

#Branded – Christie’s in the Age of Digital Image Circulation

By: Blake Finucane

In *After Art*, David Joselit meditates on the modern condition of art objects. In an age of vast digitization, images emerge as the most significant form of art production. Images are “visual byte[s], vulnerable to virtually infinite remediation,” and lend themselves to “neoliberal circulation;” they can traverse borders easily and are not fixed in any precise location.¹ Images amass influence through this motion, having the ability to “replicate, remediate and disseminate.”² This notion of value creation draws many parallels with advertising, as the primary goal in this industry is often to maximize the amount of people who are exposed to a product. Extensive diffusion of an image is standard practice in the marketing world, as this is an effective way to garner the most points of contact amongst an audience. Christie’s YouTube video, *If I Live I’ll See You Tuesday (If I Live)*, encompasses this idea. It is part of the promotional material for their contemporary art auction of the same name that took place on May 12, 2014. A 250-year-old auction house, whose sales of “art and collectibles” were \$7.7 billion in 2014, Christie’s usually opts for more limited and traditional promotional techniques.³ For their May 2014 event, they strategically picked an online format that permitted wide distribution, allowing the organization to capitalize on an emerging mode of publicity. Circulation is a crucial means by which companies add value to their products, as this can boost visibility of the brand name and the prestige attached to it. Labour is increasingly abstracted from the high prices that modern and contemporary art commands, so symbolic value has the utmost importance. Christie’s translated art works into images via the social media platform of YouTube. Using astronomically expensive paintings along with a skateboarder, a gritty behind the scenes

aesthetic, an indie rock song and several other icons, the auction house created a brand identity, earning them appeal with a substantially wider audience than is normally reserved for an exclusive contemporary art sale. This paper will argue that Christie’s leveraged this new mode of transmitting images to amplify their brand’s value, often at the expense of the average citizen’s notion of access and inclusion. Joselit’s book provides a strong framework to explain this concept, through his explanations of formats, branding, image circulation and the experience economy.

David Joselit argues that value was once coagulated in art objects that were attached to a particular environment but now value is held in the more fluid “image” form.⁴ He examines how capital, currency and power can be produced by an image’s circulation within a wide variety of networks.⁵ Joselit addresses this transformation in visual culture, but does not concentrate on how technology has played a major role in this shift. He makes passing references to the Internet and the development of YouTube and Twitter but refrains from an in depth analysis. He seems to neglect that social media sites (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) are important platforms for image circulation. However, his argument remains relevant, given how it perfectly applies to the process of digital networking, though not explicitly. Joselit also does not acknowledge that with the advent of these online communities, art objects and images are often collapsed, becoming one and the same. *If I Live* was created specifically for YouTube; there is no “original.” Whether or not he accounts for this, he believes that art is not “site specific” and never will be again.⁶ This implies that he is engaged with the current conditions of aesthetics and how they are tied intimately to digital systems.

His thoughts regarding “formats” also point to his engagement with the Internet, as they seem to fit smoothly with conceptions of social media platforms. Because of the rapidly changing nature of these technologies, the

definition of "social media" is ever evolving but can most generally be defined as digital based communication networks, encouraging the easy exchange of (predominantly) user-generated content. Users produce app or website specific personal profiles through which they share photos, writing, music, articles, videos and various other forms of information with one another. Believing formats are the key to the dissemination of images, Joselit describes them as diverse "structure[s] that channel content."⁷ He explains that formats organize "relationships spatially within a population of images" by "offer[ing] an empty platform for actions to emerge and... commodities to develop new behaviors."⁸ Formats allow for "scal[ing] up," as an object that was only seen by a select few can now be circulated worldwide.⁹ On social media formats with millions of users, capital accumulation is expressed through the amassing of "shares" and "likes," which translates into brand exposure. This idea can be directly applied to *If I Live*, as its importance as a brand-building tool relies on the vast circulation and select targeting that YouTube enables. Through a complex algorithm, the platform suggests videos to the viewer based on what he or she is currently watching and has watched previously. Due to this wide reach, images can morph into commodities.¹⁰ Christie's YouTube account functions as a cyber hub for the dissemination of their brand, connecting contradictory images into a coherent "master image."¹¹ The format can aid in repositioning the brand by making it easy to display seemingly conflicting ideas side by side, like skateboarding and a painting that costs over 5 million dollars. This can attract an entirely new audience which results in further circulation and increased power and prestige for Christie's. Effective branding is inexplicably linked with effective formatting, as they both rely upon broad dissemination.¹²

If I Live is set to the major indie rock crossover hit of 2011, "Sail," by Awolnation. The pulsing music begins to play amidst a close up of Richard Prince's *Untitled (Cowboy)* (1998) being

unloaded from a shipping crate by art handlers. Immediately, the notion of "behind the scenes" is established. Each artwork featured in the video is highlighted by an approximately 3 second, slow motion close up, as professional skateboarder Chris Martin cruises by it atop his board throughout Christie's North American headquarters in New York City. On first impression, skateboarding may seem "off brand" to the organization's prestigious and privileged reputation, but Martin embodies many of the same notions as the paintings he passes by on his skateboard. He wears Levi's jeans, a wrinkled button up shirt, and a straight rim trucker hat atop unbrushed, shoulder length blond hair, an updated version of the disheveled but stylish appearance of an artist like Jean-Michel Basquiat. The auction featured modern and contemporary art exclusively, and the majority of the pieces were from the 1980's and 1990's. The idea of youth is clearly expressed in the often abstract and conceptual character of the painting lots and the skateboarder. This genre of contemporary art, as well as the many of the ideas that are commonly associated with skateboarding, are regularly used as vehicles of gentrification, being extremely masculine icons of counter culture, hipness and toughness. The skateboarder acts as cultural capital, expressing a brand identity that is easily grasped through bold, clear symbols of trendiness and rebellion. This makes it easy for Christie's to communicate to their select audience, garnering circulation.

After skateboarding in the depths of the building past the likes of On Kawara's *May 1, 1987* (1987) and Dan Colen's *Boo Fuckin' Hoo* (2006), Martin takes a freight elevator up to the next floor. Christie's is literally being exposed from the bottom up, which adds to the feeling of the viewer being "behind closed doors" at an elite company. Out of the elevator, Martin glides past more holding crates in a back chamber, when he unexpectedly emerges through a side door into the well-lit showroom that looks like a gallery space in a world class museum. Here, a visitor takes a photo of Martin on her iPhone, perhaps a meta-ref-

erence to what Christie's expects viewers to do when they finish watching this video: document and share. After posing for the cameras the skater takes a different route out of the gallery, grinding down a handrail into yet another dark, private space. The camera pans to show a photographer taking photos of *Untitled (Girlfriend)* (1993) by Richard Prince for what seems like the auction catalogue. He then finds himself in the corporate offices, drifting by the receptionist desk and a young woman dressed in sunglasses and a leather jacket. He is met by a porter who opens up a sliding metal door, permitting him entrance into the same showroom once again and highlighting *Made In Japan I* (1982) by Basquiat. A woman looks begrudgingly down on Martin as she sets up lights on the ceiling that will shine on *Untitled* (1988) by Martin Kippenberger. He does a trick off of a make shift ramp made out of canvas transporting devices that were presumably used for moving the Kippenberger piece. The trick is not successful, causing Martin to fall right in front of the Richard Prince painting, first pictured 3 minutes and 10 seconds earlier, as it is being hung up. The last image of the video before the credits is a white background with thin black type reading "#IfILiveAuction:" a call to share the content.

Anyone with a computer can get an inside scoop into one of the most prestigious institutions in the art world, usually reserved for highly educated staff members and ultra-wealthy collectors. This increased access can be exciting, but it also reasserts an understanding of luxury at the expense of the average citizen watching the video. The typical viewer would be someone who can easily navigate a popular website like YouTube and is interested in art and culture, and this demographic may also extend to skateboard enthusiasts who would be intrigued by the featuring of Chris Martin or people who like the song, "Sail," that is playing in the video. Martin's rather cavalier attitude, doing jumps and tricks right next to paintings worth millions, highlights a kind of nonchalance and familiarity with wealth. It is

as if Christie's is so confident in its collection that it is impervious to destruction. Marks of regularity dispersed through the video including security guards, art handlers and secretaries allow "normal" viewers to feel represented, so they may be more likely to share with their online networks. These jobs are seemingly more attainable and relatable than the occupation of a typical Christie's employee or an exorbitantly wealthy art collector.

Joselit cites the work of James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II who "assert" that in the age of the "experience economy" the "highest register of global economy" is "the rendering of authenticity."¹³ The YouTube video excessively employs this idea. The usage of "regular" people and the notion of getting a sneak peek at the inner workings of an exclusive company demonstrate that Christie's is operating at the very top level of economic production. This can also serve to give the secretive company an air of openness, although what is actually being displayed are highly constructed and controlled images. Considering that the cheapest item at the auction sold for \$137,000, real access to this institution demands a higher barrier of entry than simply a computer or mobile phone.¹⁴ Joselit's references to the experience economy provide a framework into how Christie's utilizes class relations and the sensationalism of wealth to encourage vast circulation and assert their market dominance. Concepts of inclusion are central in accumulating power in the form of video views.

Jerry Saltz, senior art critic for the New York Times and three time Pulitzer Prize nominee, called the video "a bullshit ploy to massage client egos and reel in rubes."¹⁵ This comment would not bother the auction's curator and a Christie's senior director, Loic Gouzer, who pronounced in an interview with Art News that, "Our business is in such an infancy that even a failure is a success," referring to the digital nature and untraditional marketing approach for *If I Live*. In other words, it did not matter if people liked the

video, only that they saw it. This is similar to how Joselit understands the influence of contemporary artwork. He thinks that its “power arises out of cultural translation rather than avant-garde innovation.”¹⁷ In this sense, the YouTube video becomes relatively indistinguishable from what it is promoting. It too becomes an artwork in its ability to reach a wide audience by transmitting an array of compelling cultural touchstones: art, music, counterculture, youth, rebellion, exclusivity, etc. The video expresses an exotic view of affluence through an aesthetic structure associated with commercial advertising. The video translates the language used for selling common products to that of a top tier luxury good. In an interview that appears on Christie’s website, Gouzer explains “there’s been a boom in followers of art. People talk about it. Superstars sing about it... contemporary art is almost more tangible than a lot of things.”¹⁸ Gouzer was looking to take advantage of the increased visibility of contemporary art and capitalize on its following. The video is inserted into the existing capitalist framework of the experience economy, leveraging the middle classes interest in contemporary art for the sake of brand building, as this group probably makes up the majority of viewers for *If I Live*. This results in increased power for the Christie’s brand, which can then be translated into high prices for the artworks the company is selling.

From this point of view, content only matters in so far as it enhances an image’s (or video’s) ability to be found and identified with.¹⁹ In an experience economy, there is an “image explosion,” and major competition for a consumer’s attention.²⁰ The way to garner influence and circulate a brand identity is to create an image that is easily discovered and related to, what Joselit describes as “the Epistemology of Search.” In the current climate of the World Wide Web, the hashtag is one of the most efficient ways to do this. This form of categorization came to prominence on social media platforms like Tumblr, Twitter and Instagram and is in full force

in *If I Live*. Every element of the video is easily “hashtagged:” the song title, name, genre, band; each art work, the colors, the name of the artist, the people associated with him or her; the skateboarder, the tricks he does, the board he uses. In this new visual economy, commodities occupy increasing levels of customization and hashtagging is a way to further facilitate this.²² Searchability and customization are key components of circulation and brand building, which are heavily relied upon in *If I Live*.²³

This new form of value creation had a major influence on the visual character of this marketing campaign. The erratic and jumbled array of references in the video is an example of the “Search Engine Aesthetic.” Christie’s is competing with a proliferation of spectacles in the experience economy, everything from high definition television to the supermarket.²⁴ This means that the art selected for sale and extensive promotion needs to be tweaked to fit these visual sensibilities. Work must be picked for the auction that can be immediately understood in a video and clearly shown in a photograph.²⁵ *If I Live* is a commodity, as it acts as a channel to embody the Christie’s brand as well as an experience for average consumers to take part in by sharing.

Joselit explains, that what is important is not the production of new content, but the “re-framing, capturing, reiterating and documenting” of existing content.²⁶ With the emphasis on quantity and continuous production, there is no time to come up with new ideas.²⁷ The Search Engine Aesthetic has emerged as a result of this. Capitalizing on already existing brands and cultural currents is an effective way to guarantee that something can be found online. Wide distribution is the pinnacle for a brand that is generating and displaying digital content, making the Search Engine Aesthetic an efficient marketing strategy to follow to ensure traction. *If I Live* embodies this idea; its viewers are associated with the vast set of references injected into the video, situating them with increased cultural knowl-

edge and access.

An article in *Art Space* described a young artist featured in the auction, Louis Eisner, as “the son of Tom Ford muse Lisa Eisner,” highlighting how each connection an artist has can become commodified and leveraged within the Search Engine Aesthetic.²⁸ The video was picked up by art publications but also by fashion websites like *Highsnobiety* and skateboarding blogs like *TransWorld Skateboarding*, both of which have over 1 million likes on Facebook and 100,000 thousand followers on twitter.²⁹ Density of connection is where the power lies. A definition of Metcalfe’s Law explains it best: “The value of a communications network is proportional to the square of the number of its users.”³⁰ Christie’s was able to insert itself into active networks through their utilization of seemingly contradictory references. This implementation of the Search Engine Aesthetic allows the clashing ideas in the video to communicate to a broader audience by appealing to demographics that do not generally overlap. Potential viewers become commodified and categorized by their interests in order to ensure high circulation, resulting in a more valuable brand.

For the actual auction, “Gouzer was seeking out young art buyers who make their money in Hollywood or Silicon Valley,” or what the New York Times called “rich embryonic investors.”³¹ A strong symbol of youth is technology, making YouTube the perfect format to communicate the larger ethos of the auction’s identity. Every facet of the event was branded, not just the digital format used to disseminate the video but the name, *If I Live*. This is a reference to a work featured in the auction, *If I Die* (1990) by Richard Prince which sold for \$4.6 million, beating the record previously set for the highest price paid for one of his joke paintings, by over \$1 million.³³ In total, sales for the auction were \$134.6 million, surpassing even the high pre-sale estimate of \$124 million.³⁴ Over half of the paintings featured (20 out of 34) sold for more than \$1 million with the

most expensive piece selling for over 18 million, the highest amount that has ever been paid for a Martin Kippenberger.³⁴ Furthermore, 14 other “new world auction records for artists” were set.³⁵ It is clear from these results that the wide circulation of the video was probably a major influence in creating a successful auction. Christie’s branded almost every aspect of the sale, supporting the customization that YouTube offers to increase the likelihood that it should be found by an interested viewer.

Reproduction may jeopardize “the historical testimony” and the “authority of the object,” but Joselit believes that massive mechanical reproduction bestows art with new forms of influence.³⁶ He advances ideas that are antithetical to Walter Benjamin’s belief that an object’s reproduction causes it to lose its uniqueness and authenticity - its “aura.”³⁷ Joselit thinks that being stuck in this “fundamentalist” view of an art object inhibits someone from truly acknowledging its clout.³⁸ Benjamin could not have imagined how technology has created instantaneous global dissemination of an image. Jodi Dean further reiterates how technology enables images to possess vast amounts of power with her description of Communicative Capitalism.³⁹ She explains that current market conditions facilitate the dissemination of cultural values primarily through “networked communications technologies” as “ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation are realized” through this mode.⁴⁰ Images can generate more of an impact than ever before especially when circulating on formats that are connected to millions of people, like YouTube. Joselit places an exorbitant amount of emphasis on the impression that images make, appearing to grasp the current cultural climate of the experience economy.

Joselit counters Benjamin’s idea of aura, proposing that in the advent of the new economic climate, this is replaced by buzz.⁴¹ A *buzz* is created through large populations acting unknowingly in unison, circulating an image si-

multaneously, what could be described as virality.⁴² This appears to be the ultimate goal of *If I Live*: for people to share the video on their social networks, write about it on their blogs and talk about it with their friends. Joselit believes that this shifts rights towards the consumer, imagining *buzz* as controlled by the public.⁴³ He does not account for how this can shift rights to advertisers as airtime can be increasingly bought, especially on social media outlets like YouTube. Formats like this also lend themselves to surveillance. YouTube allows the uploader of a video to monitor who viewed it by age, gender and location.⁴⁴ Image dissemination can open up alternative modes of exploitation.⁴⁵ This is just one example of why the rhetoric regarding the World Wide Web as “free domain” is a completely false notion. To further emphasize this point in the case of *If I Live*, the comments in the discussion section that YouTube provides are disabled. The video is also no longer displayed on the platform. Christie’s may want to create wide visibility, but through a highly controlled environment. They do not want to hear what the audience has to say. This mirrors how major auction houses run their businesses as a whole. They often establish “reserve prices” as a way to stop a work from selling at a low amount.⁴⁶ This air of accessibility that concepts like *buzz* entail, mask the extreme authority that a company like Christie’s asserts over their media and product offerings.

Auction houses may feel the need to keep a tight rein on prices and their brand, as a buyer is almost ensured to lose money when investing in art.⁴⁷ Art assets “perform consistently worse than stocks and shares.”⁴⁸ This insinuates that “prestige” is a major reason why buyers collect.⁴⁹ This highlights just how much is at stake for Christie’s with the circulation of *If I Live*, as the value of their brand identity is crucial. Labour has been traditionally present in value creation, but in the art market, commodities are frequently monetized without any relation to the work and time put in to produce a piece.⁵⁰ It is often the auction house’s job to bestow a work with

esteem and justify the price. A useful way to do this is by elevating their brand and, therefore, the “symbolic value of the artwork.”⁵¹ As manufacturing was transferred to developing economies, the connection between the buyers of a good and its producers diminished; to counteract this, the “brand name” is put forth.⁵² Christie’s leverages this idea in their video, cross referencing their brand with other well established symbols, including skateboarding and indie music, to encourage circulation and attach themselves to notions of youth, hipness and counterculture.

Christie’s attempted to engage audiences on all fronts, extending the viewing experience amongst several networks. People who wished to know what paintings would be featured before the official auction catalogue was released could check Gouzer’s Instagram account, further promoting an air of authenticity and suggesting to any follower that he or she is an “insider.” This created backlash from Wade Guyton, whose piece, *Untitled* (2005), was included in the auction, “estimated to sell for \$2,500,000-\$3,500,000.”⁵³ This work was produced with printers and photocopiers, and in the week leading up to the event, he made duplicates of it.⁵⁴ He proceeded to share the replicas on Instagram, muddling the uniqueness of the piece selling at Christie’s.⁵⁵ Through this exercise he also highlighted the minimal effort that it took to produce the work, exposing the means of production, which is often highly idealized in the art world. Despite his efforts to slash the original work’s value, it sold for \$3,525,000, \$25,000 above the high estimated price.⁵⁶ In this sense, Joselit’s ideas regarding circulation are confirmed. By creating more copies, the image became more saturated, contributing to its value.

With its ability to circulate widely Joselit believes that art can generate great change in the world and have a “diplomatic portfolio.”⁵⁷ He is extremely idealistic but of course, there are examples to support this thinking. Most notable of these examples is Ai Weiwei, who has

been able to leverage his international acclaim to articulate dissenting concepts on his blog, including statistics about the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 where thousands of children died due to poorly built schools.⁵⁸ He exploited his “global reputation,” which allowed him some level of protection when he was targeted by the Chinese government for the circulation of these facts.⁵⁹ Art can act as “international currency” and cultural collateral in this way.⁶⁰ Gouzer, shares this sentiment, believing that “Art is the common denominator bringing everyone back together.”⁶¹ This also makes it a fantastic advertising tool, as in the case of *If I Live*.

It is important to acknowledge that social media has the power to bestow people with information that was once seen as exclusive. This unthreatening introduction to auction houses that *If I Live* provides may encourage people to become more interested in art. Regardless of all the benefits that come out of circulation, it is impossible to detach this act from economics. Joselit explains that “Thresholds arise at points of saturation (i.e. widespread connectivity) beyond which any image may begin to function as a brand.”⁶² He believes an artist cannot be internationally acclaimed without becoming a brand name.⁶³ For an artist to create meaningful change, he or she needs to embody some sort of financial power at least through being a recognizable name, which is highly related to advertising. Mass circulation is how one gets the public interested, and this has a price tag attached to it. In order for something to have diplomatic authority, it must function in a way that cannot be separated from economics and the language of marketing.

Branding is an essential way to bestow a product with value, especially in the art world. *If I Live* represents the pinnacle of this idea as it utilizes the format of YouTube to maximize circulation. This platform facilitates the video’s saturation amongst its target audience (middle class people who are interested in art, culture, skate-

boarding or indie music) through simple access and utilization of the Search Engine Aesthetic. This allows the corporation to leverage their brand in order to make their goods more appealing to the super rich. This comes at the expense of the general public. They are monitored and fed a false notion of access in order to exploit their ability to garner *buzz*, only so the Christie’s brand can be made more attractive to “the 1%.” Joselit thinks that within this new monetary structure, images become the means to garner “cultural diplomacy,” improving communication between groups that traditionally disagree.⁶⁴ However, images must have influence to make an impact in this way, which is inextricably linked to economics. As an image becomes more and more shared, a brand begins to be associated with it. This power can be leveraged to express political opinions to a vast audience but more often than not, this power is strictly employed for financial gain, like in the case of *If I Live*.

Notes:

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2. *Ibid.*, XIV.
3. Mary Romano, “Christie’s, Sotheby’s Report Record Art Sales in 2014,” *Bloomberg*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-20/christie-s-sotheby-s-report-record-art-sales-in-2014>.
4. Joselit, *After Art*, 16.
5. *Ibid.*, XIV.
6. *Ibid.*, 14.
7. *Ibid.*, 52.
8. *Ibid.*, 55.
9. *Ibid.*, 59.
10. *Ibid.*, 46.
11. *Ibid.*, 72-73.
12. *Ibid.*, 58, 72-73.
13. *Ibid.*, 83.
14. “If I Live I’ll See You Next Tuesday: Contemporary Art Auction,” *Christie’s*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.christies.com/sales/if-i-live-ill-see-you->

tuesday-new-york-may-2014/.

15. Jerry Saltz, "Saltz: Wade Guyton May Be Trying to Torpedo His Own Sales," *Vulture*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/wade-guyton-may-be-torpedoing-his-own-sales.html?mid=imdb>.

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17. Joselit, *After Art*, 21.

18. "Art of Darkness," *Christie's*, May 1, 2014, <http://www.christies.com/auctions/post-war-contemporary-art-may-2014/art-of-darkness/>.

19. Joselit, *After Art*, 58.

20. *Ibid.*, 1.

21. *Ibid.*, 56.

22. *Ibid.*, 83-84.

23. *Ibid.*, 58, 83-84.

24. Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93.

25. *Ibid.*, 84.

26. Joselit, *After Art*, 56.

27. Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 142.

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30. Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism and Class Struggle," *Spheres* 1 (2014): 5, <http://spheres-journal.org/communicative-capitalism-and-class-struggle/>.

31. Diane Brady, "How Christie's Is Winning the Auction Wars," *Bloomberg*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-05-22/christies-wins-art-auction-wars-by-wooing-young-buyers-online>; Carol

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34. "Post-Sale Release," *Christie's*.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Joselit, *After Art*, 14.

37. Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 220.

38. Joselit, *After Art*, 14-16.

39. Dean, "Communicative Capitalism and Class Struggle," 3.

40. *Ibid.*, 4.

41. Joselit, *After Art*, 16.

42. *Ibid.*, 16-18.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Google Support, "Demographic Report," 2014, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/1715072>.

45. Dean, "Communicative Capitalism and Class Struggle," 8.

46. Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 101.

47. *Ibid.*, 104.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 105.

50. Dean, "Communicative Capitalism and Class Struggle," 5.

51. Isabelle Graw, "High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture, Global Art Forum," *Art Dubai*, March 16, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/33472517>.

52. Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 79.

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56. Carol Vogel, "At Christie's Auction, An Experiment Proves Fruitful," *New York Times*, May 13, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/13/arts/design/at-christies-auction-an-experiment-proves-fruitful.html?_r=0.
57. Joselit, *After Art*, 84.
58. *Ibid.*, 93.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*, 1.
61. "Art of Darkness," Christie's.
62. Joselit, *After Art*, 73.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*, 6, 93-94.

The Cyborg Complex: Technophobia, Transphobia, and *American Reflexxx*

By: Lucas Kling

On a balmy night during the summer of 2013 a scantily dressed, androgynous cyber-organism hit the streets of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Not long into this cyborg stroll, the streets hit back. This event was recorded in the work of video-based performance artists Signe Pierce and Alli Coates, and given the title *American Reflexxx*. High-heeled and mirror-masked, the cyborg remains mute throughout the walk. Its faceless anonymity, gender ambiguity, and sexual suggestiveness together are enough to incite disturbing acts of physical violence from the growing mob that follows. An example of 'reality performance,' the work is created not simply by artist intervention but through the public participants whose actions and reactions are unscripted. In this way, the performance exposes current individual and collective attitudes toward certain ideologies embodied within the cyborg.

As a genderless biomechatronic entity, the figure of the cyborg acts as an intermediary for a host of concerns. Existing somewhere between human and machine, and male and female, the cyborg is an ideal model with which to navigate technophobia and transphobia – anxieties central to our contemporary condition. As technology becomes increasingly integrated to the human body, so does it become increasingly disembodied, both controlled and out of control. As hormone replacement therapy and gender reassignment surgery become more accessible and sophisticated, transgenderism begins to shift from the margins to the mainstream, though not without significant resistance. As gender fluidity supplants gender normativity the traditional and rigid male-female dichotomy becomes increasingly fraught. The cyborg can be seen as a manifestation of these anxieties.

In her prophetic text, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), which contains the often cited "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Donna Haraway provides the groundwork for understanding the cyborg alongside notions of cyberfeminism. Though notoriously unconventional, Haraway is widely considered as one of the pioneers of cyborgian thought. In fact, after its publication, the manifesto facilitated a profusion of literature that attempted to examine the cyborg as a vehicle to better understand feminist concerns. Her work has been so influential that the majority of academics who write on the cyborg recognize Haraway as the founder of the critical discourse. However, though Haraway has long been considered the authority within this conversation, there have been significant reconsiderations of her work. Distanced now by nearly twenty-five years, her work must be carefully reexamined in light of thoroughly different technological and cultural circumstances. This paper will examine *American Reflexxx* through the lens of "The Cyborg Manifesto," both in order to seek an understanding of technophobia and transphobia, and envision a possible future beyond gender as we understand it.

The cyborg appears to evolve out of a tradition of smudging the boundaries between man and machine. And though Haraway asserts that the cyborg has no origin story, it seems as if the opposite is true. . This is perhaps first evident in the history of automata, machines which progressively acquired increasingly mimetic and anthropomorphic appearances over the course of their development. And though the automaton operates as a machine, independent from biological human integration, here we begin to see the mapping of human appearance onto the exterior of mechanical devices. Some have argued that the cyborg appears in literary accounts as early as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and in film as early as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926).¹ The human-machine hybrid is also taken up in

the early twentieth century by the Berlin Dadaists, whose cacophonous photomontages of popular culture material speak to uncertainties with the turbulent political climate within post-WWI Weimar Germany. Of course, none of these examples would have been considered cyborgian upon their inception, because the term had not yet been introduced. It was not until 1960, at a NASA conference on modifying humans for living in space, when scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline combined the words 'cybernetic' and 'organism,' to coin the term cyberorganism, or cyborg.² Though, regardless of whether or not the term cyborg was used, generations of individuals had previously utilized this figure to speak to their contemporary concerns.

Jennifer González takes this position in her investigation of "The Cyborg Manifesto." She argues, "The image of the cyborg has historically recurred at moments of radical social and cultural change."³ Rather than miraculously materializing in the late twentieth century, as Haraway might have us believe, the cyborg emerges through the fears and desires of a culture caught in the process of transformation.⁴ This is certainly true when one considers the moment in which Haraway was writing the manifesto. Her writing emerges as the curtains closed on a decade of Conservatism. It coincides with the rise of so-called 'third-wave feminism,' and alongside the introduction of queer theory. In this way, Haraway participated within previously established conventions of utilizing the figure of the cyborg to address contemporary concerns, however, she did so with notable originality.

With this in mind one might consider *American Reflexxx*, a cyborgian video performance, as indicative of our present social and cultural situation. However, I would like to suggest that we no longer exist within a linear trajectory of cultural transition, with perceptible boundaries of beginning, middle, and end, but rather an indistinguishable cycle of cultural fluctuation. This is why the cyborg is necessary more

so now than ever, as a model to understanding the rapidly changing technological landscape we inhabit.

Some individuals are skeptical of this suggestion. Feminist thinkers such as Mary Doane and Anne Balsamo are wary of using the cyborg as a figure to speak to our contemporary condition, particularly in regard to gender.⁵ Though they concede that technology offers possibilities for the destabilization of sexual identity as a category, they argue that gender stereotypes are more likely to be reaffirmed than challenged by the majority of cyborg images.⁶ These concerns are not unwarranted. Will the possibilities inherent in the cyborg open up safe spaces for transcending gender boundaries, or will it simply create more room for violent patriarchal colonization? Haraway points to this difficulty herself, referring to the cyborg as, "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism."⁷ However, she suggests that as illegitimate offspring so often are, cyborgs are unfaithful to their Fathers, which are inessential.⁸ Certainly I can understand Doane and Balsamo's apprehension surrounding the cyborg, if indeed it were to perpetuate repressive gender stereotypes, though I do not believe this to be the case.

This is not to suggest that questions should go unasked. There is a benefit to remaining distrustful, especially in regards to technology, in that it prevents oneself from becoming comfortably complacent. In this sense we are indebted to those individuals like Doane and Balsamo, who question the usefulness of the cyborg to explore feminist concerns. Their doubts encourage self-reflexivity in those who are so readily willing to embrace the cyborg as the futuristic solution to society's ills. However, their aversion to the cyborg also conveys a certain sense of technophobia, an unwillingness and anxiety toward this changing technological landscape. In some ways this technophobia is understandable however. As Haraway suggests, "It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation be-

tween human and machine."⁹ In other words, we have entered a realm of technological indistinction. Are we programming computers to be more human, or are computers programming us to be more like machines? More often than not we choose to charge the batteries for our personal devices simultaneously as we charge our biological batteries, during periods of rest or sleep. Not only are our multiple devices synchronized to one another, but we have also included ourselves in that matrix.

It seems as if this desire to hold on to an entirely organic, biological existence is somewhat outdated. This refrains from acknowledging our present condition, of a world in which technology has already infiltrated the human body in countless ways, and continues to do so with increasing effortlessness. If feminists decide against taking advantage of the cyborg for their concerns with gender, I worry to think who will.

In regards to gender, cyborg images often perform two functions simultaneously. At once, depictions of cyborgs facilitate the male gaze and perpetuate gender stereotypes, while at the same time they work slowly to break them down. In this way the images both tell us where we are, by reaffirming conventional understandings of gender, and show us where we could end up, suggesting new possibilities that push these boundaries. These competing tendencies are what give art its significant cultural value, to speak to the present and envision possible futures. It seems somewhat naïve that some individuals suggest to disregard the image of the cyborg, as that which is incompatible with feminist concerns. This argument is fairly reductive and limiting in the sense that it would negate the need for many forms of visual cultural production, for fear that it would be too easily co-opted to suit the needs of the hegemonic patriarchal authority. If this were the case it might be said that we would inhabit a world of barren walls and empty spaces, which is more likely suited to

an environment of control. Instead we should consider the cyborg as a tool for subversion, a modern-day Trojan horse. Once imbued with the possibilities of gender transcendence and rolled into enemy territory, the cyborg can erupt with the force necessary to contribute to the disruption of rigid gender boundaries.

American Reflexxx is part of this tradition that positions the cyborg to illuminate present day anxieties and subvert gender stereotypes. And while no performance is powerful enough to disrupt these boundaries singlehandedly, this piece is a worthwhile contribution in the effort to do so. The video performance is a collaboration between photographer Alli Coates, who shot the video, and performance artist Signe Pierce, who acted the part of the mute cyborg.¹⁰ Interestingly, though the film was shot during the summer of 2013 it was not until April of 2015 that it achieved a high degree of notoriety, when it was uploaded to YouTube. The video itself is comprised of an hour's worth of footage condensed into a fourteen-minute film. This temporal distortion is achieved through the post-production processes of slowing down, speeding up, and looping the footage at different intervals.¹¹ These techniques seem to both emphasize certain moments of the performance, as well as disorient the viewer amidst an already chaotic situation.

The performance begins with a shot of the cyborg. Dressed in an electric blue mini-dress and neon yellow high heels, the cyborg begins its ill-fated journey through the seaside streets. And though the minimal clothing suggests a female body, this information is obfuscated by the reflective mirror-mask that hides the artist's identity. The clothes reveal while the mask conceals. The mask is an integral aspect to the performance, and largely responsible for encouraging the intense reactions of the public participants. It prevents viewers from obtaining the information that they insistently seek, the 'true' gender of the cyborg. Instead, the mirror reflects, repositioning the face of the viewer as

the face of the cyborg. This clever reversal inspires a kind of anxiety in the participants.

Throughout the video different assertions on the cyborg's gender are voiced from the growing crowd that follows. They question whether or not the cyborg is: a man, a dude, a 'shim,' a he, a she, a girl, a woman, a 'somethin', or a 'fuccboi.' Several times the spectators urge the cyborg to remove the mask, while reassuring there is nothing to be afraid of. In two separate instances male viewers express attraction to the cyborg's body, but again question what lies underneath the mask. As the cyborg assumes more conventionally submissive 'feminine' poses, spectators bring themselves closer to touch, or take pictures. Later, after water and objects are thrown at the cyborg, it assumes more conventionally aggressive 'masculine' poses. The cyborg squares off its shoulders, turns around, and moves quickly and assertively in the crowd's direction. This behavior, employed a few times throughout the performance, causes the spectators to run and disperse.

This push and pull carries on for a period of time, until a sudden act of physical aggression brings the performance to its climax. A woman charges at the cyborg from behind, pushes it to the ground, and retreats from the scene. As the cyborg lies on the concrete, the next insidious aspect of this performance is made evident. As the crowd encircles, only a single bystander ventures to assist the fallen cyborg. Instead, nearly every individual focuses his or her camera on the scene. Throughout the performance spectators use their cell phones to photograph and video record the wandering cyborg; a technological instrument capturing images of a technological organism. In this regard, the spectators unknowingly make their own cyborgian tendencies apparent. Using their cell phone cameras to record the cyborg, they reveal their own unnatural reflex to seek technological mediation. The camera lens, a technological extension of the human eye, transforms the spectator into a cyborg-Cyclops.

This practice of perpetual cell phone recording is not only reserved for extraordinary occurrences, as in the case of *American Reflexxx*, but it seems now to encompass the mundane. In this regard perhaps Haraway was correct to suggest that we are all cyborgs.¹² Remarkably, the manifesto was written at a time when cellphones had hardly infiltrated the mainstream, and they certainly did not possess cameras.

The choice of using the mask also seems to reference a number of theoretical and psychoanalytic associations. Writing in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler devotes a short chapter to examining the masquerade through French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere. Butler attempts to understand Lacan's notion of the Phallus, and the differences between 'being' it and 'having' it. She seems to interpret Lacan's argument as suggesting that women, who attempt to make up for their 'lack' of the Phallus, are compelled to perform some kind of masquerade as a means of satisfying their need for protection.¹³ Butler discerns two very different tasks from Lacan's notion of the masquerade. On one hand she suggests that the masquerade might be understood as the performative production of a sexual ontology, while on the other, the masquerade can also be read as a denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior femininity unrepresented by a phallic economy.¹⁴ It could be said that this understanding of the masquerade suits the cyborg in *American Reflexxx*, as a performative production. However, the cyborg in the performance does not put on a mask to satisfy its need for protection. It is neither weak nor defenseless; it bravely confronts the intimidating crowd and revels in its masked anonymity.

Next Butler questions whether or not the masquerade as Riviere understands it is more suited to her understanding. She suggests that Riviere posits the masquerade as that which transforms aggression and the fear of reprisal into seduction and flirtation.¹⁵ The masquerade

is that which women undertake in order to conceal their “masculine” characteristics. And while seduction and flirtation are obvious in *American Reflexx* in the cyborg’s suggestive dress and provocative gestures, I would disagree with this assertion again. The mask in this case does not conceal her masculinity, but rather her femininity. Wearing the mask is what persuades spectators to question her gender, and provokes the anxious reactions. Yet again it seems as if the cyborg encourages and celebrates its hybrid gender, its ambiguity.

It seems as if the use of the mask along with the gender ambiguity of the cyborg is what sparked such violent reactions from the spectators. I will refer to this as transphobia, though my understanding of the definition may differ from established understandings of the term. My choice is to use the etymological meaning of the prefix ‘trans’ as a word which equates to ‘beyond.’ In this regard, I understand transphobia as the anxiety expressed towards individuals who exist between and beyond conventional gender categories. The cyborg, as that which also occupies a position of the between/beyond, might also be considered underneath this phobia. And as stated previously, the cyborg often appears as an image of social and cultural change, a reflection of our present condition. Certainly, as never before, issues of gender nonconformity have increasingly become a point of discussion and an accepted reality. However, there are numerous hurdles yet to cross for individuals with unconventional gender identities. Oftentimes these individuals are amongst the most oppressed and marginalized people in society. Though it seems as if this tide is slowly beginning to turn.

How might the cyborg facilitate the transition from a society of gender binarism to one of gender fluidity? Haraway describes the cyborg as a creature in a post-gender world,¹⁶ though, this seems evidently premature. For Haraway to both declare that we are at once cyborgs, and that the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender

world, is a paradox. If this were the case then it is likely the transphobia and transmisogyny witnessed in *American Reflexx* would not have occurred. Regardless, this does not mean that a post-gender world is not a possibility, and indeed something that we are moving toward. Some cyborg theorists suggest that in order to reach this post-gender world we must begin assimilating technology with our bodies to greater degrees. Haraway herself suggests communications technologies and biotechnologies are crucial for recrafting our bodies.¹⁷ Other individuals who write about the cyborg suggest that the simple availability of technologies which more easily allow the possibility of sexual reassignment surgery might be sufficient.¹⁸ In this regard, the availability of the surgery would serve as a psychosexual tool for people to rethink their gender identity, though perhaps without requiring it.¹⁹

Perhaps the most significant issue with positioning the cyborg alongside the possibilities of a future without gender is that it so heavily relies on technological intervention and integration, and this often carries a substantial price tag. In this case it seems the cyborg is an essentially privileged world phenomenon. Could one realistically elaborate on the notion of a post-gender world without conceding that this would necessitate that gender transcendence was available to all those who inhabit this world? Perhaps a city without gender could exist in the future, or even a country, but a world beyond gender seems to be a distant dream.

Even within this imagined world of gender transcendence through technology, how reliant might we be on those companies and corporations who produce this technology? A sad fact of our modern condition is planned obsolescence, technology ceasing to function after a certain time, therefore requiring the consumer to purchase the latest model. What might this mean when we rely on this technology to speak, move, or simply survive? Today it seems as if Pharmaceutical companies operate from

the seat of Satan, gouging sick individuals for the necessary medication that they increasingly cannot afford. Will a biotechnological future be the same? These questions seem to float without any hint of definitive answers; this is of course the nature of futuristic thinking. Though just because a cyborgian future appears as unlikely, or perhaps particularly bleak, does not mean that it is not viable. The cyborg has long acted as a vehicle in which to explore cultural concerns and the relationship between human and machine, and it will continue to do so, both in the face of growing uncertainty, and endless possibility.

the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63.

14. *Ibid.*, 64.

15. *Ibid.*, 65.

16. Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 150.

17. Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 164.

18. Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*

19. *Ibid.*

Notes:

1. Anne Balsamo, "Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism," in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, eds. Gill Kirkup et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 149.

2. Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 18.

3. Jennifer Gonzáles, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, eds. Gill Kirkup et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 61.

4. *Ibid.*, 58.

5. Heather Walton, "The Gender of the Cyborg," *Theology and Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (2004): 35.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 151.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 177.

10. John Chiaverina, "'We Didn't Set Out to Make a Piece About Dehumanization, Mob Mentality, or Violence': Alli Coates and Signe Pierce Talk 'American Reflexxx,'" *ARTnews*, last modified May 4, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/04/we-didnt-set-out-to-make-a-piece-about-dehumanization-mob-mentality-or-violence-alli-coates-and-signe-pierce-talk-american-reflexxx/>

11. *Ibid.*

12. Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 150.

13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and*

To Move the Mountain: The Image of Collectivity in Chinese Contemporary Art

By: Ran Zheng

In 2010, Ai Weiwei's (b.1957) large-scale installation *Sunflower Seeds* opened in London's Tate Modern, which was composed of 100 million actual-size porcelain sunflower seeds scattered across the floor of the gallery space.¹ Each seed is only about 1 inch long, but when assembled in a large composition, the seeds create a grey landscape that contributes to achieving an environmental viewing experience. Large-scale production of artwork has become a "truism":² they are large not only in terms of physical scale, but also in their often extraordinary production values of fabrication and large-scale craft. A common phenomenon since the birth of contemporary Chinese art is that many Chinese artists express meaning through shaping an image of the "collective" by piling up small individual units to create one larger composition. The process which the endless individual units are produced and accumulated is often remarkably repetitious and labor-intensive. Through the process of accumulation, the identity of individuals is ceded to accomplish the unified identity of the collective image. Contemporary Chinese art historian Gao Minglu defines the phenomenon as "Chinese maximalism," and relates it to the broader social meaning behind the surface of artworks.³ It is a phenomenon that is firmly associated with history, politics and Chinese culture. In terms of the visual aspects, two characteristics can be universally observed:

1. The content of the work usually contains a large quantity of individual units. The quantities vary from hundreds to millions. In some cases, the number represents the result of a census, or a method of exhaustion in the statistic perspective, making a scientific sense of the actual scale of objects. In some other cases, the number is

used as an indicator of something larger. In Chinese context, a certain number often represents a larger amount. For example, the number "10,000" is used to represent infinity or absolute: "ten thousand things (wanwu)"⁴ means all things on earth, and emperors in the history as well as Chairman Mao were blessed with "ten thousand years (wansui)", which means to live forever. Whether or not the number represents the actual size of the objects, it is often large enough to show the universal generality and helps extend the meanings to a greater stage.

2. The individual units are visually and essentially repetitious. They often share strong similarities with each other, on both the surface and in underlying characteristics. They may leave the viewers with a highly uniform visual impression. In many cases, the individual units are completely generic. In other cases, the individual specificity exists and to some extent suggests diversity; meanwhile the universal characteristics still function as the dominant clue that connects the individuals together.

This essay gives descriptions and interpretations of the "collective" in Chinese contemporary art through analyzing the visual elements as well as understanding the cultural, historical and social context that cause or influence the shaping of the image of the collective. Note that in the essay, "collective" refers to the grouped individuals that artists choose as objects, including humans, commodities, symbols and abstracted objects, whether they are in a painting, performance or installation. The first section analyzes the form of the collective as an artistic language, and provides an interpretation in Chinese cultural contexts. The second section interprets the phenomenon of collective images from the perspectives of ideology and society that give birth to the content of the artworks. The third section evaluates some of the voices and criticisms in response to debut of Chinese contemporary art on the global stage. The third section points out some of the controversial issues regarding the

use of the collective image, where some of the artists and critics link it to the mechanical reproduction of cultural symbols as well as the desire of commercial success.

Understanding the Language: from Modular System to Meditation

When examining Chinese art in a global context, Chinese art historian Wu Hung stated, "Whether or not Chinese modernist art can have a place in the global art scene depends on if it can find its own unique language."⁵ Just as more than one element participates in the process of shaping the artistic language, the complex multi-layered modular system of Chinese script profoundly influences the logic of collective images in Chinese contemporary art.

Modules are interchangeable building blocks that can be combined to create a great variety of Chinese characters. Chinese script is a system of forms built up in a hierarchy of five levels of increasing complexity:

Element—a single brushstroke

Module—a building block or component

Unit—a single character

Series—a coherent text

Mass—all existing characters⁶

The system of wording allows individual brush-stroke units of less differentiation to be meaningful in the form of the composed word characters. As a result, fifty thousand characters can be composed by combining a few modules taken from a relatively small repertoire of some two hundred parts.⁷ It can be concluded precisely by Song-dynasty philosopher, Zhou Dunyi's poem, "Ten thousand things are produced and reproduced, so that variation and transformation have no end."⁸

A complete message in Chinese language requires the lowermost modules to repeat themselves multiple times to form the upper-

most levels of modules. Wang Jinsong's (b.1963) artwork *Standard Family* reflects the utilization of the multi-layered modular system. In Wang's work, a family module that is composed of two parents and a child functions as the basic unit of the bigger structure. By applying the modular system, Wang sews the individual, the family, and Chinese society all together with the one-child policy. By showing the people on the individual, family and social perspectives, Wang discloses the process of individuals composing a collective and their position within it.

In the work, *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing (b.1955) probes the process of making meaning of languages through the manipulation of the linguistic property of the grouped individuals. Whenever the viewers look up, down or straight, their views are projected with over 2,000 orderly arranged Chinese "words" that cannot be neither recognized nor pronounced, but are invented by Xu himself. In terms of the production of the characters, Xu precisely implements the modular systems of Chinese text layer upon layer; complexity and meaning are added to each layer to form his own language. The ultimate language products are meaningless because of the absence of cultural context of each character; however, each character is contributing to the eventual "meaninglessness" as a component of the message.

On the other hand, Xu's work reflects the ancient Buddhist philosophy of "gradual enlightenment (jianwu)", a process that lasts for the lifetime of a monk to reach the ultimate "nihility (xu)" and "emptiness (kong)" through meditation. Xu stated that he spent years to carefully implement "something that does not mean anything."⁹ An example of approaching gradual enlightenment can be found in the ancient folk story the *Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountain*, where the Foolish Old Man believes he can eventually remove a huge mountain by endlessly repeating a simple act of physical labor — carrying away the stones. Here, the repetition of a single unit is ex-

pected to result in reshaping the meaning of the whole subject. Gao Minglu considers the Chinese maximalism as a “meditative artistic phenomenon in the wake of the rationalist painting.”¹⁰ He argues that rather than focusing on the result, Chinese maximalist artists pay more attention to the process of making, where the real meaning remains in every moment.

Lin Tianmiao's (b.1976) work *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* is another example of meditative art. Countless thread balls are wound by the hands of the artist, and a video at the center of the installation restores the endless and repetitive process of the making. The juxtaposition of both the process and the result critiques the meaning of the whole production: how can the result be meaningful if it is achieved through a meaningless process? It only makes sense if the meaninglessness itself is what to be expected, and the meaning of the whole production exists only in the repetitious and endless work — a personal, private experience and practice to achieve the state of meaninglessness.

All in all, the artistic language of the collective is culturally and historically connected with the Chinese script system and Chinese ancient philosophy. By intensively piling up individual modules and enduring repetitive production processes, artists probe the relationship between the one and the whole, the process and the result.

The Mass and the Self: from Collectivism to Consumerism

In Chinese contemporary art, the image of collectivity has been associated with ideology and social facts to a great extent. Gao Minglu indicates that since its birth in late 1970s, Chinese contemporary art has always been considered as a way of “totalizing human society and integrating aesthetics and politics together.”¹² From the socialist realism paintings in the early years of the People's Republic of China to contempo-

rary artworks, the image of the collective reflects the changes in the nation's ideology, as well as a change in the mental state of people on the level of social consciousness.

Eastern art historian Lothar Ledderose states that the most important driving force in Chinese social history is keeping great numbers of people within one unified political and cultural system.¹³ Collectivism plays an important role in this process. In 1945, Mao Zedong made his famous speech “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountain” to encourage the spirit of collectivism.¹⁴ He retold the story of the Foolish Old Man, and indicated that the God was not anybody else but “the masses of the Chinese people.”¹⁵ Believing that “man's determination must conquer nature (rending shengtian),” Mao uses collectivism to unify the ideals of Chinese people and generalize the immense input of human capital in constructing a socialist society.

Depicting the image of collectivity as the background to render a monumental figure was a common tendency in oil paintings during the period of Mao. Luo Gonglin's (b.1916) painting *Mao Zedong Reporting on the Rectification in Yan'an* exemplifies this notion through the use of perspective and composition. Standing on a lectern, Mao is depicted monumentally as a preacher and leader. A hierarchal system is reflected in the composition: Mao, placed at the upper-left golden ratio point, stands higher than the unified and undifferentiated audience, but is slightly exceeded by the posters of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. What worthies our attention is the depiction of the audience, which displays the stereotypical image of the Chinese mass. The audience members are placed on one side of the scale of power, opposite to Mao. Their unified facial expressions and matching uniforms minimize their individualistic differences, which is a reflection of the unity and consistency of their political ideals.¹⁶

The relationship between the power of

the collective and that of the regime is examined by many later artists, including Zhang Linhai (b.1963). *Paradise Series No.6* appropriates the composition of earlier historically themed paintings to critique the power of collectivism during the Cultural Revolution. As in the precedents, the monumental individual and the undifferentiated crowds are two major subjects, but their relationship is no longer in harmony. In Zhang's painting, a human audience is replaced by an ocean of red flags, overwhelming the figure standing in the center of the rostrum, who is a young boy in shabby clothes with his skinny back turned to the spectators. The way he is dressed suggests his identity as a powerless peasant, evoking viewers' memory of the Cultural Revolution where powerless individuals who were considered political dissidents were often punished by the collective for their political identities.

What followed the Cultural Revolution was a nation-wide awareness of humanistic spirit. Two years after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, formal chairman Deng Xiaoping announced the Chinese Economic Reform that de-collectivized agriculture and introduced foreign investment to the country. These new economic policies also resulted in profound changes in cultural perspective that awoke a consciousness in individual value. Gao Minglu indicates that the meaning of individualism has been determined in the Chinese domestic and historical contexts as being firmly associated with humanism and self-expression.¹⁷ Seeking the social proof of self-identity was brought up by elite intellectuals who began to re-evaluate the relationship between the individual and the collective through academics, literature, and art. The image of the collective in the new era is often associated with questioning the collective conscience, from both the perspective of the individual and the mass.¹⁸

For example, Bai Yiluo's (b.1968) photographic installation *People* critiques the elimination of individualism during the collective era. It is composed of 3,600 standard monochrome

ID photographs (*zhengjian zhao*) of everyday individuals in Chinese society. Their individual characteristics are violently destroyed due to the intense fissures that cover the surface of the photos, leaving only an identical background in each. By eliminating the individuality, these ID photos become detached from their original function of declaring individual identities.

A critique of the loss of individuality is also reflected in Ai Weiwei's installation *Sunflower Seeds*. The 100 million sunflower seeds created for this piece reference the population of China. The uniform appearance of the sunflower seeds is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution practice in which citizens wore identical Mao suits (*zhongshan zhuang*) as a means of national dress. While the individual specificity of each sunflower seed is eliminated, a sense of autonomous identity is articulated on the level of production. Differing from the collective themed socialist realism paintings, a singular monumental figure is absent in Ai's piece and replaced by a collection of anonymous units. Rather than produce the seeds through mechanical modes of production, Ai commissioned artisans from Jingdezhen, a town historically renowned for producing porcelain, to handcraft each seed. The delicate craftsmanship of the sunflower seeds suggests the uniqueness of individuals at their birth who will go through a series of assimilation processes to fit in with the collective image.

Gao indicates that since the 1990s, Chinese contemporary art entered the era of the "multipolar avant-garde," a syncretical art movement that features the multiplicity of forms and subject matters.¹⁹ In the early 1990s, Deng Xiaoping proposed the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and brought a socialist market economy into the ideology of the nation. The reformation in the ideological realm resulted in rapid changes of the secular world. In regards to the cultural realm, traditional values were challenged or even abandoned, and the emergence of a new mass culture caused a

significant impact on the Chinese belief system.

Differing from the post Cultural Revolution period, the image of the collective since the 1990s is not presented to question the identity of individuals from the ideological perspective, but rather aims to reflect, disclose, and magnify the loss of the value system of the Chinese mass within a consumeristic context. For example, in the installation entitled *2005.03.05* by Gu Dexin (b.1961) thousands of bananas are strewn across a regulated area on the gallery floor. Gu enlarges the perishable quality of the bananas, as due to their short shelf life, they must be consumed quickly before they begin to rot. Gu precisely captures a new form of group consciousness that is shaped by a commodity driven society. In an interview, Gu states that he is particularly concerned with interpersonal relationships, as well as how people of different roles in society become who they are.²⁰ The radical emergence of China's consumerist culture leads to Gu's re-examination of the social roles and social relationships between people, as depicted in *2005.03.05*.

Based on the changes of the ideology of the nation, the relationship between the mass and the self was dynamically altered between 1949 and the present. The depiction of the collective has shifted from the presentation and glorification of a monumental figure in socialist realism paintings to critique and reflect on the notion of identity in contemporary art. This change suggests an increasing awakening of the self-consciousness of members in the collective, who, bathed in the twilight of humanism (*rendao zhuyi*) after the Cultural Revolution, carefully explore individuality within in the collective context. The political function of contemporary Chinese art in integrating aesthetics with politics further underlines the social meanings behind the image of the collective, and therefore, renders the dialogue with ideology an inseparable aspect in its interpretation.

Global and Commercial — Voices of Criticism

During the 1990s, Chinese contemporary art embraced a transformation from ideology and politics to commercialism and materialism. The boom of the economy and China's enthusiastic response towards globalization and transnationalism gradually intervened in the process of art making. Compared to previous generations, artists engaged in the global market by paying special attention to marketing and media, especially that of spectators outside of China who represent the global voice.

While the debut of the contemporary Chinese art scene on the global stage earned significant attention from the media and positive feedback from the art market, it has been contested for several issues. One point of criticism includes the appropriation of recognizable Chinese cultural symbols that are intended to provide the artworks with a recognizable cultural identity in the global context. These cultural symbols are often replicated in the collective form to refer to Chinese society. They are, however, detached from the original cultural meaning and reduced to cultural kitsch that caters to the aesthetics of a Western imagination of Chinese culture. When talking about his use of the image of the Great Wall in his practice, artist Zhan Wang (b.1962) stated, "I don't know how the Great Wall has become our spiritual symbol. People no longer care whether its original meaning is reasonable and acceptable... the question raised is related to the desire of the nation."²¹

The second issue is regarding Chinese artists' thirst for being noticed in the competitive global and domestic art market. Many artists pursue spectacular visual effects that allow their work to attract immediate attention. Manipulating the scale of the work becomes one of the most commonly used tools to maximize the visual spectacle and the low labor and material cost of production in Mainland China. The increasingly active capital operation as well as the expand-

ing market size together reduce the threshold of making a large project costly. Hong Kong based curator Robin Peckham states that the foremost factors of this phenomenon are the “impatient desire to be noticed globally,” as well as “a genuine interest in entering into dialogue with the scale of China, particularly as a global factory.”²² As a result, the form of the collective is chosen to display artists’ ambition and ability to complete large scale projects.

To conclude, from 1949 to the present, the dynamically changing relationship between the individual and collective, as well as the increasingly stronger appeal for self-consciousness are captured and reflected by Chinese contemporary artists. Using scale, symbolism, and spectacle, the social allegories within their works reveal an intense critique of their contemporary society.

Conclusion

The form of the collective in Chinese contemporary art is shaped by both cultural systems and ideological systems of China. The Chinese script system provides a model for shaping the overall meanings on a collective perspective by combining individual modules into a coherent message. Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, indicates that through the shaping of the collective, the ultimate state of nihilism and emptiness will be achieved. Both the Chinese script system and Buddhist philosophy explain how the meanings of individuality may transcend the individual itself and manifest on the collective perspective.

Politics in Chinese history from 1949 have evoked rapid dialogues between the individual and the collective. In the earlier history of the People’s Republic of China, the social unity of individuals generated great collective power to boost social construction. The collective in this period sacrificed the individuality of its members to maximize its unity and power. The end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of

the Chinese Economic Reformation evoked a consciousness of individuality to some extent. Artists began to critique the impulsiveness, irritability, and the loss of self-identity within the collective crowd. The notion of the self was challenged again during the 1990s when consumeristic culture resulted in a collapse of traditional value and belief systems in exchange for a celebration of materialism. Through shaping the image of the collective, Chinese artists critique the culture, political power, and social environment that drive the formation of the image of the self.

As Chinese contemporary art generates attention globally, the form of the collective image utilized by numerous artists has been critiqued for deliberately catering to Western spectators and buyers, and producing a visual spectacle with the sole intent of drawing attention within the competitive art market. In these cases, the images of the collective are often detached from their cultural and ideological contexts and appropriated for marketing purposes.

The interpretation of the ancient folk story *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountain* helps in understanding the development of collectivism in China. The unyielding Foolish Old Man persistently digs the stones every day, believing that his determination will eventually move the mountain and conquer nature. His seemingly meaningless efforts and willpower exemplifies the concept of gradual enlightenment, a Buddhist practice that seeks to achieve a state of nihilism and emptiness. Since the beginning of the history of the Republic, especially during Mao’s era, the spirit of the Foolish Old Man became the slogan of collectivism, a campaign that encouraged people to unite together and give every effort of the self to conquer the issues that the whole country was facing. With the demise of a collective consciousness after the Cultural Revolution however, it seems that the spirit of the Foolish Old Man will soon lose its practical meaning and become a part of the past.

While reading the story, one may notice the absence of free will: the story simply abstracted the Foolish Old Man and his offspring as productive units to move the mountain, just like a machine. Imagine that one day, his grandsons decide to leave the mountain for their own way of living. This possibility illustrates how a change in an individual's ideology has the potential to threaten the stability of an entire system. This is evident today: the rapidly changing society and the increasingly supported notion of humanism endow the exploration of self-identity with significant realistic and practical meanings, with Chinese contemporary art recording the very details of the process.

Appendix 1: The Foolish Old Man Who Removed
the Mountain
Excerpted from Mao's Speech²³

There is an ancient Chinese fable called "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains." It tells of an old man who lived in Northern China long, long ago and was known as the Foolish Old Man of North Mountain. His house faced south and beyond his doorway stood the two great peaks, Taihang and Wangwu, obstructing the way. With great determination he led his sons in digging up these mountains, hoe in hand. Another greybeard, known as the Wise Old Man, saw them and said derisively, "How silly of you to do this! It is quite impossible for you few to dig up these two huge mountains." The Foolish Old Man replied, "When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower. Why can't we clear them away?" Having refuted the Wise Old Man's wrong view, he went on digging every day, unshaken in his conviction. God was moved by this, and he sent down two angels who carried the mountains away on their backs.

Notes:

1. Foster et al., *Art since 1900* (Thames & Hudson, 2011) vol. 2, 758.
2. Robin Peckham, "Big, Small and Potential: Chinese Art in Spaces and Places," *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art* Vol. 10, number 1 (2011), 32.
3. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press; London, in association with China Art Foundation, c2011), 311.
4. Words in brackets are pinyin of the original Chinese words
5. Hung Wu and Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; Durham, N.C.: Distributed by Duke University Press, c2010), 130.
6. Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press c2000), 11.
7. Ibid.
8. Dunyi Zhou, *Diagram Explaining the Supreme Ultimate tai ji tu shuo*, Song Dynasty.
9. Qi Zhu, "Cultural Traditions and Contemporary Methods," *Sculpture* (vol.1, 2000), 16.
10. See Appendix
11. Gao, *Total Modernity*, 313.
12. Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art/Qiang: Zhongguo dang dai yi shu de li shi yu bian jie*, Gao Minglu, (Buffalo, N.Y. Albright Knox Art Gallery: University at Buffalo Art Galleries; Beijing: Millennium Art Museum, c2005), 46.
13. Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 4.
14. See Appendix 1 for the excerpt of Mao's speech.
15. Mao Zedong, *Serve the People: In Memory of Norman Bethune; The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967).
16. A similar approach of depicting the mass is used in the famous historically themed painting *Inaugural Ceremony for the New Nation* by Dong Xiwen (b.1914), where collectivism is demonstrated by orderly and intensive crowds.

17. Gao, *The Wall*, 50-51.
18. Gao Minglu, "Details into Background of Chinese Modern Art / zhongguo xiandai meishu bei-jing zhi zhankai," in *Meishu Sichao* 1 (1987): 40-48.
19. Gao, *The Wall*, 42.
20. Mathieu Borysevicz, "Export—Cargo Transit," *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art* 10, no. 1 (2011).
21. Gao, *The Wall*, 202.
22. Peckham, "Big, Small and Potential," 38.
23. Zedong, *Serve the People*.