



ART HISTORY OF SOCIALIST CHINA: A STATE-OF-THE-FIELD DISCUSSION

ONLINE WORKSHOP ON ZOOM, FRIDAY AND SATURDAY, 18 AND 19 JUNE 2021, 14:00 CEST

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ORGANIZER:

JULIANE NOTH, KUNSTGESCHICHTLICHES SEMINAR,
UNIVERSITÄT HAMBURG

In recent years, scholars of Maoist China have increasingly explored the use of images, displays, and other visual materials and how they were deployed for political ends. What remains largely absent from these studies are, paradoxically, the visual and aesthetic qualities of the images and media in question, their agency and that of their creators, and thus the possibility that they might offer ambiguous and multilayered readings. Art historians on the other hand, who are trained to analyze and interpret images, have shown more interest in art-specific discourses and how individual artists responded to given tasks or settings on a formal or iconographical level. Indeed, the assumption that images produced in Maoist China possessed a lot of political, but very little artistic value might be one reason why a comparatively small number of art-historical studies have been written on Chinese art from the period between 1949 and 1979. It is only recently that several new studies have begun to more fully assess the complexity of artistic production between political exigencies and aesthetic choices. In this workshop, we will discuss methodological issues and case studies which allow us to seek new perspectives on the image production of that period as well as the relation between art, propaganda, and visual culture in a broader sense.

For the access link please register per e-mail:

arthistorysocialistchina.kunst@uni-hamburg.de

PROGRAMME

FRIDAY, 18 JUNE 2021

14:00

Margit Kern
Universität Hamburg
Welcome

14:10

Juliane Noth
Universität Hamburg
Introduction

14:25

Claire Roberts
University of Melbourne
**Painting the Figure: Ye Qianyu, Dance
and Sketch Conceptualism**

15:10

Yi Gu
University of Toronto
**Magic Lanterns and the “Dark Matter”
in Mao’s Art World, or What We Could
Learn from Socialist Amateurism**

15:55 **Break**

16:10

Zheng Shengtian
Institute of Asian Art, Vancouver Art
Gallery/Simon Fraser University
Siqueiros in China in 1956

SATURDAY, 19 JUNE 2021

14:00

Juliane Noth
Universität Hamburg
**Red Guard Art and the Mass
Production of Images**

14:40

Christine I. Ho
University of Massachusetts Amherst
**Socialist Art History and the Problem
of Form**

15:20 **Break**

15:30

Discussion

16:30

Virtual get-together

ART HISTORY OF SOCIALIST CHINA: A STATE-OF-THE-FIELD DISCUSSION

ABSTRACTS

Claire Roberts, University of Melbourne

Painting the Figure: Ye Qianyu, Dance and Sketch Conceptualism

How did artists negotiate the complex social changes arising from war and revolution? What did it take to survive? How are we to understand the work artists produced in the 1950s and 1960s in relation to their earlier practice and their oeuvres more generally? What is the relationship of the parts to the whole?

Ye Qianyu (1907-1995) was a self-taught artist who rose to prominence in Shanghai as an illustrator, cartoonist, photographer, magazine editor and creative journalist the late 1920s and 30s. In 1954 he became head of Chinese brush and ink painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, a position to which he was reinstated following his political rehabilitation after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Ye Qianyu's creative interest in dance can be traced back to the 1940s and is central to the evolution of his later style and his rise as a leading practitioner and teacher of figure painting in the Peoples' Republic of China. A discussion of dance sketches and paintings from different periods of Ye Qianyu's career seeks to expand and complicate received understandings of the paintings he produced in Maoist China.

Claire Roberts is an art historian and curator specialising in modern and contemporary Chinese art, and the cultural flows between Australia and Asia. She is Associate Professor of Art History in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Her current research explores the international context of modern and contemporary Chinese art.

Yi Gu, University of Toronto

Magic Lanterns and the “Dark Matter” in Mao’s Art World, or What We Could Learn from Socialist Amateurism

How does the promotion of mass art in socialist China resonate with or differ from similar efforts to democratize artmaking, both during the Cold War and in our contemporary moment? What inspirations and lessons could we draw from the story of socialist amateurism?

My paper intends to engage with these questions by examining the magic lantern fever in socialist China. While the new PRC state championed magic lantern as a low-cost medium effective for its mostly illiterate mass in the early 1950s, it is the local lanternists—key figures of mass art (*dazhong meishu*) or grassroots art (*jiceng meishu*)—whose continued embrace of the medium led to its most intense development. Amplifying a rhetoric adopted earlier by the state, they declared magic lantern not inferior but superior to cinema, as it enabled creative participation. Unearthing these marginal figures in the PRC art world, I contextualize their production in a state art infrastructure that insisted on a divide between creative labour and artistic work. The tens and thousands of lanternists illuminate the existence of “dark matter”—the astronomical metaphor made by Gregory Scholette of the large mass of art workers and amateurs whose exclusion was indispensable to the symbolic economy of art—in the socialist art world, even at moments of its most vehement anti-hierarchy struggle.

Yi GU is an associate professor at University of Toronto. She is a scholar of modern and contemporary Chinese art. Her research interests include cold war visual culture, photography in Asia, mass art and amateurism, and the politics of aesthetics in contemporary China. Her book *Chinese Ways of Seeing and Open-Air Painting* (Harvard University Press Asia Center, 2020) points out an ocular turn of China's twentieth century as a foundation for a revisionist history of twentieth-century Chinese art.

Zheng Shengtian, Institute of Asian Art,
Vancouver Art Gallery/Simon Fraser University
Siqueiros in China in 1956

David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) visited China in October 1956 in the context of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and Mao's Hundred Flowers Campaign. He openly delivered his point of view about establishing “a new, monumental art for the new era” and strongly criticized Soviet art as academism and formalism. He praised the great tradition of Chinese art and advised Chinese artists not to follow the footsteps of their Russian fellow artists. As a leading member of the Mexican Communist Party, his speech was reported by media and was quickly spread amongst artists and students. Siqueiros's short visit not only stimulated a vigorous debate in Chinese art circle at that time but also left profound influence on the development of Chinese art in later years.

Zheng Shengtian is the Managing Editor of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, the Adjunct Director of the Institute of Asian Art, Vancouver Art

Gallery, a Research Fellow at Simon Fraser University and a Trustee of Asia Art Archive in America. As an independent curator, he has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions including *Shanghai Modern, Art and China's Revolution, and Winds from Fusang : Mexico & China in 20th Century*. He is a frequent contributor to periodicals and catalogues and four volumes of his writing on art and culture were published by China Academy of Art Press in 2013. Zheng received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2013.

Juliane Noth, Universität Hamburg

Red Guard Art and the Mass Production of Images

During the early years of the Cultural Revolution, much of the artworks and visual materials produced by Red Guards and rebels were produced speedily, anonymously, and often collectively. These images have so far been only cursorily treated in studies of PRC art, arguably because of their often amateur quality, the narrow scope of their subject matter (mostly Mao portraits and a limited number of slogans) and their obvious propagandistic function. This relative disregard of early Cultural Revolution visual culture in scholarship stands in stark contrast to its strong and varied reception in contemporary art. Indeed, Red Guard and rebel arts may well be described as serial, performative, and as deploying display modes that are similar to installation art. In this paper, I argue that it was the combination of subject matter, formats, modes of production and distribution, as well as forms of display that encourage such a posteriori readings. I will discuss how the organization of the Red Guards and rebel groups and the mass mobilization led to the production and reproduction of images and texts on a massive scale, in which the narrow thematic scope of the works led to a foregrounding of their formal properties.

Juliane Noth is a Heisenberg Fellow at the University of Hamburg and research professor at the China Institute for Visual Studies at the China Academy of Art. She is the PI of two research projects, "Artistic Practices during the Cultural Revolution: Actors, Media, Institutions" and "Metal, Stone and Newspaper: Materiality and Mediality of Writing in Socialist China," the latter at the Cluster of Excellence "Understanding Written Artefacts." Her second book, *Transmedial Landscapes and Modern Chinese Painting*, is forthcoming with Harvard University Asia Center in 2022.

Christine I. Ho, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Socialist Art History and the Problem of Form

Unlike the widely-used invectives of "counterrevolutionary," "capitalist roader," or "revisionist," the pejorative label of "formalism" (xingshi zhuyi) was reserved for cultural workers in Mao-era China. Formalism, or the idea that a preoccupation with form superseded and obscured ideological content, was largely associated with any whiff of modernist movements that could be detected in works of art. The fear of being judged as a "formalist" beset artists as well as writers, composers, and filmmakers, many of whom had experimented with modernist movements in prerevolutionary China.

Whether formalism is understood as a convenient catchall for political attacks or part of debates within art criticism that struggled to conceptualize socialist realism, the period obsession with formalism reveals an absence in current methodological approaches to socialist art. While artists and their critics in socialist China understood form as fundamental to the production of meaning, contemporary treatments of socialist visual culture regularly reduce images to their content: images are either regarded as deceptive and opaque, erasing truths of lived reality and political contestations, or as transparent and illustrative, decoded for their ideological missives. This essay asks a basic question: how should the art of socialist China be "read"? Is socialist visual culture an archive that documents history, or does this visual culture itself emerge out of a history of form that shapes its meaning and messages? I turn to Dong Xiwen's sketches of the Long March to explore how socialist art was constituted as an art historical project, one that saw style as both perilous and essential to the making of ideology.

Christine I. Ho is associate professor of East Asian art history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary art, craft, and design in China. The author of *Drawing from Life: Socialist Painting and Socialist Realism in the People's Republic of China* (University of California, 2020), she has also published in *The Art Bulletin* and *Archives of Asian Art*. She is currently working on two projects: a study of the mural in modern China, and a monograph on the theory, history, and practice of collective production in modern and contemporary Chinese art, entitled *Collective Brushwork*.