ART AND CHINA AFTER 1989 THEATER OF THE WORLD
Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World is the largest exhibition of contemporary art from China that has ever been mounted in North America. The show spans the years 1989 to 2008, which can be seen as the most transformative period of modern Chinese and recent world history. The period extends from the end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization to the rise of China as a global presence, culminating in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The Leadership Committee for this exhibition is gratefully acknowledged for its generous support, with special thanks to Co-Chairs Thomas and Lynn Ou and Liam Wee Tay and Cindy Chua-Tay, Trustee, as well as Karen Lo, Sophia Ma, Jane Yong, Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann, Jun Jun Liu, Yasko Tashiro Porté and Thierry Porté, Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang, Qinglan Ying, Jane Q. Zhao, and those who wish to remain anonymous. Additional support is provided by Gagosian and Stephen and Yana Peel.

Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Major support is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Funding is also provided by the W.L.S. Spencer Foundation, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, The Nancy Foss Heath and Richard B. Heath Educational, Cultural and Environmental Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts.
The exhibition highlights approximately 70 key Chinese artists and artist collectives and features nearly 150 experimental works in film and video, installation, painting, sculpture, photography, performance, and socially engaged art and activist art. The show is organized in six chronological and thematic sections occupying the Guggenheim’s rotunda and Tower Level 5 and 7 galleries.

This Teacher Resource Unit focuses on four artists (listed in order of the exhibition’s design) and provides strategies for exploring the exhibition with students and incorporating its themes into visual arts and other areas of the curriculum. This guide is available on the museum’s website at guggenheim.org/artscurriculum, with images that can be downloaded or projected in the classroom. The images may be used for educational purposes only and are not licensed for commercial applications of any kind. Before bringing your class to the Guggenheim, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read this guide, browse our website, and decide which aspects of the exhibition are most relevant to your students. To schedule a visit for your students, please call 212 423 3637.
All of us have a map in our heads of everything. For example, Hong Kong: if all of us were to commit to paper our personal maps of Hong Kong, [they] would all look as different as snowflakes. —Qiu Zhijie

Having practiced Chinese calligraphy since childhood—a form of writing created with a soft brush dipped in liquid black ink and brushed on paper or silk, akin to painting—Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969, Fujian Province, China) has used this traditional art form as an important resource and subject in his practice, from his earliest work to this day.

Qiu created Map of “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,” a five-panel ink-on-paper map that charts the history of art and political movements covered in the exhibition. Qiu is well suited for this task; he has made many conceptual maps that diagram ideas and concepts rather than physical places.

Mapmaking is one of the fundamental ways humans are able to imagine the world. Through maps, the unknown is made visible and understandable. Qiu uses the histories and techniques of mapmaking together with an ancient Chinese tradition of mapping imaginary places to create a conceptual territory that represents the subject matter and time period of the exhibition.

In the work Assignment No. 1: Copying the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” 1,000 Times (1990/95), Qiu records the process of copying one of the most famous works in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Composed in the fourth century, Wang Xizhi’s (303–361 AD) Orchid Pavilion Preface is a touchstone of Chinese calligraphy that students have tried to master through repetition over the last 1,500 years. Qiu copied this famous work one thousand times, but instead of doing so on separate pages, he layered his writing on the same sheet of paper so the words eventually dissolve into a solid field of black ink. To emphasize the progression of the work, Qiu recorded the process on video. By focusing on the process of writing rather than on its content, Qiu upends the focus of calligraphy practice from that of communication to the artist’s creative process.

▲ Ask students to look closely at this work. Its subject is the very exhibition it appears in, Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World. What names and events do you recognize? Which ones are unfamiliar?

▲ Compare Qiu’s work to other maps you are familiar with. How is this work similar to or different from maps you have used?

Show: Qiu Zhijie, Assignment No. 1: Copying the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” 1,000 Times, 1990/95

▲ Ask students for their initial responses to this work, and record their comments.

▲ Show students photo documentation that reveals how a similar work was created (https://i.pinimg.com/originals/80/73/59/807359c4fc9cc93c2c096071eed4fca5.jpg). Ask students if understanding how the work was created changes their response to it, and how.

▲ Practiced for over six thousand years, Chinese calligraphy is the most revered art form in China. Qiu studied this ancient art for many years, but approaches the subject from a different perspective. Instead of using calligraphy as a means of conveying truth and meaning, he approaches calligraphy as a time-based process, like a performance of putting marks on paper. Qiu confronts a recurring theme in contemporary Chinese art—how does one successfully incorporate traditional Chinese culture into contemporary thought and practice? Discuss with students which aspects of his work seem traditional and which veer toward more contemporary thinking.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

• Qiu takes concepts that are usually expressed in words and converts them into images, which depict hierarchies, impasses, and ironies. This type of illustration of ideas and concepts is sometimes called a “mind map,” a visual tool that helps to structure information, gain fresh insights, and avoid linear thinking.

Ask students to select a topic they are interested in, such as a certain book, place, or idea. How might they convey the things they know about this topic graphically to help others understand it? Using pencils and colored pencils, students should put these graphic visualizations to paper. When finished, ask students to share their mind maps, and to try to gauge how successfully they were able to communicate their ideas to others.

• In the opening quote of this section, Qiu states, “All of us have a map in our heads of everything. For example, Hong Kong: if all of us were to commit to paper our personal maps of Hong Kong, [they] would all look as different as snowflakes.” Suggest a single topic to your students—it can be something the class is currently studying, an upcoming event or holiday, or a topic you want them to consider, like healthy eating or conserving energy. Using paper, pencils, and colored pencils, students should map their ideas. When finished, ask students to share their mind maps. How do the results relate to Qiu’s statement? Ask students to discuss the similarities and differences among their mind maps.

• In addition to making work on his own, Qiu has also created work in collaboration with other artists, and offers workshops that invite participants to interact with works that have moveable parts. These collaborative maps are intended to invent new ways of understanding the world. Working in small groups, challenge students to select a theme and create a map that depicts the theme graphically. This will require quite a bit of discussion, planning, and revisions in preparation for transferring their preliminary drawing to a final draft.

• In China children are taught from a young age to appreciate and respect calligraphy. Schools provide at least one calligraphy lesson each week, and each student has his or her own box of calligraphy materials. The supplies needed to allow students to experiment with Chinese brush painting are widely available, and many instructive books and videos can provide students with a hands-on introduction to this enduring art form.
Born in 1962 in Shanghai, Ding Yi worked at a printing factory as a young man before graduating from the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts in 1983. His enduring method of incorporating crosses into his work emerged in the late 1980s. While still a student in the fine arts department at Shanghai University, he began a series of painting experiments titled Appearance of Crosses, in which he used x and + shapes as a recurring motif with the intention of merging painting and design into a single form of expression.

Appearance of Crosses 1991-3 (1991) is a representative work from this early stage in Ding’s artistic development that he refers to as his “phase of technical precision.” Before beginning to paint a work such as this, he would often use complex calculations in order to map out an underlying structure for the composition. In the painting process, he removed all texture from his brushwork, along with any meaning or emotion. He painted with unmixed paint, straight from the tube, and employed rulers, tape, and drafting pens to ensure the highest level of precision in his lines and colors, with the ultimate goal of achieving an effect akin to mechanical printing and industrial design.

By applying extremely rational design methods, Ding sought to “make painting that was not like painting,” and for the past thirty years he has relentlessly and exclusively created abstract paintings made of small cross shapes. The majority of his work features repetitions of the plus sign superimposed in different layers, colors, and rotations; the tiny, manually painted symbols cover the entire surface of large canvases, requiring a painstaking amount of precision and technical skill. Although Ding’s methods emphasize a rational approach to painting, to some he seems perfectly attuned to the industrial development of the urban environment in a rapidly changing Communist China.

It’s not my intention to do something that’s deliberately difficult. . . . The major challenge for me is to explore a new language with which to express myself, not to simplify the technique. —Ding Yi

[I] found it necessary to distance myself both from the burden of traditional Chinese culture and from the influence of early Western modernism, in order to go back to the starting point of art, in order to literally start from zero. —Ding Yi
VIEW + DISCUSS

▶ If showing this work in the classroom, try to project it at its actual size. Ask students for their initial responses to the work. How do they think it might have been made?

▶ Although Ding sees his work as a form of reflection and introspection and rejects narrative and representation in his practice, viewers have been known to layer associations onto his paintings. Depending on the colors, arrangement, and density of forms, his paintings may be evocative of rattan mats, woven fabrics, military camouflage, QR codes, mathematical symbols, or aerial views of his home city of Shanghai. Ask students if this painting reminds them of anything familiar. Create a list of associations students have with the work.

▶ It is hard to appreciate the various ways Ding has used the \( x \) and \( + \) forms by only looking at a single work. Search Google Images for a wide range of works that Ding has created over more than three decades of using these basic symbols. Ask students to discuss how Ding’s work has changed over the years. How does seeing more of his work alter the way they think about this single painting?

▶ Looking closely at Appearance of Crosses 1991-3, ask students to make a list of steps that Ding might have taken to create this work. Now watch “What’s Left to Appear,” a short video that shows Ding at work (http://www.timothytaylor.com/exhibitions/ding-yi-1/). How does watching the video change students’ response to his work?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

• Through the years, Ding has become more experimental with his compositional choices, but early on he strove to create paintings that appeared to be machine-made. Challenge students to create a small work by hand that could be mistaken for a work created mechanically. Once these works are complete, ask students to discuss their choices, process, and results. What was their rationale in making their selections of materials and composition? Was this assignment easier or harder than expected? After sharing their methods, ask students what, if any, changes they would make if they were to try the same assignment again.

• Just as Ding has become more experimental with his compositional choices, he has also experimented with many color palettes, from dark and neutral to bright, even fluorescent. Ask students to draw the same small, simple abstract composition on six different sheets of paper (or reproduce them on a photocopier), creating a different color palette for each. When all six are finished, ask students to discuss how changing the color palette changes the impact of each of these small works and their associations.

• Ding’s artwork is all about process and repetition of action. How is this kind of painting different from realist painting, which portrays real and typical contemporary subjects and situations with accuracy, or Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on spontaneous, automatic, or subconscious creation?
materialistic aspirations and an obsession with prosperity coexist in Asia with Buddhist traditions and beliefs in nonattachment to material goods.

In Precipitous Parturition (1999), Chen once again used found materials, weaving black rubber bicycle inner tubes, plastic toy cars, and bicycle parts into a 25-meter-long writhing dragon form. Inspired by a slogan proclaiming: “In 2000, 100 million Chinese people will possess their own cars. Welcome China to participate in the competition of our car industry!,” the work comments on China’s transition from a nation of bicycles into a nation of cars.

**CHEN ZHEN**

Born in 1955 in Shanghai to a family of doctors, Chen Zhen was a conceptual artist and sculptor who lived in Paris. Chen’s work explores the realities of the human body and the relationship between spirituality and modern capitalist culture.

In Fu Dao/Fu Dao, Upside-Down Buddha/Arrival at Good Fortune (1997), found objects, such as figurines, car parts, television sets, and electric fans are suspended from a pagoda-like structure that recalls a Buddhist sanctuary with a roof made of real bamboo. Chen was inspired by an upside-down fu (good fortune) sign he saw at a restaurant in Shanghai. At first puzzled by the sign, he came to understand that fu dao (fortune upside-down) is homophonous with fu dao (arrival of fortune). The signs are common during the Chinese New Year because they invite prosperity. Fu dao can also be understood as “upside-down Buddha,” which Chen interpreted literally by suspending Buddha figurines upside down.

The work questions “the relationship between nature, the Buddhist tradition, and the fast-paced proliferation of consumer products in Asia.” Chen was interested in how
VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: Chen Zhen, *Fu Dao/Fu Dao, Upside-Down Buddha/Arrival at Good Fortune*, 1997

- The objects in this work can be categorized into spiritual and non-spiritual objects, and natural and manufactured objects. Ask students to look carefully at the installation before sharing its title or any description of it. Ask them to make a list of all the materials they can see that are used in the piece and sort them into these four categories. Are there any objects that belong to more than one category, or do they all belong to opposing categories? What are some of the positive aspects of the coexistence of opposites?

- Chen said: “If something is acid you cross it with something sweet. This is a very Chinese way of contradiction, like yin and yang. The most exciting moment in my work is when there is suddenly a meeting between two things that were inactive before. It is about contrast, contradiction, and confrontation.”* What instances of contrast, contradiction, or confrontation are present in this work? What can we learn about Chinese society by looking at and discussing the relationships among the objects in this work?

Show: Chen Zhen, *Precipitous Parturition*, 1999

- Ask students to share their initial responses to this work. Which of its formal qualities—color, size, shape, and positioning—provoke and inform these perceptions?

- Ask students to compare *Fu Dao/Fu Dao, Upside-Down Buddha/Arrival at Good Fortune* and *Precipitous Parturition*. How are the works similar in use of materials, formal qualities, and concept? How are they different?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- In the artist’s own words, *Fu Dao/Fu Dao, Upside-Down Buddha/Arrival at Good Fortune* questions “the relationship between nature, the Buddhist tradition, and the fast-paced proliferation of consumer products in Asia.” Ask students to research the core tenets of Buddhism. Discuss how Buddhist values are in harmony or in conflict with the proliferation of consumerism and materialism.

- Ask students to research what the dragon symbolizes in the context of Chinese culture and history. How does the presence of bicycles and cars contrast with the traditional form and meaning of the dragon? Describe the opposing forces at play—past and present, modern and traditional, eternal symbols and fast-paced urbanization and economic growth. How does this image of contrasts reflect the state of China today? What are examples of contrasting conditions in our society that coexist?

- Both *Fu Dao/Fu Dao, Upside-Down Buddha/Arrival at Good Fortune* and *Precipitous Parturition* are site-specific installations, meaning they change depending on the museum, gallery, or site where they are installed. Ask students to choose one of the works and make a drawing of how it would look installed in a place other than the Guggenheim. How would it look if it were installed in a non-museum space? How would it look if it were installed outdoors? How does the meaning of the work change based on its surrounding context?
Artist, thinker, and activist Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957 and grew up in difficult circumstances. His father, the poet Ai Qing, was persecuted by the Chinese Communist government and exiled to a far western province. He was later hailed as a great national poet after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In 1981 Ai moved to New York, where he studied visual art and began working as an artist. He also developed a deep appreciation of Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades”—found objects of everyday use elevated to the status of art—and their implied critique of cultural value systems. In 1993, upon learning that his father was ill, he returned to China.

One of Ai’s most famous pieces, Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995), incorporates what Ai has called a “cultural readymade.” The work captures Ai as he drops a 2,000-year-old ceremonial urn, allowing it to smash to the floor at his feet. Not only did this artifact have considerable value, it also had symbolic and cultural worth. The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) is considered a defining period in the history of Chinese civilization, and to deliberately break an iconic form from that era is equivalent to tossing away an entire inheritance of cultural meaning about China. With this work, Ai began his ongoing use of antique readymade objects, demonstrating his questioning attitude toward how and by whom cultural values are created.

Some were outraged by this work, calling it an act of desecration. Ai countered by saying, “Chairman Mao used to tell us that we can only build a new world if we destroy the old one.” This statement refers to the widespread destruction of antiquities during China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and the instruction that in order to build a new society one must destroy the si jiu (Four Olds): old customs, habits, culture, and ideas. By dropping the urn, Ai lets go of the social and cultural structures that impart value.
VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: Ai Weiwei, Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995

► Ask students to describe what is happening in this work.

► Discuss the meaning of Ai’s statement regarding this work: “It’s powerful only because someone thinks it’s powerful and invests value in the object.”

► How has Ai used elements of shock and surprise in this work?

► These photographs of Ai dropping a 2,000-year-old Han dynasty urn capture a moment when tradition is challenged by new values. Some might view this act as pure vandalism, while others will see it as an artistic statement that challenges the status quo. Discuss and debate these questions with your students. Which aspects of tradition do they think should be preserved? Which traditions do they think should be reexamined and revised?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

• Several modern artists inspired Ai’s use of found or recycled objects from everyday life, including Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Jasper Johns (b. 1930), and Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Learn more about the work of each of these artists. What parallels can be drawn between Ai’s work and theirs?

• In order to create this work, the photographer shot several photos in rapid succession, and two urns, not one, were used because Ai’s photographer was unable to capture the first urn’s fall to the ground. The effect of these three photographs aligned in succession recalls stop-motion animation. Traditional stop-motion animation is a complicated, time-consuming process, but the emergence of free, automated software apps has made it something anyone can try. Ask students to experiment with capturing motion through a series of still photographs.

• Ai is able to call attention to social issues through his art. Ask students to identify an issue they feel strongly about. How might they create a work that calls attention to that issue?
Adapted from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition, unless otherwise noted.

**CHINESE HISTORY AND CULTURE**

**BUDDHISM**  
A religion of eastern and central Asia growing out of the teaching of Siddhārtha Gautama that suffering is inherent in life and that one can be liberated from it by cultivating wisdom, virtue, and concentration.

**CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY**  
A traditional form of writing with brush and ink on paper or silk that is prized along with ink painting as the greatest art form in China, Japan, and Korea.

**CULTURAL REVOLUTION (1966–76)**  
A radical social and political reform movement in China initiated by Mao Zedong in 1965 intended to eliminate “counterrevolutionary” elements in the government. It resulted in purges of artists and intellectuals and caused massive socioeconomic chaos.

**GLOBALIZATION**  
Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among people, companies, and governments of different nations, characterized by an international industrial and financial business structure. It is marked especially by the free flow of capital, labor, goods, and ideas. The term dates to 1989, near to the time when the Cold War ended and the Internet was invented, giving rise to a “borderless” world. The benefits of globalization include the global exchange of ideas and people, while the consequences include the rise of multinational corporations at the expense of poor countries.

**THE REFORM ERA**  
A series of reforms that began in 1978, led by statesman Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), which produced rapid economic growth, greater openness to the world, and lead to mass urbanization in China. Some observers have commented that the Reform Era compressed the 150-year period of Britain’s Industrial Revolution into thirty years of China’s modernization and industrialization.

**CONTEMPORARY ART**

**ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM**  
An artistic movement of the mid-twentieth century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing especially an artist’s liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and usually nonrepresentational means.

**CONCEPTUAL ART**  
Conceptual art is based on the notion that the essence of art is an idea, or concept, and may exist distinct from and even in the absence of an object as its representation. Conceptual art emerged at a time when both art institutions and the preciousness of the unique aesthetic object were being challenged by artists and critics.

**FOUND OBJECT**  
An object of everyday use, usually mass-produced, that artists re-use in a different context, collapsing the boundaries between high art and everyday life.

**INSTALLATION ART**  
A form of large-scale, three-dimensional art that is designed for a specific exhibition space. Installation art is often made of a range of found or fabricated materials that are assembled to create a specific environment.

**REALISM**  
The theory or practice of fidelity in art and literature to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization.
**BOOKS**


**AI WEIWEI**

Website: http://aiweiwei.com/

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**CHEN ZHEN**

Association Des Amis De Chen Zhen: https://www.chenzhen.org/

VTV Classics (r3): *Chen Zhen: The Body as Landscape at Kunsthalle Wien*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qGnVusiRNc

Chen Zhen “Fragments d’éternité”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqLNIxqX730

**DING YI**

What’s Left to Appear: http://www.timothytaylor.com/exhibitions/ding-yi-1/

Interview with Ding Yi on Chinese contemporary art in the 1980s: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUGOybx6_JM

**QIU ZHIJIE**

Art Wall: Qiu Zhijie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBRDaw9SmA

Biennale Arte 2015: Qiu Zhijie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mftkXaH6Wps

NOTES


8. Art and China after 1989, p. 120.

9. Ibid.


17. “An Interview with Chen Zhen,” in Chen Zhen, p. 16.


20. Ibid.


