

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Nottingham
Unit of Assessment: 36 Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library & Information Management
Title of case study: Adding Complexity to the Curatorial Presentation of Contemporary Chinese Art
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Paul Gladston's (Associate Professor of Critical Theory and Visual Culture, Nottingham, 2005-present) research has served to problematize and add complexity to the public understanding of the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and the wider conditions of its making and showing both within and outside the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). The Chief Curator of the Hayward Gallery exhibition <i>Art of Change: New Directions from China</i> (2012) drew on Gladston's expertise in the exhibition's presentation. The exhibition attracted over 22,000 visitors, with international media coverage leading to wider critical engagement in broadcast and social media. A challenging review of the exhibition in <i>The Guardian</i> by the high profile artist Ai Weiwei, followed by Gladston's response, stimulated broader public debate around contemporary Chinese art.</p> <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The impact described here is underpinned by two research projects into the history and socio-cultural significance of contemporary Chinese visual art carried out by Gladston within the PRC between 2005 and 2010. The first involved a University of Nottingham funded investigation into the activities of four of the most significant 'avant-garde' art groups active within the PRC between 1979 and 1989 – The Stars, The Northern Art Group, The Pond Association, and Xiamen Dada (References A, B and C). The second was a wider study of theoretical discourses and cultural practices related to the development of contemporary Chinese art (References D, E and F). Both investigations were conducted with the support of local Chinese-speaking research assistants and involved first-hand analysis of cultural artefacts, sites of display and documentary sources inaccessible outside China, as well as an extended series of semi-structured interviews with Chinese artists, curators, academics and critics. Gladston's combined use of primary qualitative research and leading-edge critical theory as an interpretative tool breaks new methodological ground in the emerging field of contemporary Chinese art studies. Central to Gladston's work is his concern to challenge and disrupt the presumptions which often frame the judgments and responses of Western and Chinese art critics towards Chinese art. In this context, it is important to note Gladston's experiential familiarity with the place of art practice in modern China, where he was seconded between 2005 and 2010 as the inaugural head of the Department of International Communications and director of the Institute of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham Ningbo.</p> <p>i) 'Avant-garde' Art Groups in China, 1979-89</p> <p>Supported by a University of Nottingham Small Research Grant (£1,000) and a University of Nottingham Early Research Grant (£7,500), this investigation not only provided accurate historical information about the activities of four of the groups concerned, but also furnished new insights into the socio-cultural significance of works made individually and collectively by their members. Key findings of the investigation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ the differing, often regionally-influenced identities and aims of the groups (References A and B) ❖ the nuanced and often politically ambiguous ways in which groups sought to negotiate their collective identities as 'avant-garde' artists in relation to the continuing climate of political authoritarianism within the PRC during the 1980s as well as PRC leader Deng Xiaoping's concurrent programme of social and economic reform (References A and C) ❖ the negative as well as productive effects of cultural translation on attitudes and techniques appropriated by the groups from Western modernist, postmodernist and contemporary art (References A, B and C) ❖ the complex relationship of the groups with indigenous-traditional as well as modern Western cultural influences – including limitations on the exposure to and understanding of attitudes and techniques appropriated from Western modernist, postmodernist and contemporary art (References A and C). <p>ii) Contemporary Chinese Art in Theory and Practice</p> <p>There is a relatively small but growing body of theorised academic writing related to the study of</p>

contemporary Chinese art. Outside the PRC much of that writing has tended towards established forms of Westernized critical discourse at the expense of any detailed consideration of localised Chinese cultural/theoretical perspectives. By contrast, within the PRC academic writing on contemporary Chinese art has often tended towards the use of partisan and uncritical interpretations of traditional Chinese thought and practice as well as uninformed readings of Westernized theory as a basis for assertions of national-cultural exceptionalism. Gladston is the first academic writer to have addressed this problematic discursive opposition not only by exploring in-depth the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and established Chinese cultural thought and practice (**References D and F**), but also by developing novel deconstructive interpretative/critical methods. The latter has involved the use of polylogues derived from the writings of, among others, Jacques Derrida (**Reference E**) that bring Chinese and Westernized interpretative perspectives together while opening each up critically to the other.

3. References to the research

- A. Gladston, P. *'Avant-Garde' Art Groups in China, 1979-89*. Bristol/Chicago: Intellect/University of Chicago Press, 2013. Listed in **REF 2**. This is the first published monograph on avant-garde art groups in China. Comments by Professor Jason C. Kuo of the University of Maryland, a leading scholar of Chinese art, are included on the back cover – "Avant-Garde" Art Groups in China, 1979-1989 [...] addresses head-on the problematic identity and cultural politics of contemporary Chinese art in the late 1970s and 1980s.' Production of the book, which includes a substantial number of full-colour reproductions, some of which are published for the first time, was supported financially by the ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai.
- B. Gladston, P. 'Locating Displacement: Envisioning the Complex Diasporization of Contemporary Chinese Art'. In B. Hopfener, F. Koch, J. Lee-Kalisch and J. Noth, eds, *Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*. Weimar: VDG, 2012, 243-258. Listed in **REF 2**. Cover note by the editors: 'The book features 20 essays written by a select group of international junior and senior scholars engaged in ambitious and methodologically innovative research on contemporary Chinese art.'
- C. Gladston, P. (2011) 'Low Resolution: Towards an Uncertain Reading of the Art of Zhang Peili'. In R. Peckham, ed., *Zhang Peili: Certain Pleasures*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8-Blue Kingfisher, 36-42. Available on request. This fully illustrated book/catalogue accompanied the first major retrospective exhibition of the work of the artist Zhang Peili, which was staged at the Minsheng Art Museum, a major private gallery in Shanghai, in 2011. Gladston's article appears in English and Mandarin Chinese translation.
- D. Gladston, P. (2012) 'Traces of Empire: Deconstructing Hou Hanru's "Post-Colonialist" Reading of Contemporary Chinese Art'. In: J. C. Kuo, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art and Film: Theory Applied and Resisted*, Washington: New Academia, 8-24. Available on request. In his extended introduction, Kuo situates the work of other contributors with reference to Gladston's essay, which is given keynote status.
- E. Gladston, P. 'Problematizing *Contemporaneity*: Towards a Polylogue Between International Postmodernist and Chinese Contemporary Art Theories', *Culture and Dialogue*, 2012, 2(1), 53-80. Available on request.
- F. Gladston, P. 'Problematizing the New Cultural Separatism: Critical Reflections on Contemporaneity and the Theorizing of Contemporary Chinese Art'. *Modern China Studies*, 2012, 19(1), 195-270. Listed in **REF 2**. *Modern China Studies* is a leading bi-lingual (English and Mandarin) peer-reviewed academic journal.
- G. Gladston, P. *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011. Available on request. In his forward to the book Lorenz Helbling, director of the ShanghArt gallery, noted: 'I am very pleased that during his five years at the University of Nottingham Ningbo ... Gladston had the time and energy to carry out such extensive research into the thinking of contemporary Chinese artists. A scholar is a rather rare thing in the contemporary Chinese art world ... However, Paul found a way into this world, focusing on its more interesting aspects by engaging in extended dialogues with people who are shaping the Chinese part of today's global culture' (p.12).

4. Details of the impact

Contemporary Chinese art has become a major focus of interest for public museums and art galleries world-wide. Gladston is a researcher at the forefront of advances in scholarship in this area and the value of his published research was recognized when he was requested to serve as

an advisor to the Hayward Gallery's Chief Curator to assist in improving the intellectual depth and richness of the gallery's exhibition *Art of Change: New Directions from China*, a major international exhibition of contemporary Chinese art staged by the Hayward between 7 September and 9 December 2012 (see <http://china.southbankcentre.co.uk>). Beyond his contribution to the Hayward exhibition, the influence of Gladston's published work was further recognized when his article responding to a review of the exhibition by the renowned contemporary artist Ai Weiwei (**Source E**) stimulated a critical debate by problematizing predominant perceptions of Chinese art and artists, thereby further opening up a broader and more nuanced public understanding of contemporary Chinese art.

Adding complexity to a curator's perspective on contemporary Chinese Art Recognition of the fresh and challenging insights presented by Gladston's published research resulted in him being invited to act in an advisory capacity by the Chief Curator and curatorial team for *The Art of Change*. In this role, Gladston's advice in particular drew attention to:

- ❖ the ways in which Chinese artists seek to negotiate their identities in relation to the continuing climate of political authoritarianism within the PRC (**References A and C**)
- ❖ the negative as well as productive effects of cultural translation on the work of Chinese artists (**References A, B and C**)
- ❖ the complex relationship of contemporary Chinese art with indigenous-traditional as well as modern Western cultural influences (**References A, B, C, E, and F**).

Gladston also provided the curator with insights into the problematic contestation between localized Chinese and international discursive perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art. The sharing of Gladston's research in these areas added significant complexity to the Hayward's existing curatorial view. It also served to problematize conventional views held by the Hayward's curatorial team, particularly in relation to the political management/control of contemporary art in the PRC. *Art of Change* was amongst the first exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art to be staged by a major public institution in the UK and attracted an audience of over 22,241 (**Source C**). The close attention given by the exhibition to indigenous Chinese thought and practice, as well as the ambiguous critical positioning of contemporary Chinese art (**References A, D, E, F and G**) (all elements of the exhibition to which Gladston contributed research data and critical insight) was acknowledged in positive media reviews including 4 and 5 star reviews in *The Times* (Nancy Durrant), *The Sunday Times* (Waldemar Januszczak), *The Telegraph* (Andrew Graham-Dixon) and BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* (Charlotte Mullins) (**Source D**). Gladston's advice helped the curator to develop and present new critical perspectives on the relationship between contemporary art and the wider conditions of its making and showing both within and outside the PRC with particular insights on; the problematic effects of cultural translation, helping them to look beyond Westernized cultural perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art (**References D, E and F**); the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and aspects of traditional Chinese cultural thought and practice; and the persistently uncertain positioning of artists in relation to centralised authority within the PRC (**References A, B, C, F and G**). This advice helped the curator to 'focus and give confirmation of [my] existing vision' (**Source A**). Through the provision of research insight, fact checking and critical analysis, Gladston helped to shape the specially-created interactive digital archive, which formed the backbone of the exhibition. The archive combined video materials, a timeline and detailed discussions of works included in the exhibition. Drawing on his published research (**References A, B, C, D, E and F**) Gladston was able to contribute a selection of key events and an individual perspective in the section of the exhibition entitled 'Arguments' which focused on China's complex relationship with modernity and tradition (**Source C**). This contribution provided insights into the problematic and often contested historical/cultural significance of the artworks on display in the exhibition. Gladston was also able to offer advice on the factual accuracy of materials used to contextualise the exhibition and to peer review an introductory essay written by the Chief Curator for the exhibition's accompanying catalogue (**Source B**). The article cited Gladston's previous work (**Reference G**), confirming the contribution of his research to the development of her curatorial approach. Gladston contributed an essay to the catalogue on the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and traditional Chinese cultural thought and practice (**Source B**). The catalogue reached a wide readership amongst visitors, with gallery sales reaching 720 copies. A key indicator of the interest in contemporary Chinese art that the exhibition stimulated is the fact that this figure was 220 in

excess of the Hayward's target (appealing to 1 in 31 visitors, rather than the target of 1 in 73 originally forecast). A further 351 copies were subsequently bought through direct sales (including at other galleries, through Amazon, and by standing orders) (**Source C**) suggesting wider cultural penetration of the ideas and content of the exhibition beyond visitors to the exhibition itself.

Problematizing dominant cultural perspectives on contemporary Chinese Art and Artists

When the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei wrote a challenging review of *Art of Change* which appeared in *The Guardian* (**Source E**), Gladston countered online with a critical response published on *Randian* (a project seeking to promote independent cultural debate in China and to foster intellectual exchange between China and the rest of the world by publishing independent commentary on art, artists, exhibitions and galleries, as well as video, architecture and design) (**Source E**). Ai's review of *Art of Change* criticized *Art of Change* for its failure to show art that engaged directly and openly with political authority within the PRC. In response, Gladston's article drew attention to the exhibition's more subtle and varied engagement with the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and political authority. It also discussed the problematic status of Ai's standing as a media celebrity which has, arguably, obscured in-depth discussion and debate about the wider context of artistic criticality in the PRC. Circulation of *Randian*'s e-newsletter reaches approx. 40,000 addressees, while the site attracts approximately 20,000-30,000 page views per month. By 29 April 2013, Gladston's article had attracted 2,474 unique page views with an average reading time of 3mins 45secs, and as the article had attracted 2,994 views as of 9 September 2013, this indicates that it has continued to attract approximately 100+ views per month (**Source F**). The article stimulated interest from members of the art world internationally, being subsequently published in the art magazine/journal *Broadsheet* (circulation 4,500 print copies per issue and 30,000-40,000 web downloads per annum) (**Sources E and G**). Ai Weiwei's critique and Gladston's response were translated in full and discussed on the blog of Vietnamese art writer Nhu Huy, who commented 'This is a very useful discussion, since it refers to the same situation that exists for contemporary art in Vietnam - for example: the relationship between art and politics and the difference between Western and local perspectives on contemporary art' (**Source E**). Also Shanghailist, a major online filter of China related news stories for the international media, ran a feature on Gladston's *Randian* article, quoting substantially from the original text (**Source E**). International interest in this debate resulted in the Director of the New York-based organization and exhibition space AW Asia contacting Gladston to say 'I really enjoyed reading your "Getting Over AWW" piece. Bravo [...] a well-written "reality check" such as yours is needed [...] your critique adds a necessary dimension to the overall conversation about the field of contemporary Chinese art' (**Source H**). The extent of engaged response to Gladston's article attests to its contribution in problematizing existing cultural narratives about contemporary Chinese art, and the specific mythologization of Ai Weiwei within that narrative.

Gladston's advisory role with the Hayward has led to further invitations to critically inform the work of other public museums and galleries, including a major exhibition of contemporary Chinese art at Michigan State University curated by Wang Chunchen, organizer of the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and a forthcoming exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in the PRC curated jointly by Dr. Marko Daniel of Tate and Carol Lu (an internationally active curator and critic).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- Source A - Letter, Chief Curator, Hayward Gallery
- Source B - Catalogue, *Art of Change: New Directions from China*. Available on request
- Source C - E-mail, Research Assistant, Hayward Gallery
- Source D - Dossier, Nine Press Reviews *Art of Change*
- Source E - Dossier, Four Articles Ai Weiwei-Paul Gladston-Huy-Shanghailist
- Source F - Letter, Editor, *Randian*
- Source G - E-mail, Principal Editor, *Broadsheet*
- Source H - E-mail, Director, AW Asia