

# AI WEI WEI, BO YUN, GAN SHAOCHENG, HUANG RUI, LI SHUANG, MA DESHENG, MAO LIZI, QU LEI LEI, SHAO FEI, WANG KEPING, YAN LI, YANG YIPING, YIN GUANGZHONG, ZHONG AHCHENG

## MEDITATION ON THE STARS

by Don J. Cohn



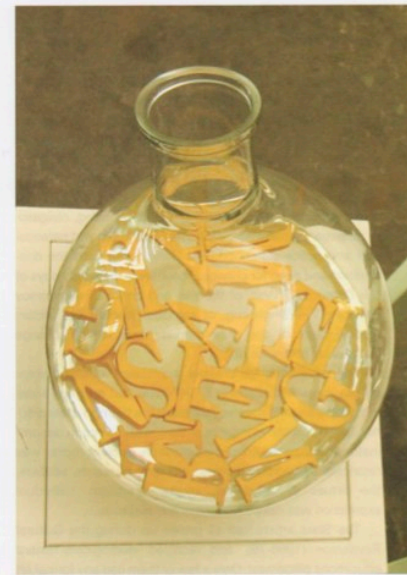
Beijing, 1979. Task: organize a downtown outdoor exhibition of over 100 works of art by more than 20 artists...without telephones (wired or mobile), faxes, internet, taxis or buses that operate after 8 pm. And without official permission. But with bicycles at bicycle speed.

The Stars group of painters, sculptors and poets who accomplished this task and went on to make history, had their start in post-Mao China 26 years ago.

That the loosely organized group—ranging from 13 to 31 members—could pull off this act of public defiance took grit, bravado and shrewdness. In addition to the communications and transportation deprivations described above, no one had any money—but there were very few goods to buy.

Opposite Left to Right ■ Ai Wei Wei ■ Wang Keping ■ Huang Rui





Clockwise from Top Left ■ Interior of Ai Wei Wei's studio (2004), Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong ■ Wang Keping peeking over his sculpture. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong ■ YANG YIPING - A WOMAN SOLDIER FROM 1970S (2001), Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm. Courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Clockwise from Top Left ■ Huang Rui's Studio. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong ■ YANG YIPING - WOMAN PORTRAIT (2002), Oil on canvas, 49 x 40 cm. Courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong ■ HUANG RUI - MADE IN CHINA (2003) Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong ■ WANG KEPING - UNTITLED 14 (2002), Thuya wood, 74 cm high. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.



#### STAR GAZER'S GUIDE

More than 30 artists participated in the three Stars exhibitions in Beijing in 1979 and 1980; the 14 listed below are generally regarded as the key members of the group.

**AI WEI WEI** (b. 1957) Son of Ai Qing (1910-96), major Chinese poet of the 1930s, politically rehabilitated in 1978. Self-taught as an artist. Learned from forbidden Western art books. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp. Participated in Stars exhibitions but not as an activist. Studied and lived in New York 1982-83. Explained return to Beijing: "I found it boring living there [New York]." Now inhabits a self-built home and studio, works as a conceptual artist, sculptor, author and arts entrepreneur. Architectural consultant for the 2008 Beijing

Olympics. Arguably the best-known and most successful Star.

**BO YUN** (b. 1948 Li Yongchun) Attended the middle school of the Central Academy of Fine Art and studied art history at the academy 1978-80. Works in ink, oils and mixed media. Addresses Chinese culture through traditional means of representation and abstraction. Teaches in Beijing.

**GAN SHAOCHENG** (1948-96) Gifted as painter and wrestler as a boy. Participated in Stars exhibitions and demonstration. Worked in Shenzhen in late 1980s. Produced oil paintings and large sculptures in wood and stone, the latter considered his finest works. Themes include landscapes, portraits and political subjects executed in a semi-

realistic mode, ill-fated life ended in a car accident in Beijing after heavy drinking.

**HUANG RUI** (b. 1952) Mainly self-taught painter and poet. Early works imitative of 20th-century Western genres. Art editor of important underground magazine *Jintian* (Today) in the late 1970s and key organizer of Stars exhibitions. Married a Japanese student in Beijing, moved to Osaka 1984. Returned to Beijing for art projects beginning in 1992. Now a moving force behind Factory 799 in Beijing, where he has his home and studio, producing conceptual works.

**LI SHUANG** (b. 1957) Daughter of two professors at Beijing's Qinghua/Tsinghua University. Sent to labor reform camp 1981-83 due to liaison with French diplo-

mat. Married 1983 and moved to Paris. Early work tinged with succès de scandale. Paintings and collages known for their decorative "prettiness."

**MA DESHENG** (b. 1952) Handicapped by polio as a child. Self-taught woodblock printmaker, oil painter, poet, novelist. Organizer of the Stars exhibitions. Moved to Switzerland in 1985, Paris in 1986, lived in New York 1989-92. A car accident in New York (1992) rendered him hemiplegic. Despite profound setbacks, continues his work as artist-poet in Paris.

**MAO LIZI** (b. 1950 Zhang Zhunli) Chinese People's Liberation Army set designer. Punished for participation in second Stars exhibition. To Paris in 1990, made career out of painting doors, walls,



Access to information from outside of China was strictly controlled. Possession of a Western art magazine not approved by the authorities could be a counter-revolutionary crime. All urban residents, including foreigners, had a dossier hanging over their heads, a veritable albatross. Keeping pets was illegal too. This was an exhausted, impoverished, inefficient post-revolutionary society, starved for novelty.

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping had just dethroned Mao's chosen successor Hua Guofeng. China was stuck in a Stalinist mold, with strict grain, protein and cloth rationing, obligatory propaganda meetings, a climate of paranoia and persecution and police-statehood. But Deng recognized the desperation and need for change. These were the heady days of the Democracy Wall, of the rise and arrest of democracy advocate Wei Jingsheng, of samizdat journals like *Jintian* (Today), and of the gray market in Foreign Exchange Certificates and renminbi.

The conditions for creative expression in China were equally grim. Mao Zedong's 1940s line that art must serve the people and the masses facilitated the triumph of mediocrity. Setting artistic standards at the lowest common denominator poisoned the artistic imagination. Subject matter was restricted to socialist themes: workers, peasants, soldiers, the virtues of self-denial, loyalty, patriotism. Individual expression was risky. There were few surprises.

The Stars artists had all grown up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and received ideologically-tainted educations piecemeal. Only a few of them had any formal art

training, and that was based on rigid Soviet models; in fact, no Stars displayed the technical virtuosity in oil painting that so readily—and painlessly—brought the next generation of Chinese artists to the attention of the overseas art world. In the late 1970s, the West was just beginning to fall madly in love with China. Deng Xiaoping appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine as Man of the Year in 1978. Joseph Stalin had made it there in 1942.

#### THE STARS MAY HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT NAÏVE AND HOMESPUN AS ARTISTS, BUT THEY WERE SOPHISTICATED IN THE WAYS OF CHINA, AND WITH FOREIGN COOPERATION, CAPITALIZED ON THEIR DISSIDENCE.

Thanks to Deng's open-door policy—which facilitated both the entry of dirty "flies" and other forms of spiritual pollution and the exit of outspoken bourgeoisie liberals and other inconveniences to the regime—an ancient social code was, for two or three years, turned on its head; foreigners were king. Chinese served their needs, mostly cultural and social, sometimes personal. In this system of inverted apartheid, a foreign face guaranteed carte blanche entry into areas of Chinese society that were just being created or reconstituted by the new openness, while a Chinese taken under a foreign wing obtained temporary immunity from persecution. Keystone-cop surveillance of "international relations" kept most participants in line and on their toes.

While contact with foreigners was risky for Chinese, it was also ripe with opportunity. Cultural attachés, journalists,

Chinese graffiti in oils. Now works as an interior decorator and real estate trader in Beijing, runs fusion restaurant in Factory 799, where his paintings provide the décor.

**OU LEI LEI** (b. 1951) Son of Chinese novelist Qu Po. Trained in traditional Chinese ink painting. Active in Stars exhibitions. Early works gently distort the human figure. Moved to England in 1985, where he teaches and works in Chinese ink painting, calligraphy, photography, collage and oils.

**SHAO FEI** (b. 1954) Daughter of professor in the oil painting department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Army artist 1970-76, yet had no formal training. Studied at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1976. Moved to Europe in

1987 with her husband, the noted "misty" poet Bei Dao (Chen Maiping, founder of *Jintian*), returned to China 1989, works and travels in the US and Europe since the mid 1990s. Plays on native Chinese themes, Buddhism, feminism, mythology in a Matisse-like manner.

**WANG KEPING** (b. 1949) Originally a script writer for Beijing Television. Self-taught wood sculptor of moving political images, perhaps the most iconic of the Stars. Moved to France 1984. Recent work deals with the female figure, sexuality and gender.

**YAN LI** (b. 1954) Only five years of formal education, self-taught as artist, poet and novelist, with greatest accomplishments in the latter two genres. Moved to the US in 1985 on an

artist/extraordinary talent visa. Writings banned in China, 1995-99. Operates the Chinese-language poetry website, www.yihang.net. Lives in New York and Shanghai.

**YANG YIPING** (b. 1947) Studied drawing at Children's Palace 1962-65. Served in the army 1966-70, won Communist Youth League prize for a propaganda picture. Works in oils in a nostalgic and realist mode with themes related to daily life in China. Lives in Beijing, still producing melancholic monochromatic paintings.

**YIN GUANGZHONG** (b. 1945) Untrained artist from impoverished Guizhou province in southwest China. Draws on folkloric themes in his clay sculptures and shaman masks; also works in oils

and prints. In later works turned to the Chinese written language as source of ideas. Visited Europe but lives in China. Little known outside of China.

**ZHONG ANCHENG** (b. 1949) Son of film critic Zhong Dianfei. Spent 1968-78 working on farms in rural China. Gifted novelist, calligrapher, draughtsman, photographer. Several of his novels were combined to make the film *The King of Children* directed by Chen Kaige and premiered at Cannes in 1988. Moved to the US in the late 1980s.



traders and "foreign experts" hosted artsy salons for their Chinese discoveries in the comfort of their gated and guarded ghettos, as there were few other forms of evening and weekend entertainment available in the culturally barren capital then called Peking.

Both sides benefited. Foreigners gained status by becoming connoisseurs of art and Chinese talent, while the Chinese got the goods: money, passports and visas. By 1989, at least nine of the original Stars were living or working outside of China.

In varying configurations of membership, the Stars held only three exhibitions in Beijing. The first show that took place outdoors in a small park next to the prestigious China National Museum of Fine Arts (Meishuguan) in Beijing on September 27, 1979 without official approval, was shut down by the police on the third day. The Stars then held a protest march on Chinese National Day, October 1, beginning at the famous Beijing Democracy Wall. This resulted in their obtaining permission to hold the first official Stars exhibition in Beihai Park, November 23-December 2, with 23 artists and 170 works.

The following summer, 12 artists (see above) formally registered as the "Stars Painters Society," held an exhibition in the China National Museum of Fine Arts, with 130 works by 31 artists. In vetting the works for this show, Jiang Feng, one of the gallery's directors, was broadminded in his selection, but red-lighted Wang Keping's provocative sculpture of Chairman Mao entitled *The Idol*. As Stars member Zhong

Ahcheng wrote in a memoir of the period: "But *The Idol* was shown at the exhibition after all. In my opinion, *The Idol* is the first true work of art that takes Chairman Mao as its subject matter." Seven years earlier, however, Andy Warhol had produced thousands of silkscreen prints of the then still-breathing Chairman.

The museum show was the last Stars exhibition in China, and the group formally disbanded soon after to follow their own rising trajectories. In 1989, a core group of Beijing-based artists, along with Yin Guanzhong from Guizhou, were canonized for posterity as the Stars with a thorough retrospective exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Organized by Tsong-zung Chang of Hanart 2 Gallery, the show traveled that year to Taipei, Dunkerque and Paris, a wry footnote to the events of June 4, 1989 in Beijing.

The Stars contributed a new form of public discourse to the arts in China. Breaking with the bureaucratic system of approval, control, censorship and supervision, they chose their own works and produced them outside the conventional channels of the official art academies. They paved the way for several succeeding generations of artists in China, blurring the line between official and unofficial, between Chinese and foreign, and set into motion a flood of artistic activity that continues unabated today with minimal government interference. Young artists in China today can hardly imagine the conditions under which the Stars—the first avant-garde cultural movement in the history of the People's Republic of China—lived and worked. **END**

Left ■ Young female militia parade in Tiananmen Square, circa 1978. Photo NCNA.  
Right ■ People's Liberation Army soldier denouncing Confucius, circa 1974. Photo NCNA.

Left ■ Trial of Chinese pro-democracy activist Wei Jingsheng, 1979. Photo NCNA.  
Right ■ Hua Guofeng dancing in Tiananmen Square with Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu and friends, circa 1978. Photo NCNA.