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A Web. Notes Toward a Phylogenetic Study of the Co-emergence of Chinese Art and Chinese Economy through the Sigg Collection

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A few years after the death of Mao Zedong in September 1976, amongst the first entrepreneurs to travel to China following Deng Xiao Ping's rise to power in 1978 and declaration of the Open Door Policy was the Swiss Uli Sigg, who led a Schindler Company delegation there in 1979. Until that year, there was no Chinese state capitalism, and no Chinese contemporary art. There were art schools where you could study the craft of realist figurative painting and sculpture, but the concept of creating work independently of any public commission, either to reflect society or to reflect on and critique society, and by doing so imagine future or alternative worlds and effect change—that did not exist. Except for artists of the Chinese diaspora who began working in the early 1980s in China, but who soon moved to Paris, like Huang Yong Ping and Chen Zhen, and New York, like Cai Guo-Qiang, what we usually define as contemporary art globally today, simply did not exist in mainland China.

The earliest autonomous artworks in China itself were those of a collective of artists called Stars (Xing Xing), founded by Ma Desheng (1952) and Huang Rui (1952) and including Li Shuang (1957), who exhibited on the sidewalk and fences outside the Beijing Museum in 1979. Uli Sigg was there. In 1981, the young artist Ai Weiwei (1957), one of the founding members of the Stars group, left for New York and only returned to China in the mid-1990s. During the 1980s, Sigg was in China as the vice-chairman of the China-Schindler Elevator Co. in Beijing—he had effectively created the first joint venture between China and the outside world that later served as a model for over a million companies investing in China. What a company is, how a profit-and-loss statement is drawn up, how a company is taxed, the rules for a technology transfer: many of the solutions he had to negotiate have become protocols and rules that regulate private companies and later, most of them became Chinese law.

During that time, artists and intellectuals emerged and were grappling with what it meant to be in China during the birth of a transnational global art world and Sigg began to seek them out, visit their studios, collect their works, and build his collection in tandem with the development of the art system there, when the first galleries began to open in the mid-1990s. In an essay, a few years ago, Sigg writes about what motivates him as a collector:

“[I do] not analyze whether the roots of collecting may be phylogenetic, whether they originate in human instinct, in greed, in a gaping void, in a desire for refinement and self-cultivation, in the brain stem or from emissions of endorphins. Such subjects are left to ethnologists, psychoanalysts, art historians, neuroscientists, and others. [I] simply use the term "collecting" to denote accumulating things with a logic, so as to create meaning beyond what the single collection item contains in itself.”

He speaks of "accumulating things with a logic," and uses the scientific term "phylogenetic," which is the study of the evolutionary relationships among individual organisms. This offers a key to understanding his utterly Swiss neutrality in collecting: never taking sides in a debate or competition between artists and movements, he collects a wide range of artworks, from the exquisitely refined and fundamentally traditional depiction of animals in the philosophical paintings of Shao Fan (1964) and the minimal landscapes on the edge of invisibility by Qiu Shi Hua (1940), to the radical and brutally avant-garde work of installation artists Sun Yuan (1972) & Peng Yu (1974), the critical installations of archival materials and objects of Mao Tongqiang (1960), or the work on code and language of Feng Mengbo (1966).

Sigg systematically collects all that seems evidence of an emergent state of contemporary consciousness in China as a way of understanding it through its evolution. Indeed, he often remarks that he has not made choices based on what he likes or does not like, but has tried to collect what is happening and has occurred encyclopedically. It is to be remembered that he was both a lawyer and a journalist before becoming an entrepreneur, and that his journalism focused on the economy. In many ways, he thus became a *reporter-collector*, locating and finding tangible evidence in artworks of what was happening in the world through the lens of China at the crucial moment in which everything was about to change: the imminent collapse of the Eastern block after 1989, and of communist state-planned economies, beginning with China in the early 1980s. When the Tiananmen Square protests took place in 1989, a period of diminished individual freedom was ushered in; yet it was only after 2012 that a true reversal of the trend of increased freedom of expression for artists occurred, strongly connected with new surveillance technologies. This lies at the core of the work of one of the youngest artists in Sigg's collection, Miao Ying (1985), who is at the forefront of exposing the limitations imposed on all subjectivities around the world through AI and our algorithmic, anti-humanist society, in particular in relation to the Great Chinese Firewall.

So Sigg, in a context devoid of cultural institutions dedicated to contemporary art, partook in the development of the art itself. In 1997, before the development of the 798 Art District in Beijing in the former Dashanzi factory complex, he launched the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA). This annual prize for contemporary Chinese artists who live in their home country has, through the involvement of international directors and curators in the jury and together with Chinese art critics and curators, contributed to the subsequent spread of Chinese art to many museums all over the world. For the first edition of the award, Sigg invited Harald Szeemann to be on the jury and this led to Szeemann's inclusion of numerous mainland Chinese artists in the 1999 Venice Biennale, where many Westerners saw their work for the first time. Some had also seen the group exhibition *China Avant-garde: Counter-currents in Art and Culture* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (then touring to Kunsthal Rotterdam and MoMA Oxford, among others) in 1993–94, where Xu Bing presented his installation about Chinese calligraphy. In 1998, along with a number of Chinese diaspora artists, Song Dong presented work in *Inside Out*, curated by Gao Minglu at the Asia Society, PS1 Contemporary Art Center and SFMoMA. In parallel with Sigg's support of Song's participation at dOCUMENTA (13), with his *Doing Nothing Garden* based on recycling trash into a broccoli and meditation garden in front of the Orangerie in Kassel, he asked me to be on the jury of the CCAA award. This in some ways leads us to this exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, and to Sigg's support of Chinese artist Liu Ding's (1976) installation *The Orchid Room* (2019), produced and donated to the museum by Uli Sigg—a work inspired by the Francesco Federico Cerruti Collection at Castello di Rivoli.

In 2012, Sigg decided to donate 1,450 works from his collection to the M+ Museum for Visual Arts in Hong Kong, which should be partially open to the public in December 2020, thereby returning to China an important part of its recent cultural history. The construction site of M+, which I have ob-

served over the years, reminds me of the layered urban landscapes by artist Liu Wei (1972), intensively collected by Sigg. Structures and works that are contemporary yet intersect with the tradition of landscape painting in China as they speak to large numbers of small marks, drawn together in an abstract formal composition, stripes and strips minutely connected.

In an era of growing private collections, Sigg testifies to the importance of the practice, while at the same time to the importance of not dispersing these works in the flow of the art market, but keeping the collection intact, whole, a singular visual and tactile encyclopedia of one of the most important transitions in the world: the shift from Eurocentric Western art historical canons to narratives that are broader, that make place for so much more.

Not all collectors acquire existing artworks after the fact. Some, like Sigg, collect in parallel with the emergence of the work itself, and by so doing provide artists with some of their daily support. Such collectors co-emerge with the art, with its meaning—they shape it and are shaped by it. Is Sigg a Westerner who went to the East to appropriate it? Or is he the reverse—a quintessence of the mode by which China, amongst other places, is transforming the Westerner and Eurocentricism altogether?

Some time ago, as sundown passed and the darkness slowly crept in after a long bright day in Sigg's home in Mauensee, Switzerland, while no one came to turn the lights on for us, and he did not rise to do so, so nor did I, I finally asked him about his relationship in China to spies and Intel. He smiled and avoided the question. Perhaps it was too obvious, too banal, and not cosmic enough. After all, this is the man who wrote:

Still, to do full justice to a collector remains futile. One would need to know in depth about the collecting process and the full potential of the collection universe available to a collector. Then one would also need to consider the constraints. Which research efforts were undertaken and which were not? What were the works available for choice at a given moment and which works were not selected? What financial resources were available to achieve the actual result? Where do those failures made invisible rest, what are they, and how numerous? And many more issues...

The question now is how will art, as a form of expression that has up till today been created by humans, evolve in the twenty-first century, and what place will it have in forging multispecies societies co-emerging with non-humans, including plants and mushrooms, strawberries and bees, keeping AI and their robots in check rather than working for AI? I suspect Chinese artists will have much to say concerning this matter. I wonder what Sigg will collect next.