太平天国
TAIPING TIANGUO
In 2007, the NUS Museum organized an exhibition entitled Reconfiguration: Chinese Contemporary Art. The exhibition featured a selection of works that would enable one to speculate on the effects and imprints of China's cultural struggles in the last century. The subject of the exhibition remains largely centered on China, anchored in its attempt to prompt potential dynamics between the broader collection of Chinese art focused on ceramics and traditional inks.

In retrospect, Reconfiguration could only point to vexing links between the contemporary and the tradition, marked by its cursory regard for the modern and the histories it offers in sustained frames of readings. Taiping Tianguo provides such an attempt in locating the contemporary to plural potentials of history. From “Chinese contemporary art” to “contemporary Chinese art”, the emphasis has shifted from the articulation of a Chinese difference within the global production of contemporary art to the proposition of a Chinese art that is contemporaneous to a global present. As such, the overturning of terms may be taken as a metaphor for the Taiping Rebellion of the mid-19th century, thus charting a possible contemporaneity between the two events. Yet, it is also with this “rebellious” gesture that one might begin to question what is meant not just by the “Chinese” label, but also the very notion of the contemporary itself, and to open it up to possible histories.

By situating the exhibition to engage with the Museum’s permanent display of Chinese artefacts collected from both China and Southeast Asia, a dialogue between histories may be allowed to take place. It is hoped that a traveling show like Taiping Tianguo might wander off to alternative turns on the road home.

NUS Museum would like to express its gratitude towards the artists for their kind support and to Doryun Chong for having initiated this project. Also, this exhibition would have been impossible without the curatorial directions from the co-curators at Para Site, Costin Costinas and Lim Qinyi.

Ahmad Mashadi
Head, NUS Museum

5. Frog King Kwok, Selections of photos of various people wearing the artist’s "Froggies", 2012.
INTRODUCTION

The exhibition 太平天国/Taiping Tianguo, A History of Possible Encounters: Ai Weiwei, Frog King Kwok, Tehching Hsieh, and Martin Wong in New York began as a series of simple questions. How did these four artists end up in New York in the heady days of the 1980s and early 1990s? Did they know one another? What new lessons might we learn about the storied time and place of art history and also about the divergent practices of these well-known figures by considering them together?

In recent years, Ai, Kwok, Hsieh, and Wong have come to prominence in different ways. While all of them are of Chinese heritage, they hail from different places, contexts, and lineages and are situated in wildly distinct art historical narratives and discursive matrices. Ai is from mainland China, Hsieh from Taiwan, Kwok from Hong Kong, and Wong from San Francisco: all arrived in New York in the late 1970s to the early 1980s and lived there until the early 1990s. Ai, Kwok, and Wong all returned to their homelands in the early 1990s, while Hsieh continues to live in New York. Wong died in 1999. From the beginning of the inquiry, certain connections between the four artists were clear, thanks to existing documentations and remembrances. For instance, Hsieh appears in Ai’s photographs from this time, along with many other future Chinese cultural luminaries; Kwok provided critical assistance for Hsieh some of the latter’s legendary One-Year Performances; and Kwok met Wong and Ai—who were well acquainted with each other—at the Kwok Gallery, the space he ran in Soho.

The inquiry, initiated by curator Doryun Chong, into the possibility of their encounters beyond these known facts, quickly turned into an exhibition, an opportunity for further exploration, at the invitation by Cosmin Costinas, the Executive Director/Curator of Para Site, Hong Kong. The exhibition, which opened at Para Site in May 2011, ventured to propose an alternative narrative to those that disregard these artists’ personal connections in favor of city or nation-specific or formalist histories and depicted the New York of the 1980s and early 1990s as a time-space filled with freedom and possibilities and incubated the artistic visions and imaginations of the four artists. Furthermore, the exhibition suggested a possibility of thinking about a casual community and network of acquaintances, and also an underground economy that brought them together. The exhibition, in its structure and presentation, eschewed an authoritatively historical stance and instead revealed the propositional and provisional nature of its endeavor. By doing so, it hoped not only to shed a new light on the work of each artist but also to contribute to a critical reading of this period—the first decade of contemporary Chinese art and the prelude to the era of globalized contemporary art.

The Hong Kong presentation of 太平天国/Taiping Tianguo, A History of Possible Encounters included select works by the artists from this period, along with various documents and archival materials, which map their separate lives and the encounters and connections between them. It also paid attention to the artists’ pre-New York practice, in an effort to demonstrate that while their time in New York was a powerful formative experience for them, their artistic personalities had already been formed in many ways in their original contexts. The subsequent presentation at SALT Beyoğlu in Istanbul (May – August 2013) was modified with additional works and information for the audience who is less familiar with the work of these artists, all shown in Turkey for the first time. The exhibition is conceived as an evolving discourse as it travels from one venue to the next. The Singapore presentation reflects these changes of perspective as well, as the exhibition’s questions are introduced into a cultural space charged with debates about diasporic identity, complex connections with the Chinese cultural sphere, and an acceleration of its contemporary art scene in the past few decades.

“Taiping Tianguo” (“Heavenly Kingdom of Eternal Peace”) was the name of the domain in Southern China established by the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-19th century during the late Qing dynasty period. The rebellion represented—both for the Nationalists and the Communists in China—a historic precedent of heroic revolution against the corrupt and feudal regime subjugated by Western colonial powers. Ostensibly unburdened by the political implications of the historical event, Wong used the name as the inspiration for a painting, and it was in turn used as the title of his posthumous exhibition in San Francisco in 2004. The present exhibition borrows it again as a metaphor for the New York of the 1980s and early 1990s, the time-space which was crucial for the lives and works of the four artists in this exhibition.

Cosmin Costinas     Doryun Chong
A son of the prominent poet Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957. After years spent in forced relocation during the Cultural Revolution, Ai’s family returned to its hometown and he enrolled at the Beijing Film Academy in 1976. Shortly thereafter, he became a member of the Xingxing (Stars) Group—widely acknowledged as a pioneer during the dawn of contemporary art in China—along with Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Wang Keping, and others. Ai presented several watercolours in the second Stars Group exhibition (24 August – 7 September 1980), which was held at the China Art Gallery, attracting nearly 200,000 visitors during its two-week run. Although most of the art works by the members of the Stars Group were not explicitly political, the group’s intentions were highly so, having been animated by a belief in democracy, human rights and individual expression in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.

In 1981, Ai left for the United States and enrolled at Parsons School of Design. He soon withdrew from the school but stayed in New York until 1993. For the period of more than a decade he spent in the city, residing mostly in the East Village, Ai was an inveterate, if somewhat unintentional, photographer of the place and its people. His pictures—said to number in thousands—chronicle the turbulence and vibrancy of this neighborhood and the city during arguably its most critical period. Featured in this diary of mostly black-and-white photographs are the artist’s compatriots in their impoverished years before they attained fame. Other creators who relocated to New York during this time—including artist Xu Bing, director Chen Kaige, composer Tan Dun among others—appear as do the American Beat poet Allen Ginsburg, and Teihching Hsieh. Since his return to Beijing in 1993, Ai has emerged not only as one of the most prominent figures in contemporary Chinese art and architecture, but also as a globally renowned cultural and political icon. His political activism and public criticism of Chinese government led to his imprisonment and house arrest since April 2011.
Widely considered to be a legend in the history of performance art, Tehching Hsieh was born in 1950 in Nanjhou, Taiwan. Dropping out of high school early on, he dedicated himself to experimenting with various styles of painting. In 1974, having found employment as a ship worker, he left Taiwan and entered the United States near Philadelphia, then moving onto New York. He remained an illegal alien for several subsequent years, working menial jobs for a living. In 1978, he embarked on his legendary ONE YEAR PERFORMANCES and by 1986, completed five of them. In the first performance (1978-1979), Hsieh locked himself up in a cage he constructed. An editioned print of a documentary picture from the performance is included in this exhibition. In the second (1980-1981), he attempted to punch the clock at every hour. In the third (1981-1982), he lived outdoors for a whole year, never entering any building or interior space, as represented in this exhibition through elements including a poster, a statement, a map, photographs, and a film. In the fourth (1983-1984), a collaboration with Linda Montaro, the two artists were tied to each other, with a rope around their waists, and were never alone for the duration of their performance. In the fifth (1985-1986), he did nothing that pertains to art.

From 1986 to 1999, Hsieh worked on the “Thirteen Year Plan,” whose details remain unknown to date. On January 1, 2000, he officially announced that he had kept himself alive and would stop making art completely. Since a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 2009 and participating in several group exhibitions at venues including the Guggenheim Museum, he has occasionally discussed his only remaining project of constructing a museum dedicated to his lifework.

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TEHCHING HSIIEH
Frog King Kwok (Kwok Mang Ho, born in 1947 in mainland China) has been a pioneer of conceptual art in Hong Kong. He was virtually a lone figure in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, who employed a wide range of media and forms of expression to challenge the highly conservative Hong Kong art scene of the time. Moments such as the 1974 exhibition he organized in Yuen Long (believed to be the first conceptual art exhibition in the territory) and the display of rotten eggs he presented at the inaugural exhibition of the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1977 caused public scandals and have remained in the local memory. But Frog King’s truly legendary status arose from his 1979 performance at the Tiananmen Square and at the Great Wall, using strings and plastic bags, which is related to his fascination with the five traditional Chinese elements. This is believed to be the first example of performance art in China.

In 1980, Kwok moved to New York and stayed there until 1995. During his New York years, he ran KWOK Gallery for two years in Soho and actively organized and participated in performances, often with other artists, while holding a number of other jobs, such as decorating a Chinese restaurant and working on the art direction of the 1987 film, “An Autumn’s Tale.” Kwok, who continues to be a highly prolific artist is believed to have presented performances, sculptures, paintings and installations in over 3,000 art events all over the world since 1967. His recent exhibitions include the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), where he represented Hong Kong in a solo exhibition, and Third Architectural Biennale, Beijing (2008).
Martin Wong was born in Portland, Oregon in 1946 and grew up in San Francisco. Both of his parents were second-generation Chinese Americans. After studying ceramics at Humboldt State University in Eureka, California, and living in that city for a time, he returned to his hometown and lived in a commune in the Haight-Ashbury district, the famous epicenter of the Hippie movement. He also became involved as the graphic set designer with the Cockettes, as well as the Angels of Light, radical gay drag performance troupes in the early 1970s.

In 1978, Wong moved to New York to fully dedicate himself to painting. He quickly became known for his inimitable style and for his masterful realistic urban landscapes and loving portraits of his Lower East Side neighbors. His work was shown in numerous solo and group shows throughout the 1980s and 1990s. He also amassed what is believed to be the world’s largest collection of graffiti art at the time, which he subsequently donated to the Museum of the City of New York. Wong returned to San Francisco in 1994, having been diagnosed with AIDS, but continued to work. In 1997-1998, he was the subject of a retrospective co-organized by the New Museum, New York and University Art Galleries, Illinois State University. Wong died in San Francisco in 1999. His paintings can be found in some of the most important public collections in the United States, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 8,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The Lee Kong Chian Collection consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the South and Southeast Asian Collection holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the Ng Eng Teng Collection is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the Straits Chinese Collection, is located at NUS Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

Para Site is Hong Kong’s leading contemporary art space and one of the oldest and most active independent art centres in Asia. It produces exhibitions, publications and discursive projects aimed at forging a critical understanding of local and international phenomena in art and society.

Founded in early 1996 as an artist run space, Para Site was Hong Kong’s first institution of contemporary art and a crucial self-organised structure within the city’s civil society, during the uncertain period preceding its handover to Mainland China. Throughout the years, Para Site has evolved into a professional contemporary art centre, engaged in a wide array of activities and collaborations with other art institutions, museums, biennials and academic structures in Hong Kong and the international landscape.


太平天国/Taiping Tianguo, A History of Possible Encounters is co-organized by the curatorial initiative A Future Museum for China and Para Site, Hong Kong.

Co-organised by

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