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EDITORIAL

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Abstract

New and complex forms of entanglements and power dynamics have taken place via a transcultural curation ethos of Chinese contemporary art in recent decades – the frictions of which have amplified during pandemic times. This Special Issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* focuses on curatorial research and debates on the transcultural and the post-Covid world in China, and beyond. The Editorial sets out the key conceptual framework for assessing the significance of transcultural curation and Chinese contemporary art, both before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The Editorial unpacks key concepts and ideas such as transculturation as theory, method and practice; interrogates the processes and challenges of curating Chinese contemporary art in a transcultural context and the post-Covid world; and maps the issue content and structure. The Special Issue invocation to transcultural curation in a post-Covid world serves as a provocation to think carefully about the connections between past, present and future, and what continues, and what is new, for curatorial imaginaries.

Keywords

China

contemporary art

transculturation

transcultural curating

post-Covid world

exhibitions histories

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Transcultural Curation and the Post-Covid World

Beginning as a global health crisis, the Coronavirus pandemic has caused severe ruptures within cultural sectors internationally, including the artworld. Mobility was restricted, museums and galleries closed their doors, art fairs and biennales were suspended, and creative workers lost their jobs –with non-white, precarious workers being among the most impacted (Ali et al. 2022). Arts, cultural labour and policy scholars have begun the urgent work of mapping the impact of Covid-19 on local and national economies and cultural organisations across the globe. This research spans losses and disruptions to business models and operational practices, and highlights the inherent precarity of many cultural and creative workers livelihoods (ICOM 2020; Comunian and England 2020; UNESCO 2021; WIPO 2022). Artists, academics and cultural workers in China (and working on China) have discussed the ‘suspended state’ of lock-down daily lives, forms of creative and commodified expression explored under quarantine, ‘the end of museums’ as they commonly operate, the rise of online exhibitions and programming, and the intensification of anti-Asian racism, critiquing what might be the ‘new normal’ as the crisis continues (Jiang 2021a, 2021b; Snels 2022).

A concrete example of the emerging impactful force of the ‘post-Covid world’ can be found in the closure of the Times Art Center Berlin (TACB) in the summer of 2022. A privately funded, non-profit art space located in the German capital, TACB operated as a satellite project of the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou, China. It positioned itself as an independent and self-governed organisation, and the first parallel institution initiated by an Asia-based art museum overseas. Operating since 2018, TACB was fiscally supported by the Hong Kong-listed Times China property company, owned by husband and wife team Shum Chiu-hung and Li Yiping, who are also one of the main sponsors of the Guangzhou Triennial. Dedicated to realising “an experimental platform for changes and transformation, creative exchanges and communal encounters”, the Times Art Center Berlin prioritised cutting-edge programming and the exploration of new models of Asian institutions of contemporary art through various forms of art production (Xi 2022). In scope, their work included exhibitions by Chinese contemporary art curators and artists active throughout Europe. They also explored wider transcultural connections, such as the 2021 group exhibition “Más Allá, el Mar Canta (Beyond, the Sea Sings)”, which explored Chinese labour migration to Central America and the Caribbean, and cross-oceanic South-South diasporas.

As Xi Bei, artistic director of the Times Art Center Berlin, reported to *ArtNet*, the decision to close was predominately financial, but stemmed “from the last years of political, economic and cultural crises...The impossibility of mobility across countries (for us namely between Europe and Asia), economic instability, and recessions” (Batycka 2022). These factors occurred alongside heightened tensions between China and the West, and the stalling of the Chinese property market.ⁱ Significantly, Xi noted that there is a “growing cultural and political disparity that will probably also impact transcultural projects such as ours [in] the coming years”.

The concerns and issues embedded within the closure of Times Art Center Berlin provide a strong resonance with the aims underpinning this Special Issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. The Special Issue brings together curatorial research and debates on transculturality and the post-Covid world, and addresses the following questions as a starting point: how do exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art engage with the ideas and possibilities of transcultural curation, and with what kinds of political imaginaries? In what ways is Chinese contemporary art mobilised through international exhibitions situated in between institutional, commercial, independent art spaces, the digital and beyond? And what does the 'transcultural' mean in the post-Covid context, and what is the new role of a curator? The issue assembles unique case studies and conversations that unpack transcultural debates and explore innovative discussions, to provide new understandings and methodological approaches in curatorial research and practice. The case studies are drawn from the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts (CCVA) Annual Conference that I co-organized at Birmingham City University in December 2021. The two-day conference invited researchers, curators, artists, designers, and practitioners at all stages of their careers to reassess the significance of transcultural curation and Chinese contemporary art, both before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This Special Issue provides initial responses to the questions posed above and opens the debate further on the field of transcultural and curatorial inquiry in China, and beyond.

ⁱ In September 2022, the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou also announced the temporary closure of the 19th FI exhibition space until the end of 2023, the museum main exhibition space. Nikita Yingqian Cai, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of Times Museum, cited the ongoing economic downturn as the main reason for closure. As she stated in the announcement: “The trajectory of an institution accommodates our shared precarity in real time, but an edifice does not crumble for one single voice. We will continue to create spaces and conditions for complex interrogations in the field of contemporary art and come back with a renewed proposition”. Email correspondence from Nikita Yingqian Cai, 8 September 2022.

Transcultural Curation as Theory and Method

The idea of the ‘transcultural’ has gained momentum in academic, curatorial and artistic contexts in the last decades, providing a framework for thinking through non-hegemonic global exchanges and knowledge production. Ideas of the transcultural have shifted through different stages and forms of conceptualisations, with each wave of theorisation bringing forward particular aspects of understanding. The widespread emergence of the term ‘transculturation’ is associated with the work of the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1940). Ortiz coined this term to capture what he saw as the complexity of cultures colliding in a bounded space and time; where the transcultural is not just the imposition of hegemonic elements of the dominant culture on subaltern cultures and a resulting assimilation, but on complex, multi-directional processes of exchange, loss and production that span the linguistic, economic and cultural.

In the 1990s, the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch introduced the term ‘transculturality’ to critique the idea of nations as discrete and homogenised ‘container cultures’. His aim was to further understandings of their inherent entanglements and hybridity. Transcultural formations are historical, technical, individual and societal, and have been bolstered by the workings of globalisation, but cannot be reduced to such a concept. For Welsch, “transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation” (1999, p. 205). Building on Ortiz, the transcultural is understood as directing analytical attention to the outcomes of exchange, interaction and entanglement. General usages of the term ‘transcultural’ may point to ideas of the multi-cultural, cross-cultural or inter-cultural, and a sense of the ‘competences’ needed to work with and represent social ‘difference’. However transculturality points to something more nuanced: *how* “difference is negotiated within contacts and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, re-historicizing and rereading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance – or through a succession/coexistence of any of these” (Juneja 2013, p.25).

The idea of the transcultural has proven a fruitful framework to analyse curating Chinese contemporary art in a global context since 1989,ⁱⁱ albeit with some critiques in its usage. In the 1990s Chinese contemporary art exhibitions emerged in museums and galleries in the West characterised as national survey shows. These exhibitions responded to an increased Western interest in non-European art and were often presented within a series of shows entitled *China; Chinese Art* or *New Art from China* – or India, Brazil, Russia, Mexico... for that same matter. These exhibitions, from the titles and national approach to their global claims, reinforced ethnic essentialism and possibly its entertainment value without challenging hegemonic Western curatorial positions and practices (Querol, forthcoming). The use of ‘New Art from’ suggested a novel construct while conforming to an easily consumable attitude linked to the phenomenon of globalisation and the burgeoning Chinese contemporary art market. This curatorial approach led to art historian Franziska Koch to examine early travelling exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art with the pertinent critical question: “*China on Display for European Audiences?*” (2011).

In this vein, ideas of the transcultural in the 1990s in the artworld referred generally to exhibitions that simply included art from another culture, often non-Western art, and was used as synonymous of terms such as ‘cross-cultural’, ‘intercultural’ or ‘multicultural’ (Bhagwati 2018). As such, critiques of transcultural curating soon arose for enhancing a centre-periphery dialectical model and reinforcing Eurocentrism (Mosquera 1994; Hou 1994). By contrast, in the 21st century the situation changed with a shift towards thematic exhibitions and a growing number of Chinese artists, curators and cultural practitioners active within global circuits, positioning themselves and working in collaboration with artists, curators and institutions worldwide. Biennales have had a significant role in this transformation, expanding the geo-political cartographies of contemporary art in China and transculturally (Belting 2009; Green and Gardner 2016; Harris 2017; Jiang 2020). Contemporary curatorial strategies and modes of transcultural curating, despite blurring the hierarchical dualism prevalent in the 1990s, still retain contradictions. These include uneven

ⁱⁱ As is well established in the fields of art history and curatorial studies, the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris marked the beginning of institutional multiculturalism, which interpreted culture as ‘ethnicity’ and supported non-Western artists through exhibition opportunities and funding as far as they met existing expectations of their cultures (Araeen 1989; Fisher 2008). *Magiciens de la Terre* was curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and included three Chinese artists: Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang, selected with the advice of curator Fei Dawei.

power dynamics, exhibition flows and intersectional approaches, both in global and local contexts where dominant groups retain hegemonic positions.

While ideas of the transcultural hold many challenges, it is also a site of productive thinking. The transcultural should never be reduced to an already constituted homogeneous whole (e.g., a static idea of Chinese contemporary art, curating or ‘Chineseness’). As art historian Monica Juneja suggests, “Transculturality is about spatial mobility, circulation or flows, an insight drawn from studies of globalization, but is neither synonymous with nor reducible to these. It focuses on processes through which forms emerge in local contexts within circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction, and entanglement make the transcultural a field constituted relationally” (2013, p. 25). It is this understanding of relationality which positions the transcultural both as a *theory* and an *analytical approach*, sensitising us methodologically to the need to interrogate specific empirical examples of the transcultural, their processes, and their frictions.

Transcultural Curation Between Past and Future, the National and the Transnational

In this Special Issue, the articles grapple with understandings of transcultural curating and Chinese contemporary art, moving from the 1990s to the present moment, where the impact of the Covid and post-Covid world can be taken into account.

Xiaoyi Nie’s article sets the scene for this enquiry, focusing on the development of curating in China through an exploration of the *Long March: A Walking Visual Display* (2002). From London, where curator Lu Jie wrote the initial proposal in 1999, to China, where the project materialised along the historical Long March road two years later, the article explores how this curatorial project addressed a dilemma of curating Chinese contemporary art in a transcultural context during the 1990s. Beyond the politics of representation and Western hegemonic curatorial positions, Nie demonstrates the role of the *Long March* in establishing experimental curating in China, making art public and exhibiting artworks in alternative contexts.

Alina Sinelnik’s article examines the transcultural trajectories of contemporary Chinese ink medium art through two key exhibitions: the Third Chengdu Biennale (2007) and The Met’s *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* exhibition (2013-2014). Through a richly

researched analysis of the formation, reception and dissemination of these exhibitions, Sinelnik demonstrates how these shows not only repositioned today's Chinese ink art on the global art scene, but also highlighted the multiple dichotomies and frictions of the medium in-between the indigenous and the contemporary; the national and the international; the local and the global.

Hongwei Bao, Julia Hartmann and Anuradha Vikram focus on transcultural curating as incubating spaces of contestation, critique and activism, bringing in queer, feminist and diasporic lens. Hongwei Bao examines the exhibition *Secret Love*, the biggest queer Chinese art exhibition outside Asia to date. This exhibition first took place at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm in 2012. The article explores the applicability and limitations of queerness, 'Chineseness' and contemporary art through this transcultural exhibition. It also explores the restaging of *Secret Love* as an outdoor exhibition during Covid times. From this case study analysis, Hongwei proposes queer curating as a critical curatorial method which challenges fixed identities and dominant positions, opening up the politics and possibilities of transcultural curation.

Julia Hartmann focuses on the #MeToo movement and its exhibitions in China and transnationally. Providing a historical mapping of feminist consciousness in China and all-female exhibitions from the post-Mao era until today, Hartmann draws on these genealogies to ground and contextualise the issues that artists, curators and activists address within their work in digital times. Hartmann's pertinent overview of transcultural curating in the #MeToo era in China highlights questions of feminism, intersectionality, solidarity, and empowerment in a highly censored context, demonstrating the transnational connections of these exhibitions and the #MeToo movement globally.

Bringing race and diasporic experiences to the fore, Anuradha Vikram's article examines influential works by Chinese American artist Patty Chang and her legacy on a new generation of Chinese American and Asian American artists. Through an exploration of two online exhibitions of Patty Chang and Chinese American Art held during the pandemic, the article considers the impact of Covid-19 and anti-Asian violence on the direction of Chang's work and on wider diaspora artists and transcultural curators. *Milk Debt* (2020), Chang's most recent video installation and exhibition initially developed under Vikram's curatorship, voices fears and pandemic anxieties collected from Hong Kong to the United States, pre- and

post-Covid times. This work captures the transcultural condition that defined Chinese diaspora artists during the pandemic, and beyond.

This Special Issue is then completed with a conversation between curator Jonathan Watkins and researcher Julia Jiang. Watkins' curatorial work spans over three decades, most notably as Director of Ikon Gallery in Birmingham (1999-2022), alongside significant curatorial projects in China (Shanghai Biennale 2006; Today Documents 2010; Guangzhou Triennial 2012). In this conversation, Watkins and Jiang discuss the possibilities and limitations of transcultural curation. From Cool Britannia, multiculturalism and cultural difference to transculturation, translation and online curation, their conversation unpacks the changes in discourse, methods, and approaches of transcultural curating in recent decades, to put forward the importance of the everyday in curating across cultures and borders.

New and complex forms of entanglements and power dynamics have taken place via a transcultural curation ethos of Chinese contemporary art in recent decades – the frictions of which have amplified during pandemic times, as this Special Issue demonstrates. Triggering states of crisis, the global Covid-19 pandemic reinstated national borders, halted mobility, and saw many projects failing – such as the Times Museum in Berlin and Guangzhou as this editorial begins. These changing conditions have created new parameters through which to understand transculturation as theory, method and practice, and have galvanised critical attention to the forces through which exhibition processes and circuits may be built, and may be thwarted. While the post-Covid world is not resolutely here – it is emerging – this idea serves to heighten existing fragilities and opportunities in the ways in which contemporary Chinese art is produced, researched and curated. Thinking about transcultural curating in a post-Covid world does not require a strict historical cut or rupture, but an understanding of ongoing systems, hegemonies and relationalities. To this end, our invocation to transcultural curation in a post-Covid world serves best as a provocation to think carefully about the connections between past, present and future, and what continues, and what is new for curatorial imaginaries.

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