wants to do. There are many issues that Xu Zhen did not purposely seek to present, as the mentioned dichotomy between dark and light, hot and cold. These are really irrelevant to what Xu Zhen is trying to say. In this case, the idea of digging a “pit” for people to jump into is also groundless, as is the idea of overturning something. Overturning what and for what purpose and alternative? What exactly is Xu Zhen trying to say?

**Li Hongyu:** I am also very curious about what the artist thinks about the artwork and its purpose. In particular, I am interested in the necessity of the material he chose. Did Xu Zhen himself have a particular ideal in mind? I understand originally he had intended to “import” a child from Kenya, but was this necessary for the work? In the end, a black child living in Guangzhou was found to do the performance, but was this step even necessary? If the event itself was staged, why not just find any Chinese child and have him or her painted black? The same problem also presents itself with regards to the space station. I am not saying that artists must explain to the viewer the entire thought process for the creation of the work or their reasoning for making such a selection. However, artists ought to have a set objective in order for them to be able to explain their choices. Is it a “subjective” selection or a default selection that results from a lack of choices? Objective circumstances during the process of realization can be talked about and explained. However, the selection of material for an artwork should not be about making do with what is available but should very clearly express the artist’s own intent. Also, must the expression of a concept and a topic rely upon the re-enactment and re-presentation of the event? I do not believe that when people view the work, they necessarily understand why the work must be as it is. Or is it that the openness of the work is paramount to determining an explanation?

**Han Yuting:** As a member of the mainstream media, my focus is on those events that register with popular interest and thus have value for transmission: for example, the “space station” and its relationship to the “Shenzhou Seven” provides a larger space for discussion. Regardless of whether the artist’s original intent was political or not, I would be inclined to think of the political nature of the work because this is the most direct. The same goes for the *The Starving of Sudan*, where I would take the position of social commentary and focus on the reaction and perspectives of the people participating in this art performance; these first-



hand accounts are perhaps more valuable in the future than the numerous concepts that we develop about this work in our discussion here. What exactly are the deep and mysterious issues that art is talking about? From the perspective of mainstream media, we are perhaps not so concerned with these artistic issues, but rather those seemingly superficial and surface-layer issues. These issues may have more value in their directness.

**Wang Jianwei:** In reviewing previous works by contemporary Chinese artists, it is possible to see two main anxieties. One is toward ideology; the other is toward the West. The reason for the use of particular materials and subjects, as well as the artist's own explanation of the work, all seem to become more apparent if we look at it informed by these two anxieties. Over the past twenty years of exhibiting internationally, we, the contemporary Chinese art community, have continually been faced with one issue—in the end all works have been reduced to their conceptual meaning. It is the issues concerning ethnicity or elements of sociological documentation in the work that continue to produce effect. For me, Xu Zhen's work in this exhibition is a step towards addressing this problem. When we speak of artworks that employ experience as material, our conversations often become abstract. In actuality, good works are able to draw upon different experiences, including intuitive experience, to collectively add to and complete the work. In this work, I've discovered that each element can be used to construct its own system. Xu Zhen has built a structure with a whole range of conceptual elements that eludes stereotypical understanding, and thus the interpretation of the work is much more complex and profound. It utilizes particular known icons without having the definition of the icon providing the final meaning and understanding of the nature of the work.

For an artist to achieve something such as this is quite extraordinary. This is not simply a series of negations of negations. Confusion is a necessary element inherent to the work—even the use of cut hay to simulate the dried grass of the original photograph is somewhat ambiguous. An artist capable of producing this type of work understands where the gaps and overlaps in knowledge reside, the parts where knowledge begins to negate itself. It is here that the meaning of the work begins to form in its ambivalence. What I see is an artist who has the capability to bring together ever more relationships to construct his site and meaning. To be able to present a site where “anything goes” and to be able to pass it off is a very difficult feat. Is it legal for an artist to construct themselves in this way without any restrictions? The work of Xu Zhen begins to touch upon this problem.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Realized in 2001, *Dinner—Eating People*, by conceptual artist Zhu Yu, was an artwork in which the artist ate his own aborted fetus that he had fathered with a prostitute. The work came in the midst of a trend in contemporary Chinese art toward body and shock art, which utilized dead human and animal bodies and animals as material to create artwork. The work was exhibited as part of the Fuck Off exhibition in Shanghai in 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> *Shan zhai* (山寨), or “copycat,” is a Chinese term that literally refers to a mountain stronghold of bandits. First borrowed to describe rip-off products, it has evolved to refer also to homemade products, such as video parodies of popular movies. Here Gu Zhenqing also uses the phrase with respect to ideas of authenticity and falsification.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Starving of Sudan* was originally proposed for an exhibition to be realized in London in 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> The 1969 Pulitzer Prize was awarded to Eddie Adams for his photograph of police chief general Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner on a Saigon street, February 1, 1968, at the beginning of the Tet offensive.