

## Countercurrent: One Man's History of Chinese Art

Preface to *One Hundred Years in One Minute*

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### Prologue

Filled with anticipation as well as questions, I greatly look forward to the unveiling of Hu Jieming’ s recent work. My anticipation arises from the fact that there is always spectacular visual art history embodied in his works. The content, concepts and visual presentation of his works are significant and substantial. My questions, however, stem from many considerations.

First and foremost is the question of the reliability of this international visual art history. This question has something to do with the limitations of historical writings. Due to limitations in knowledge acquisition, approaches to communication and cultural disparity, etc, the writing of art history used to be heavily dependent on the personal interests and the individual consciousness of an author, giving rise to limitations in their writings. Other questions include: What is the Chinese counterpart for this centennial art history? As it has been cultivated by art education since 1949 and corresponding to a certain period in the development of international art history, what is it like?

With these anticipations and questions in mind, I searched for Hu Jieming’ s personal art history, in an effort to make up for the loss in the current writings of art history and culture. My dialogues with Hu made me even more determined to carry on with this task. If we cannot derive precious personal experience of the artist from the writings of contemporary art history, then why not join the artist, follow individual clues, and witness the increasing diversity in Chinese contemporary art through the progress of time?

At the same time, it is also for the purpose of making discoveries in Hu’ s work that I am writing this article for his new solo exhibition. Such discoveries may not be categorized among often mentioned artistic or cultural movements, but they signify the silent power of the potential for art and culture.

Molly Nesbit once drew a comparison between Lu Xun’ s *Wild Grass* and Yang Fudong’ s work and his approaches to artistic creation. I think this metaphor actually covers a larger grass–roots group in China. They don’ t live a Bohemian life, nor do they give performances for others. Their independence shapes individual thinking and working space. They would sacrifice such independence if necessary, and devote themselves to cultural development. I learned that Yang started teaching at the China Academy of Art this year. As a matter of fact, Hu Jieming had devoted himself to art education even earlier. With the assistance of texts, we can find parallels between the artist’ s

trace and the evolution of historical narration, and in the meantime, shed some light on the artist’ s uniqueness in his media–based art creation by highlighting some of their works.

I’ d like to quote Walter Benjamin’ s discussion in *Little History of Photography*, with the aim of providing support for the validity of Hu Jieming’ s methodology, which deviates from the general Chinese contemporary art movements. Like the impact brought about by the birth of cinematics upon traditional art (as Benjamin also discussed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) it is time for us to understand and appreciate the artistic creations which break away from the restrictions of visual arts. And what this might bring us can be far beyond the developments of visual art.

### 1980s in Retrospect

The 1980s witnessed a special period for Chinese contemporary art after China’ s political and economic reform. The free expression celebrated by The Stars Group in the late 1970s can be deemed as a precursor of the new generation emerging in the 1980s. The influence of the emergence of the New Wave in 1985 is mainly regional, giving rise to the birth of organizations such as M Group in Shanghai, Guangzhou, the Northern Group of Northeast China, Dada of Amoy, Pond Association of Hangzhou, etc. The budding independence of that time is slowly transmitted in our art and culture, thus making it hard to identify where the term “New Wave” originated from. It emerged, in many cases, from the general reviews of the times by critics and theorists.

What did the 1980s mean to artists like Hu Jieming?

*I rented my first studio in the early 1980s. After graduating from university, my classmates Shi Yong, Fan Jianping and I rented a farmhouse on Daduhe Road, near the western gate of East China Normal University and Jinshajiang Road. You could see farmland from the back of the house. I lived in Caoyang Neighborhood in Putuo District which was not far from there. The rent for this 15 or 16m2 studio was 27 Yuan per month, with water, power and gas supply included. We felt it a luxury to have such a professional creative space of our own, where we could talk about art and ambition with no disturbance.*

– *Hu Jieming: Oral History of New Media*, by Wang Yalei

To most artists, the 1980s was a phase of silent meditation. Indeed many artists had gradually established their own personal discourses and methodologies, and even individuals related to the aforesaid movements

had put forward their collective manifestation. However, apart from these individuals who had a clear and determined mind to struggle, those who had chosen not to join the radical movements were still the silent majority.

It was not until “1989 China / Avant–Garde Art Exhibition” that the bigger picture and tendencies of the art movements in 1980s got clearly reflected. More than 200 artists took part in that exhibition. What I care more about is its cause, as well as the development of the artists who didn’ t take part in this cultural movement.

The 1980s was the best of times, and it was also the worst of times. The merit of 1980s is that it broke with the past in a pure and evolved sense; the disadvantage lay in its unpredictable prospects. Such concerns were reflected in many artists’ actions. Many artists of the New Wave movement who took part in the exhibition in 1989 chose to go abroad to live. This situation was connected with the art movements of the late 1970s as well as the cultural, social and political conditions in China, and reflected the vast changes of our country in transition. It was also the swan song for collectivism. As Hu Jieming puts it “they were able to discuss the things interested” . Most intellectuals and artists living in silence began to think and work more independently, seeking their own starting point in China.

Withdrawal from movements or collectivism can be deemed as the beginning point of one’ s independence, for one no longer is attached to or relies on a certain movement or situation for psychological satisfaction. Instead, one can achieve the possibility of building an inner world of independent thoughts through self–meditation within a single small space.

A group of people, along with Mr. Hu, in the 1980s belonged to that category. They didn’ t take active part in any of the movements, and kept to themselves silently as spectators.

### Public Media, Surveillance and TV Series

As the overall cultural environment in China turned more colorful and diversified in the 1990s, and with the influence of international integration, Chinese contemporary art was under constant change in order to match the demands of this situation. Different from the search for free expression and a breaking away from the past in 1980s, this time Chinese contemporary art tried to search for possibilities in tradition, modernity, folk, and politics. Traditional art education was also faced with challenges from performance

art, installation art, video, and so on.

The cultural confidence of China did not ameliorate with the reformation of the economy, thus the preference and emphasis on Western culture still somehow remained a cultural must.

Chinese artists in the early 1990s began to take part in large international exhibitions like the Venice Biennial. At the time of integration and strategy–making, they had to think about where their core values were rooted; how to adapt their own contemporary art with knowledge found in Western texts and construct an artistic discourse through the forms of visual art; how to find a form of contemporary art totally separated from the West in our own local soil, and to integrate into the international exhibition system without losing their local identity.

As the debates and discussions heated up, media art—the most direct form of the arts and the product of modern technology and broadcasting systems—quietly rose within the cultural and visual arts. As VHS and TV sets became more and more common in people’ s daily life, Zhang Peili began his explorations in the field of video art. Since political or economic restrictions could not bind the imagination, artists were also able to develop and further their aesthetic exploration in other areas. The mainstream art of the 1990s was still painting, but the emergence of controversial performance art in the early 90s (some early developments could be traced back to the 1980s) also gave photography some momentum to be accepted as a form of modern art. Such a grand background of Chinese contemporary art lay down a foundation for Hu Jieming’ s artistic practices.

*1995–1996*, created by Hu Jieming in the year 1996, resorted to the technique of magnifying daily life. It can be deemed a classic work of Anti–Media art. I divide media art into two categories: medium art and media art. The former places the emphasis on medium and methods, while the latter celebrates broadcasting and carrying on. *1995–1996* can be regarded as a profound reflection upon the broadcasting phenomenon. By recording the last day of 1995 and the first day of 1996, it collects a 24–hour public media image, in the end presented in an installation in the shape of labyrinth made up of a photographic installation. His anti–media perspective aimed at the magnified media picture generated by time, medium, and the recordings, and produced reflections upon the aggressiveness, political stances and public coverage by the media. By showing the effectiveness of the media without adopting a new medium, the artist eliminated the power of the media and provided new inspirations for thinking through media art.

In 1996, Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun curated the exhibition *Image and Phenomenon*, casting light on the evolution of the entire Chinese contemporary media art scene at the level of medium. Since the initiation of video art in 1988, the year 1996 can be regarded as the most comprehensive and fastest developing period for this medium. Besides, the curators also collected a great amount of literature on Western video art which was complementary to the whole 1980s art movement.

Hu Jieming's *Comparative Safety* (1997) could be seen as the earliest discussion on the issue of surveillance. Its inspiration came from surveillance camera in public spaces which makes people feel monitored and makes them yearn for a sense of security. Within the work, Hu provided the spectators with an optional role as they could choose to observe and intrude into the public space. Upon seeing this piece, it's hard not to see the political connotations, and it also implicated modern society into which the artist intrudes with the piece. At the same time as the spectators are experiencing their observational tour and enjoying the new-found sense of security, they are also involved in the paradox of being themselves intruded upon and observed.

The creation of *New Journey to the West* (1998) recruited artists from Canada, including overseas Chinese, Canadian and non-Canadian residents. The artists dubbed their respective roles from the classic TV series *Journey to the West* and gave their characters a parallel dialog based on the artist's contemporary experience. Such an attempt combined these classic images from TV and the Internet culture of spoofing together, which evolved into its ultimate stage in *A Tragedy Caused by A Steamed Bun*. This video work could be seen as the masterpiece of relational aesthetics, for it intentionally parodied popular keywords within the decade, such as identity, politics, immigration, and so on. Besides, Hu Jieming on purpose gave up the process of production within artistic creation, namely, the artist did not provide a particular visual experience, instead he adapted daily experience into the work as a kind of public experience. The task of the artist lay in the linkage between the voice actors and daily public experience. The dubbing lines were not derived from the production of the artists either, but directly from the personal experience of the dubbing actors.

Hu stays independent from any particular movement and phenomenon. He adopts film, monitor footage, and TV series as media. Most of the information is derived from TV media, public places and public media images available 24 hours a day. He selects and collects images broadcast via mass media. What he does can be seen as a kind of statistical or sociological study of broadcasting. In particular, he intends to eliminate a style which bears the characteristics of the artist. What we can see and sense from these works is far beyond the

experience that visual art or concept art can provide.

## Music, Sound, and Physiological Diagrams

Hu Jieming keeps his interests in other disciplines and sometimes mixes those side-disciplines in his works. Based on musical inspirations, *TV-Bra* by Nam June Paik in the 1960s was a comprehensive application of video media created to advance dramatic presence. The artist himself played the part of the musical instrument. Both his improvisation and the TVs worn by female violoncellist provided inspiration for a comprehensive understanding of musical experience. Hu's attempt, however, aims at the expression of human internal physiology by converting a combined experience of physiological diagram, gesture, architecture space, identity, musical score and vision.



Paik, Nam June; Moorman, Charlotte, «TV-Bra for Living Sculpture», 1969  
© Paik, Nam June; Moorman, Charlotte

*Collect a 5'20" cardiogram and respiration record from a hospital, and then overlap music scores on it. Read the score along with the fluctuation of the curve, and let the pianist play the music according to the reading.*

– Hu Jieming, Description of *Related to the Physiological State* (1996)

In this work, the artist made use of the physiological diagrams of a patient and turned it into music. The music here took on an externalized form, which made it hard for spectators to understand the connection if there were no notes explaining the work by the artist. Thus the cross-explanatory function of vision and music was weakened. The visual information can be regarded as a diagram based on the systems of natural sciences and an individual existence. Music became the core of the work, while the anxiety and image constructed its space.

*Collect cardiogram data from a patient, a drunkard, a sufferer and an infant, and compose 4 different musical scores with this data for percussion, piano, saxophone, and contrabass. Then, combine 4 scores into a quartet.*

– Hu Jieming, Description of *Related to the Situation* (1999)

The artist adopted an approach similar to anthropological research in this work, juxtaposing the cardiogram of patient, drunkard, sufferer and infant.



Video Quartet 2002  
christian marclay

Four screen projection, found Hollywood film clips transferred to colour video and audio track  
overall display dimensions variable duration: 14 min  
installation

Different sounds of music were played from each space containing the diagram and were combined together as a sociological music movement. The way these sounds of music were played appeared more distinct in *Video Quartet* by Swiss-American artist Christian Marclay in 2002. Marclay derived his inspiration from the melody of music, while Hu focused his attention on the social individuals in reality.

*Collect data of the cardiogram recorded during the process of an adult's masturbation, compose music according to the diagram, and play the score on a pianola.*

– Hu Jieming, Description of *Related to Happiness* (1999)



A still from Solo, 2008, Christian Marclay

In Marclay's work *Solo* (2008), we can see another sort of liberation of humanity. A woman incessantly caressing her guitar was used as allusion to the relationship between masculine rights and sensual joys. However, in Hu's work, the visual sensation was unambiguously obscured. There was the vagueness of vision, sightlessness of the video, and the latent allusion between sound and image. When spectators were faced with the masturbation scene reflected by the faceplates on the piano and its keyboard, they were attracted by the melodious music while feeling embarrassed. Perhaps this embarrassing situation was what Hu wanted to create.

*The video footage was collected from Chinese Scenic Spots postcards. The image of the postcards was scanned into computer and made into a 9-minute video clip through multimedia rendering. On the screen, postcards are horizontally overlaid with musical scores and slowly move from right to left. When these postcards appear in the center of the screen, the major lines of the contour would be displayed by dots of different colors. The music was composed according to the different positions of the dots, and was played as a single piece through different instruments.*

– Hu Jieming, Description of *Outline Only* (2001)

*A floating map of China filmed. The cities (marked by spots on the map) fluttering in the wind became the suggestion for the composition of the musical movement. This piece of piano work is a vivid reflection of the shaking spots, as well as the realistic poetic creation for us.*

– Hu Jieming, Description of *The Cities in the Wind* (2001)

*The video footage was gathered from two sections of video and photos. The first section was shot in the ancient traditional architecture in Anhui Province. The second section was shot inside a modern Western urban cluster. Computer technology was used to combine these two sections and produce the dramatic effects of overlapping, alternation, conflict and so on. Data was collected from the contours of these buildings of different sizes and styles, and then turned into music. The red dots and yellow dots in the video were the basis for the music score. They run along the contours of the buildings and were replaced by musical notes on the score. The red dot ran along the contour of the traditional Chinese buildings and its score was played by Chinese instrument, while the yellow dot ran along the contour of the modern city with its score played by Western instruments.*

– Hu Jieming, Description of *From Architectural Immanence* (2002)

The vocalized work based on the image data, the music with its political allusion based on maps, architecture and the internal sounds, all these works can be regarded as a series. By using the sound media once more, and through the introduction of music, Hu transformed the visual art experience. Those red and yellow dots in the video seemed to provide another key element of dioramic or narrative relation. It was also the same with the connections of sign language and music in his 2002 work *One Minute Soulful Touch*.

Hu's attention to music mainly results from his attempts in transforming and deviating visual experience. By rhythmic music or music in chaos, he introduces revelation in other senses. Music, dots and images construct an interactive space.

## Utopia and Reality

Most of Hu's work deals with daily experience, whether the focus is on the cardiogram, a gesture, a postcard, architecture or maps (in his music series), or his interpretation of the comprehensive experience of economics, icons, worship, and peeping. According to him:

*“...by adopting a humorous manner in the way of a trick, the work presents the universal desires and incentives of the human spirit and physiology, namely, the desire to expose and*

*peep behind. Following this presentation, and by combining the daily experience in China’s times of opening-up, another dilemma is created. On the one hand, company brands and high consumption have brought vitality to the economy which is becoming a totem for modern times and an icon admired by the new generation. Like the political icons of the last generation, they have gained absolute sovereignty in daily life. People come upon them and begin to feel irresistible excitement, and they achieve sensual pleasure by passionately admiring and consuming them. On the other hand, the self-consciousness in culture and tradition seems to give that excitement and sensual pleasure a certain moral edge, with a guilty conscience.”*

– Hu Jieming , Description of *Untitled* (1999)

*Medusa’s Raft* (2000) shared some connection with *Untitled* (1999), and was exhibited as part of the “Cool Collection Digital Art Festival” , co–organized by Qiu Zhijie, Wu Meichun and myself in 2001. Hu Jieming used Photoshop software to imitate *La Zattera Della Medusa* depicting the contemporary landscape of society and its progress of commercialization. It’s not hard for us to see Hu’s harking back to French Romanticism. The focus of his work, as well as its sharp irony and vivid metaphor, follows the characteristics of Romanticism. We can also find in this piece an indication of Hu’s study and reflections on Western art history.

Hu’s work *The Best Strategy is to be on the Move* (2002) absorbed vast amounts of visual footage and presented a visual time differing from the narration. The meeting scene, people passing the inlet, the facial expressions of the soldier and the collected footage of actual grassland, scenery and hens are all full of humor through Hu’s eyes. Given the circumstances at the time, it was hard to find another artist who had a similar style. His constant observation focuses not only on the momentary trivialities of our complicated life, such as a coquettish and bop serious art movement, but also with self–mockery and the grass–roots spirit of the Internet.

*Above and Beneath the Water* (2003), *Up! Up!* (2004), *Something in the Water* (2004), *Where is My Home* (2005), *Zero Altitude* (2006), *Cross the Center* (2006) all brought us the psychological image of the paradox between reality and utopia. Hu’s utopia is parallel to this society, and is sometimes the actual reflection of it. His approach is to de–glorify, yet with some magical visual language, providing reality with humor, and at the same time with cruel and touching feelings. This is especially so in *Up! Up!*, which deals with public sympathy. We can see that the hardship to go up and the fall triggered by the spectators all contribute to the irony of the reality and the reflections upon utopia.

*Use 3D technology to create a sphere based on the Moon and Mars with a diameter of over 1000cm. Place scenes of human life on the surface of this sphere. The scenes are arranged*

*and organized based on the material of contemporary global political, economic, cultural characteristics and structure. The principle for the arrangement is against reality, absurd and irrational, so as to create a utopian world. Spectators can refer to astronomical observation. Several telescopes are installed and spectators can use them to view the details of the work, see the scenes in the utopian world, and reflect upon the issues of the real world.*

– Hu Jieming , Description of *Hey! A World is under Construction* (2006)

*Hey! A World is under Construction* continued to present the utopia of parallel worlds of *Where is My Home*, and made the settings a background combining the features of the Moon, Mars and Earth. This complicated utopia was built with reference to, but as a betrayal and confusion of reality. What it could offer is the momentary escape from a shortsightedness of reality and to bring our thoughts into the wilder attention of the supra–world.

## Epilogue

Bill Porter depicted a Mount Zhongnan built upon Taoism in his book *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. He interviewed many hermits living in the wilderness and mountains over several visits to China in the late 1970s and 1980s. Among them was a old hermit who went to live in the mountains around 1939 and had never left since. When asked about Mao Zedong and the New China, he asked: “Who is Mao? Where is this New China?” The final chapter saw the author meet a young monk on the street. Their talk contributed to the author’s sudden enlightenment of the reason why the ultimate truth is never revealed to the world.

Like many artists, Hu Jieming leads a simple urban life. These artists are always sensitive to the new trends in science and culture, and are brave to attempt things and pass on their experience. They don’t wish to live peacefully with tradition, instead, they choose to take part in the progress of the wider globalized contemporary art.

This article does not lay too much emphasis on Hu’s work in New Media, but chooses to present his creations in areas like media, music, and utopia. This is because I like what he said in an interview about his recognition of New Media. He thought the concept of “refresh” , the Anti–Media in *1995-1996* and the tendencies in Internet culture existed in his following works, which more or less explains the reason why I hadn’t written about this aspect. What’s more, in looking back upon Hu’s work, I admire his reflections upon media, his preference for cross–media and his exploration of a wide, comprehensive knowledge. Thus his works in other media are put in their place when it comes to the explanation and introduction of his entire

creation.

*100 Years in 1 Minute* shares some similarity with *Dozens of Days and Dozens of Years* (2009). Apart from the physical vestiges and concern for living in the former, the latter can be regarded as the overlap of time and space, as well as the recovery of memory. In the tumult of contemporary art phenomena, Hu has once again looked and inspected the timeliness of the process, by using the videos to speculate on the generated contextual relations of the visual. The glittering flashbacks of visual art history in the storage bags seem so easy to retrieve, and yet hard to capture.

Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to Hu Jieming for his invitation and Shanghart Gallery for their generosity.

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