

# Daimler

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This is the manuscript of a presentation by Carol Yinghua Lu, which was given on Sept 16, 2015 at Daimler Contemporary Berlin.

Crimes without A Scene

Good afternoon!

It's a pleasure to be speaking this afternoon.

I have been asked to speak about alternative spaces and practices in China today. But I am afraid that my talk is something of a divergence from the given subject, it does, however, reflect one of the concerns in my research and thinking, which is to revisit the past, both recent and remote, with issues and questions informed by present-day urgencies and concerns.

The title of my talk today: Crimes without A Scene, has come from the e-flux text that I wrote jointly with artist Liu Ding on the revisits of two practices that took place in China between 1989 and 1996, in Shanghai and Beijing respectively. The two practices that we examined closely in this text and also through an exhibition we made in OCAT Shenzhen early this year, were that of the artist Qian Weikang and that of the artist group New Measurement. Both practices stopped in 1996, and as some of the artists involved had withdrawn completely from the art system, both became forlorn instances in the account and memory of art history. Before going into why we have felt the need to recuperate such practices in the not so distant past of the 1990s and how we did so, I would like to zoom into the present state of artistic practice in China, which has to a certain extent triggered such an inquiry.

After visiting many of the high-quality exhibitions and exhibition spaces in Istanbul during the opening week of the Istanbul biennial in early September 2015, a Chinese colleague told me that his strongest impression was that in comparison, what is happening in the artistic and exhibition practice of China today is mostly just dancing within the territory of capital. Not even dancing, he told me, just acting willingly and comfortably within the rules and confines of capital, not much else. These were his original words.

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I sympathize with such a comment simply because wherever one looks, the kind of criticality, the sense of independence and the desire to be independent, that can be discerned from today's artistic practices are nihilistic. The Chinese art community, especially among the younger generation of artists, critics and curators, educated both in the country and abroad, have little interest in any form of critical engagement with the public life as well as the reality of the art industry. But even when some of them are habitually suspicious of everything, which in itself posits a critical stand, their critical consciousness and position have no root in any political, social and cultural standing or horizon. There is a widespread tendency of de-politicization and de-historicization in the present thinking, practice and discourse of art, ignorant of what is happening socially, politically and historically. The removal from public life and ideological issues is a common symptom. The growing indifference towards the political, social and historical conditions for contemporary art production among the participants in China has mainly from a more affluent economic context and the government's growing involvement in supporting the art market and exporting of Chinese art exhibitions. When political events and subjects are addressed, the sentiment and commentary evinced in such projects and discussions, are uninformed, shallow, impulsive, and often charged by a strong dose of nationalism. But mostly, the silent state of the art community in the political sphere is one of the most important political features of contemporary Chinese art practice and community today. As the basic political institutions in China are monopolized by capital and power, a political phenomenon that was generated by political and legal reforms undertaken by the Chinese government to comply with the conditions of a market economy, this new historic condition in China is shaping the art world as much as it affects the larger society.

The fixation with the power structure in art that is largely generated, sustained and affirmed by the economy of art, which consists of commercial galleries, corporate sponsorships, real-estate supported institutions, state funding, art fairs, and gallery-funded museum exhibitions is overwhelming. The choices that are made by players of this structure are consistently driven by, mostly short-term business profits and expectation of returns while at the same time, professionals just conform to and help execute and act out such expectations. To aggravate the situation, there is little counter-argument or a sense of resistance in place among most players in the field, let alone any reflection on the ideological and historic framework that produces such

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a condition. It is as if people readily forego any sense of judgment in artistic standard and ethics and decide that the best thing is just to follow the flow.

What is the flow then? To begin with, we can't obviously associate the word "conservative" with our artistic condition in China today. On one hand, there is a considerable amount of openness towards international art. Artists and thinkers from other parts of the world, predominantly Europe and America, are invited to have shows in China. The subjects of their interest and research and their ways of practice could almost instantly become relevant and would even be warmly welcome as focuses of local discussions momentarily. On the other hand, we continue to tolerate most mediocre exhibitions organized on our own that either have no engagement with any real issue in their curatorial vision or demonstrate no awareness of the language and methodology of exhibition making itself. The undiscerning art media and art critics serve as a vehicle to incorporate these exhibitions into a discourse about art and thus give these exhibitions a legitimate and authoritative position. The majority of exhibitions and works on view in both commercial and museum spaces are interchangeable, in most cases, echoing and complimenting each other.

On the front of global participation, the art community in China has not missed out any opportunity to engage in possible exchanges, appearing diligently in art fairs all over the world. Many can now even claim the annual trip to Basel a tradition of their own as well. About five years ago, there were no more than two galleries from China, one Swiss-run, participating in Art Basel. Now it's most galleries' daily operation to make applications to the increasing number of art fairs in the world.

The establishment of the experimental art department has become a state cultural mandate that every art academy in China must comply with. The name "Experimental art" becomes a front of openness and a status quo of being contemporary for Chinese art academies while contemporary artists that have been employed to work in these departments are able to make the claim of "hitting the enemy's camp".

For a long time after the Cultural Revolution, to practice and to be able to exhibit, the art community needed to engage in a certain antagonistic relationship with the government, even though fundamentally, it was NOT about seeking a complete break from the government. When the government periodically tightened its control on freedom of expressions, some artists and practitioners would react to such

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oppression provocatively and maintained the tension in such a relationship. Yet slowly through the 1990s, as the growing bonding between capital and the state power turned the state into less an opposition and symbol of power to rebel against, but more of an employer and commissioner at times, offering opportunities and space for practice, though always limited in terms of the extent ideological expressions. In the process of gaining “work” and possibilities to exhibit and to sell works, the art community succumbed to a certain mindset that can be described as “seeking common ground” with the government, putting away the differences in opinions and political stands, until eventually these issues became distant and irrelevant subjects in their minds. Apart from wanting a certain improvement of economic and exhibition opportunities, many are unclear about what they should be opposing and whether there is opposition any more and what should be the relationship between their own conditions and that of the general society.

Instead of having multiple art systems and values in place as a result of all these developments, the art world in China looks unprecedentedly unanimous and situated squarely within a purely capital-based structure, which mirrors the positioning of the country itself: the endless pursuit of personal authoritarianism coupled by the belief in the supremacy of capital and power.

Since 2011, I have worked with Liu Ding to inquire into the years between 1989 and 2000, the period preceding the full-fledged market expansion in the art world of the following decade until the present day. This decade witnessed the gradual but extensive transition of the art world from a mixed community of idealistic intellectuals, radical conceptualists, pragmatic revolutionaries and naïve entrepreneurs to one of market believers, operators and disciples. As the government quickly launched the market and economic growth as the new state ideology for all walks of life, its preaching was mistakenly taken to heart by intellectuals and artists who delved right into it, initially considering it a means and pathway to arrive at a more open society. The intellectuals, technocrats, and artists shared the government’s commitment to establishing an economic society. Behind such a move, the rationale was the Marxist theory of the economic base determining the superstructure. While in effect, the government found it a welcome diversion from the political tension of the 1989 and a scheme that eventually implicated a great number of intellectuals and educated elites into economic activities supported by a certain extent of political access and privileges. Some of these people who would have otherwise taken to the street to

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request for political reforms and a more open society became so involved that they would also desire for a certain political stability and the privileges offered to them that their political vision was no longer about having radical and subversive visions about existing order, if they have one still. They became part of the existing order and wanted to consolidate it and not to challenge it. Disillusioned by the Tian'anmen democratic uprising, many have already discarded the passionate idealism and metaphorical discussion of the 1980s. In its place, they tended to link the vision of a rational, analytical and orderly system of approaches and thus a more open society to establishing an economic base. In both public and private arenas in China, bureaucracy rules, according to a shared logic of political pacification, economic growth and the narrow interests of a propertied class. During the 1990s there was a liberal hope that China's new entrepreneurs would create a democratic vanguard. But they forgot that the new business elite was fully dependent on the one-party state and above all its exploitation of labour.

It is worth noticing that at this time, state-run art magazines gave considerable space to publishing new regulations of art fairs, reports of art fairs and pages of auctions prices, as well as meetings that the association of art critics held to determine a market price for art critical writing. There was a pervading sense of excitement about the word and conception of "business", which evoked a kind of formality, something that is regulated, orderly and efficient, that can be taken seriously and that could yield a way of livelihood, rather than a cultural and idealistic pursuit.

Business activities became exceptionally present in the art world, with former translators of Western art history books and emerging art critics setting out to organize a biennial, which was supposed to emulate that of the Venice Biennial, especially that of its origin as a trading platform, there was even attempt to launch an art magazine entitled *Art Market*, with a core mission to promote the discourse of the market in the art world. Some of these ideas seemed far-fetched misreading and mis-translations of practices in the Western art systems, one should never forget the disruption between China and the rest of the world throughout most part of the decade of the Cultural Revolution.

The general perception and historical narrative of this period is thus dominated by accounts of market success and international recognition of a limited number of art movements coined and heavily promoted by art critics and traders of this time. Yet

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more nuanced and diverse approaches to artistic practices are only recorded as insignificant instances, aborted attempts and terminated and forgotten cases that have little relevance in terms of providing guidance to greater success.

One of our main intentions in several of the research projects Liu Ding and I have undertaken was to reconsider some of the individual practices and spirits of the 1990s, which had what we describe as a kind of “unrefined/raw” idealism, before the complete takeover of pragmatism and utilitarianism in both the cultural sphere and the society. By discarding the illusion of collective revolution and shifting to individual practice, many artists’ careers entered in the 1990s into an important period for creation, development and gradual maturity. They began seeking ways to break through and face themselves in their creative endeavors, identifying reference systems that belonged to their individual conditions, and using creative thinking and cultural foundations to replace their excessive, even total reliance on modern European humanist ideas.

Reading through essays on artists and practice since the 1990s, one discovers that most of the commentary attempts to establish connectivity in artistic creations on the level of reality. Such explanations of art gained effectiveness on the vernacular and utilitarian level, with the simplified explanations of artworks especially resonating with international media’s projections about Chinese contemporary art. In turn, practitioners in the Chinese art industry, including artists and critics, also engaged in their own projections of the Western art practices that were introduced into China. For instance, the practices of pop art were widely understood to be a criticism of consumerism, and this critical component was magnified in Chinese pop art, turning such work into a practice in the expression of socially critical meanings and attitudes. Such expositions and interpretations seemed to bestow these artworks and practices with standing in art history (Western art history), while establishing connectedness with the Chinese social reality.

During this period, on one hand, artists continued to engage in work according to their bodily and artistic instincts; on the other hand, art criticism continued to seek out the basis for creations on the levels of psychology, sociology and philosophy, while continuing to overlook commentary on art itself. One could say that artistic practice encountered the fate of transitional projection, while the artistic nature of creation, that is the recognition of art itself, had yet to be established. This gave

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artists a lot of confusion and even anxiety. For them, the entire discipline of art lacked recognition of the interiority of art and discourse on art. It seemed that artists always had to provide some legitimacy in reality for their work, a false contextual relationship, but this wasn't necessarily where their interests lay, and it forced some artists to take a resistant stance. Political directedness and social themes often became the mediums and languages for the artists' work, and became the sole channel for art criticism to enter into artistic practice. These perceptions and habits have remained to the present day.

The various interpretations, circulation and misreadings that extend out from artistic practice have, on the material level, been expanded into a kind of perfect knowledge, particularly after entering into certain historicized narratives and when stripped of their original colors, as the organicness and randomness of artistic practice has been consciously and unconsciously ignored. Certain of art's clumsy and initial states, certain unclassifiable, primal, spontaneous, private, serendipitous and individual elements in artistic creation and thought, have been diluted, forgotten and ignored in the process of the industrialization, universalization and calibration of art.

In 2012, as part of the 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial, which Liu Ding, Su Wei and I co-curated, we have presented an observation of this local history, focusing on the 1990s and looking specifically at the creative trajectories of individual artists. Art as an individual phenomenon is our departure point, method and content for researching and narrating this era. Interviews with artists, critics and curators who experienced the 1990s and are still active today present a concrete and unprecedented view of the experiences, ideas, dilemmas, hesitations, anxieties and sources of self confidence in art during that period, and we have learned about the contexts, circumstances, interactions, encounters and clashes that they experienced. It was not a retrospective to summarize the entire scene but an attempt to restore the art of that time to its individual spirit and personal thinking.

[Show slides of the Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial](#)

Following on this research, in 2014, Liu Ding and I have researched deeply into two practices of this period: Qian Weikang and New Measurement Group. These were artists whose artistic vision and practice were deeply invested in the modernization of contemporary art practice in China in the beginning of the 1990s, soon after 1989, by

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introducing self-imposed rules into the making of work and by turning the attempt to reduce arbitrary, willful and emotional decisions of the individual a central concern in their practice. Without any planning on either side, they were active simultaneously in two of the most important cities for cultural activities and discourses in China and their paths crossed each other occasionally in a handful of group exhibitions. Mostly, they were at the forefront of an emerging conceptual art movement in China in the post-Tian'anmen era. Instead of running away as many of their disillusioned peers and colleagues did after 1989, they stay put, and had initiated a new horizon for thinking about art and practicing in China.

Other than a few "witnesses" who had actually seen their works during their time, few could really recall or know what they actually did. A lack of any form of record of them apart, the odds to retrace their works are high on several accounts. Qian Weikang made about 12 pieces of installations and five written proposals between 1991 to 1996. After making and presenting them in mostly self-mounted exhibitions, Qian disposed of all of his works simply because he had no space to store them. Then he made a deliberate decision to stop making any visual artwork, participating in any exhibition, or socializing in the art circle in 1996 and is nearly a forgotten name these days.

In the same year, the New Measurement Group disbanded and concluded their activities by trashing all of the manuscripts and related materials they had produced during their eight-year course of work. One of them, Chen Shaoping, did not make any other work from that point on, although remained in touch with the art community. Gu Dexin quit all art-making activities in 2008 and minimized his involvement in the art world to the extent of occasional meetings with close friends and colleagues. The only one who maintains an active presence in the art world still is Wang Luyan, who continues to make works. Neither Chen Shaoping nor Gu Dexin had discussed much in public about the work of New Measurement. Available resources on their work were scarce and hard to come by.

To want to understand these two practices today was like entering a crime scene stripped clean of any physical evidence. There was as much ignorance as there was mystery and myth surrounding these two cases.

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Qian Weikang, had not visited any contemporary art exhibition over the past two decades. On one previous occasion when we approached him to re-create a work of his, he left the decision to ours entirely. He did not direct us or answer any question as to how the work should be made or look.

Compared with the relative anonymity of Qian Weikang, New Measurement has a legendary status and is often associated with the aura surrounding Gu Dexin, who at the height of a successful international career, voluntarily abandoned the art world. His decision sparked speculation and wishful projections, mostly interpreting his act as a rebellious gesture and rejection towards the power of the art system and a sign of martyrdom, showering him with admiration and comparing him to a master.

The silence of the artists, no matter what the reasons, led to an omnipresent obliviousness of their work, and simultaneously, for a couple of art critics to claim their absolute authority about the subject matter. All through the existence of the New Measurement Group, they produced five books, which together with the trashing of their archival materials, were considered by themselves as the totality of their work. All of the five publications were works commissioned and produced for exhibitions that happened in Fukuoka, Hong Kong, Berlin, Erfurt, and Barcelona. Most of the languages used in these books were the respective local languages of the countries where they were shown and thus remained foreign to the Chinese readers.

With these cases and more of its kind being the missing pages from the history of art in China, the current historic account of art often fails to offer a more diversity and heterogeneity of approaches, experiences and values as references in terms of making, and evaluating art. Such an inadequacy on the part of our art history still hinders today's scope of understanding art, especially those that involve conceptually and intellectually charged and challenging works, and processes. With the supremacy of the art market and the preference for immediate and visible outcomes in the artistic discourse, the popular anti-intellectual sentiment in the art community leaves even little room for more careful consideration of such practice.

What were these practices exactly that fascinate us today still even with such little physical remaining? Qian Weikang was denied college education due to his inborn heart problem yet he was given a favor to feed burning furnace with coal in a machinery manufacturer from 1982 to 1987. It was then that he became infatuated

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with modernist poetry and radical writing experiments and participated in an underground literary scene in Shanghai. Like many literary enthusiasts of that time, Qian read many translated works from Europe and was deeply impressed by modernist ideas and the avant-garde movements described in these books. In his 20-square meter residence on the outskirts of Shanghai, Qian carried out a writing experiment, which he termed as “the ladder poem”. He picked more than 100 characters randomly from a dictionary of modern Chinese and wrote each of the characters on one piece of paper. He drew lines on his floor with white chalk to resemble a notebook page, and climbed up a ladder to release the paper slips from atop the ladder. By transferring the characters that fell on each of the lines on the floor onto his paper notebook, he composed his ladder poems. The same idea of lending the outcome of a process open to such natural forces as gravity and wind was reoccurring throughout his practice.

Showing slide of re-staging the Ladder poems.

After 1989, Qian had more and more contact with the visual art circle in Shanghai, mostly thanks to his reunion with his primary schoolmate, artist Shi Yong. Qian applied to work in the basement gallery of the Shanghai Huashan Art School where Shi has been a teacher until today. The two of them organized group exhibitions with their colleagues, and then an exhibition together that could be considered two parallel solo exhibitions. It was in this lower-ceilinged space where Qian made and showed the first and also most of his installations. His first public appearance as a visual artist was a site-specific installation consisting of nearly 30,000 pieces of white chinks, those commonly used for writing on blackboards in schools. He stood half of them on the floor and left the other half fell in all directions, as off overblown by a whip of some sort. Together, they formed the shape of triangle. After this work, he switched to using standard sheets of iron plates, colored them in deep blue, lying one on top of another to create beautiful forms, and sifted a certain amount of white plaster powder onto a part of the steel plates while standing from the height of a ladder. One of them featured a video of a running fan playing on loop on a monitor elevated from a metal stand, facing at an angle of 45 degree down towards three sheets of metal plates stacked onto each other on the floor. One of such works made of metal sheets consisted of two sheets bound by exposed wire so that they became a transmitter that channeled the electricity from the power circuit in the wall towards

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a radio playing a local music channel. These works were in a way poems themselves, narrating in serene and elegant forms the poetry of invisible forces and connections.

### Showing slides of Qian's works

The New Measurement Group in contrast, produced zero objects other than their five books, which were printed in a small quantity and given away to colleagues or sold in the bookstore of the institutions they had exhibitions at. The root of their practice, as was told by Gu Dexin to us, and later on confirmed by Chen Shaoping and Wang Luyan, could really be traced back to the thinking of Gu Dexin. While working as a watch guard in a factory, Gu developed the habit of watching people passing by at work. As a hobby though, Gu often observed the activities of animals in the Beijing zoo. He also enjoyed the frequent exchanges with a group of like-minded friends who had no formal art education like him. They had commented on his sketches of human bodies as out of proportion and in response to that, he measured his friends and made drawings of their bodies on his sketchbook with lines drawn by a ruler, in proportion to the measurements he got, and marked each line with their exact measurements.

Recalling the occasional blackouts at home during his childhood, Gu once proposed to his friends to try out an experiment that was designed to single out the sense of touching by turning off one's visual and hearing senses. Not all but Wang Luyan responded with enthusiasm and together, they made a series of 16 drawings on photographic paper, describing tactile feelings, some factual, such as the temperature of a room and some described the subjective and some actions and experiences. One writes "Temperature 39"; another writes "Soap Bubbles Onto Faces" with an analytical drawing of a number of white circles packed inside an open triangle shape.

### Showing Gu's sketches and the Tactile Art series

From there, the loosely formed group that at the most number had six members, made another series of drawings, each following the same set of rules that designated the tools they should use and the angle of 45 degree that the lines they draw should take and so on. They were all departing from one black dot and ended up with six sets of drastically different graphics. This process drove them to further

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reflect on the nature and working of individual subjectivity and three of them, Chen, Gu and Wang remained to work together to develop a system of working and a process of analysis based on following rules designated by the artists that would be much more radical and extreme in terms of attempting to eliminating the presence of the individual hand.

What they actually did through seven years of work and the making of five books was precisely that: to create a set of rules and with it a collection of tools, and a precise procedure of analyzing data, be it pictures or texts, which would avoid chances and diversions. On such terms, one can almost say that their work was much less the five books than the rules they devised through self-application, testing and constant revisions and the process it took to arrive at these rules. They had claimed that the system and procedure of analysis they had invented would be applicable to any form of material that would be subject to such a process of analysis and executed by anyone to reach the same conclusion. Two decades later, we created a quasi-New Measurement Group to re-execute their rules and proved their point. Curiously, two of the three artists had a vague idea of how their rules work these days and only one of them could remember some of it.

The practices of Qian Weikang and the New Measurement Group, together with many colleagues of theirs who were active in the experimental art scene of the 1990s are still invisible in the account of our art history and are just beginning to be heard and told. The latter half of the 1990s is yet to unfold with more examinations of individual practices and experiences as well. It laid a foundation and framework for the full establishment of market value and utilitarianism as a dominant denominator for artistic practice and discourse in China, which is our living reality today.

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