

The Influence of Robert Rauschenberg on the Chinese Art World: From “ROCI China” to the Awakening of Contemporary Chinese Art

Huang Xiao

(International Art College, Krirk University, Bangkok, Thailand)

Abstract: Robert Rauschenberg not only established himself as a vanguard figure in the global art scene but also left a profound and lasting impact on the development of contemporary Chinese art. Through the “ROCI China” exhibition, Rauschenberg facilitated a dialogue between the essence of Western modernism and China’s rich cultural traditions, offering Chinese artists a unique opportunity to transcend conventional boundaries and explore new artistic languages. Particularly, his advocacy for practices such as ready-mades, collage, and installation art not only dismantled the boundary between art and life but also ignited a wave of innovative thinking among Chinese artists concerning form, material, and expression. Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy prompted a critical reevaluation of the definitions and boundaries of art within the Chinese art world, contributing significantly to the “85 New Wave” movement and the subsequent awakening of contemporary Chinese art. Many artists, influenced by Rauschenberg’s focus on “chance/contingency” and the use of “everyday objects”, began to boldly experiment with novel modes of artistic expression, deconstructing traditional artistic languages while incorporating social and cultural critique. In the works created by these artists, we not only witness the absorption and transformation of Western modernist influences but also observe the independent exploration of Chinese contemporary artists within the context of globalization. Through Rauschenberg’s artistic impact, Chinese contemporary art embraced a more diversified and open creative direction, blending traditional artistic forms with the challenges of modern society, and constructing a multidimensional artistic world. Whether in the sculptural works of Sui Jianguo (隋建国) or the politically charged critiques of the “Red Humor” group, these creations, inspired by Rauschenberg’s art, exhibit a powerful individuality and artistic breakthrough. The artistic exchange fostered through the “ROCI China” exhibition not only bridged the gap between Eastern and Western cultures but also provided new possibilities and directions for the development of contemporary Chinese art.

Keywords: Robert Rauschenberg; “ROCI China”; Cross-cultural Communication; Multidimensional Exploration; Aestheticization of Everyday Life

1. Introduction

Robert Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy is renowned for its boundary-defying approach, wherein his works seamlessly integrate painting and sculpture, while also incorporating elements such as quotidian objects, advertising slogans, and cultural symbols, thereby constructing a distinctive visual lexicon. As the initiator of the “ROCI” project, Rauschenberg championed the transcendence of artistic boundaries, fostering global cultural exchange and interaction. The “ROCI China” exhibition, as a pivotal component of this initiative, not only encapsulated the essence of Western modern art but also embodied Rauschenberg’s pursuit of cultural diversity and international understanding.

2. The Genesis of the “ROCI” Project and the Tremendous Impact of the “ROCI China” Exhibition on the Chinese Art Scene

In the summer of 1982, Robert Rauschenberg visited China, a three-week journey that not only served as an exploration of his personal artistic practice but also laid the groundwork for the conception and implementation of the “Robert Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange” (ROCI) program (1984-1991). In pursuit of this dynamic and mobile artistic creation and exhibition project, Rauschenberg left the United States and subsequently visited ten countries. Through extensive material collection, photographic endeavors, and engagement with local artisans, he amassed a rich repository of global artistic resources, while also showcasing his own works. This cross-cultural artistic exchange not only demonstrated Rauschenberg’s profound commitment to cultural pluralism but also pioneered new pathways for international artistic interaction and collaboration. In 1985, Rauschenberg returned to Beijing and held an exhibition titled “ROCI China” at the National Art Museum of China, further fortifying Sino-American artistic exchanges and cooperation. This exhibition marked a significant milestone in his global artistic practice, stirring an immense response in China, and can be regarded as the first truly profound encounter between Chinese and Western contemporary art.



Figure 1: Rauschenberg working on "The 1/4 Mile" or "2 Furlong Piece" (1981 – 98) in his Laika Lane studio, Captiva, Florida, ca. 1983.

Photo: Attributed to Terry Van Brunt.

Website link: <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/news/rauschenberg-china-14-mile-or-2-furlong-piece-travel-nearly-7000-miles-be-exhibited-beijing>

As a representative figure of Pop Art, Robert Rauschenberg's works introduced Chinese audiences -- who were then still ensconced in an art scene largely isolated from global developments -- to a completely new artistic perspective. At that time, traditional realist styles still dominated the Chinese art world, while Western modern art, particularly Pop and Dada, remained largely unfamiliar. Rauschenberg's exhibition not only challenged the conventional aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese viewers but also provided a significant catalyst for the emergence of contemporary Chinese art. For the Chinese art scene, Rauschenberg's works presented an entirely novel artistic language, one that was both foreign and fraught

with challenges. Particularly his use of ready-mades, installation art, and collage -- forms nearly unheard of in China at the time -- struck a profound, albeit bewildering, resonance. On one hand, these works sparked confusion and skepticism, with many artists questioning, "Can this truly be considered art?" On the other hand, these very doubts became a critical turning point in the aesthetic awakening of Chinese audiences.

The renowned Chinese art critic and curator Li Xianting (栗宪庭) wrote a dedicated essay titled "Robert Rauschenberg and the Historical Opportunity for Chinese Modern Art", in which he noted: "For Chinese audiences, who had been immersed in over seventy years of realist aesthetic education, Robert Rauschenberg's solo exhibition undoubtedly brought a profound shock to the Chinese art world. Whether it was packaging boxes, taxidermy animals, or installation art and ready-mades, each of Rauschenberg's works left most Chinese viewers bewildered. Indeed, a significant number of artists, when confronted with Rauschenberg's works, also experienced a deep sense of confusion. The significance of this uncertainty lies in the fact that Rauschenberg's art prompted Chinese audiences to reflect upon the very definition of art, opening them to a completely new understanding of artistic form. At the very least, Chinese viewers became aware, for the first time, that art could be so diverse and open. Of course, and most crucially, Rauschenberg's works played a catalytic role in the burgeoning Chinese modern art movement of the time. They afforded the younger generation of Chinese artists their first direct encounter with the authentic practices of Western Dadaism and its postmodern artistic counterparts. In the historical trajectory of Chinese modern art, Rauschenberg's exhibition undoubtedly represented a timely and pivotal historical opportunity."

As Li Xianting (栗宪庭) aptly noted, Rauschenberg's artistic practice not only had a profound impact on Chinese art audiences but also triggered a fundamental rethinking of the very essence of "art". The diversity and subversiveness of his works compelled viewers to transcend traditional aesthetic frameworks and explore the boundaries and possibilities of artistic expression. Within this cultural context, the creative freedom of young Chinese artists was significantly expanded; they were no longer confined by the constraints of traditional realism, but instead, boldly ventured into diverse and deconstructive artistic forms. Rauschenberg's works provided crucial insights and models for this artistic transformation, igniting a wave of innovative vitality in the creation of Chinese contemporary art.

3. The Direct Impact of Robert Rauschenberg on Contemporary Chinese Artists and Art Practice

Robert Rauschenberg served as a pivotal conduit between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, with his oeuvre frequently incorporating collage, found objects, imagery, and an array of non-traditional materials. In doing so, he pioneered an artistic direction that sought to move away from abstraction and purity, embracing a more expansive, inclusive approach to artistic expression. His creative methodology blurred the lines between quotidian objects and the artistic process, dismantling the constraints of conventional materials and techniques, thereby allowing viewers to re-evaluate the meaning and form of artworks from a radically novel perspective. For Rauschenberg, art should not be confined to the lofty precincts of the ivory tower but should engage directly with everyday life and societal realities. He championed the role of "contingency" and "randomness" within art, believing that these elements infused his works with a renewed vitality and dynamism.

In Rauschenberg's works, art transcends mere formal expression or visual impact; it becomes a reflection and deconstruction of the real world. Through the use of collage and found objects, Rauschenberg dismantles the barriers between "art" and "life", advocating for a more open and pluralistic form of artistic expression. This philosophy is a direct response to the increasingly complex and fragmented cultural phenomena of modern society, and is intricately linked to the social upheavals and cultural collisions of the 1960s.

Robert Rauschenberg's artistic philosophy and creative practice have had a profound influence on a generation of young Chinese artists, particularly in the realms of ready-mades, collage, and installation art.

His emphasis on these forms significantly expanded the creative boundaries for Chinese artists in terms of both form and material usage. Through his innovative application of non-traditional materials and his reinvention of artistic forms, Rauschenberg encouraged Chinese artists to boldly integrate elements of Western modernist art into their own works. Prominent artists such as Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专), Sui Jianguo (隋建国), Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚), and Ye Yongqing (叶永青) have incorporated and transformed these Western artistic languages within their practices, thereby driving the diversification and modernization of Chinese contemporary art.

Particularly within the context of the “85 New Wave” art movement, Rauschenberg’s influence was profoundly significant. During this movement, Chinese artists not only exhibited a critical engagement with traditional artistic forms in response to Rauschenberg’s artistic inspiration, but they also actively sought out new artistic languages and modes of expression. Through his innovations with ready-mades and collage techniques, Rauschenberg endowed his artworks with multiple layers of symbolic significance and cultural connotations, thereby facilitating the liberation of artistic creation from the constraints of traditional techniques and subjects. His work provided crucial theoretical support and practical pathways for Chinese artists, empowering them to freely traverse the boundaries of form and content as they explored personalized artistic expressions.

3.1 Sui Jianguo (隋建国): An Artistic Exploration Across Cultures and Eras

Sui Jianguo (隋建国), a towering figure in contemporary Chinese sculpture, has profoundly impacted the methods of creation and the artistic concepts within modern sculpture through his unique artistic language and striking visual impact. From his early iconic work “Hygienic Portrait” (卫生肖像) to his subsequent creations such as “Earth Hangers” (地罌) and “Celebration” (庆典), Sui Jianguo (隋建国) has consistently navigated the vast expanse of artistic territory, constantly exploring and breaking through boundaries. His pursuit of innovation is not only evident in his techniques and materials but also in his profound engagement with social, cultural, and philosophical reflections, which together construct a new temple of art. His creative trajectory unfolds like a tumultuous river, marked by challenges to traditional art forms and a deep introspection of modern society. His works transcend mere sculptural forms, serving as vessels imbued with rich cultural symbolism and philosophical inquiry. Each piece acts as a window, through which we are afforded a glimpse into the complexity of contemporary society and the profound depths of the human psyche.

Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) artistic practice has been profoundly influenced by Western modern art, particularly by the installation art movement pioneered by Robert Rauschenberg, which has become a significant reference point in his own artistic exploration. Rauschenberg’s works, with their emphasis on spontaneity, materiality, and the ingenious use of “ready-mades”, completely dismantled the constraints of traditional artistic forms, liberating art from the confines of two-dimensional canvases and three-dimensional sculptures to enter a new, multidimensional artistic realm. Through the juxtaposition and collision of everyday objects, he breathed new life and meaning into these materials, forging a creative path that transcended traditional boundaries. Sui Jianguo (隋建国) has often remarked on the profound impact Rauschenberg’s art had on him, particularly the serendipitous encounters between imagery, objects, and visuals, the interweaving of materials and forms, and the emotional tension evoked by these elements. It is within this conceptual framework that Sui Jianguo (隋建国) began to critically reassess sculpture as a traditional art form, endeavoring to create entirely new works through the combination of diverse materials, abstract expressive techniques, and a profound dissection of societal issues.

Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) “Hygienic Portrait” (卫生肖像) series materializes the essence of this artistic movement. Through the display of fragmented plaster heads supported by a row of iron rods, he acutely manifests both the materiality and symbolism inherent in sculpture. Each plaster head is marked by cracks, absences, and distortions, with facial features nearly obliterated, evoking the sense of a silent cemetery.

The heads are swathed in gauze, seemingly concealing some unhealable wound, yet this covering fails to mask the profound sense of fragmentation and emptiness that pervades the interior of each bust. The visual impact of this work arises from the stark opposition and collision between the form of the sculpture and its materials—conveying both the universality of human emotional trauma and the existential themes of spiritual emptiness and the fragility of life that individuals face in modern society. While each plaster head appears identical, each bears its own distinctive characteristics, and this combination of repetition and variation lends the entire series a powerful emotional resonance. Through his masterful manipulation of materials, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) allows every crack, every twist of gauze to silently narrate the pain and helplessness embedded within the human psyche.



Figure 2: “Hygienic Portrait” (卫生肖像, 1987-1989) by Sui Jianguo (隋建国)

Website Link: <https://www.trueart.com/news/731628.html>

“Hygienic Portrait” (卫生肖像) is not merely a formal shock; it is an emotional jolt. Every fractured line, every contorted form seems to transmit a profound philosophical reflection. These damaged plaster heads, while losing their facial features and individualized characteristics, paradoxically become more figurative, as if embodying the universal suffering and wounds of humanity. Through this minimalist sculptural language, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) closely links the emotional trauma of the individual with the broader context of social history, transforming the work into not just a visual object, but a spiritual symbol. This series of works demonstrates Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) profound exploration of themes such as life, death, suffering, and emptiness, compelling the viewer to confront, in the face of these fragments and deficiencies, an unavoidable impact on the depths of the soul, invoking reflection and introspection.

In a dialogue with “Hygienic Portrait” (卫生肖像), Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) “Earth Hangers” (地罍) stands as another profoundly symbolic work. This piece continues the artist’s innovative exploration of the relationship between sculpture and space, with each detail reflecting a deep reflection on the complex interplay between society and the individual. “Earth Hangers” (地罍) employs the traditional technique of kintsugi, using metal nails to reassemble shattered objects. This act of “repair” transcends mere restoration; it signifies a re-creation of the broken, expressing both nostalgia for the past and an ongoing emphasis on trauma. Amidst the interwoven metal nails and iron sheets, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) offers a

profound visual representation of societal fractures, historical wounds, and the internal conflicts of the individual. The use of kintsugi not only constitutes a reimagining of a traditional technique but also serves as a metaphor for the pathological state of contemporary society. Each nail, each piece of metal, silently narrates a story of the past and present, of suffering and healing, of loss and rebirth.

The visual effect of “Earth Hangers” (地罟) creates a spatial experience that simultaneously embodies both “homogeneity and fragmentation”, a tension between these opposing forces. Through the meticulous arrangement of materials and spatial composition, the artist transcends the traditional boundaries of form and space in sculpture, compelling the viewer to engage in a perceptual encounter that is at once familiar and alien. Behind these fragmented and reassembled objects lies a profound critique of societal production methods, consumption patterns, and the emotional states of humanity. With this work, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) offers a deep reflection on the fracturing of modern society, allowing these once isolated objects and fragments to regain new life and meaning within a transformed artistic context. This act of “repair” not only imbues the work with heightened emotional tension but also forces the viewer to confront the inescapable fractures that exist between society, history, and the self.

In contrast to “Hygienic Portrait” (卫生肖像) and “Earth Hangers” (地罟), another of Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) works, “Celebration” (庆典), engages with a distinct artistic strategy. By collecting and repurposing teaching models of the human form from various eras at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) breaks the conventional techniques and forms that traditional sculpture has long adhered to. He places these instructional sculptures against the weathered walls of the campus and applies a simple coat of paint, effecting a remarkable transformation in the viewer’s perception. These sculptures cease to function merely as pedagogical models and instead become “ready-mades” that prompt reflection on history and society, imbued with the artist’s profound critique of contemporary social change, consumer culture, and the educational system. Through this artistic maneuver, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) not only breathes new life into these traditional sculptures but also transforms them into symbols of the spirit of the times. In “Celebration” (庆典), the clash between the normative conventions of traditional sculpture and the fragmented context of contemporary society allows Sui Jianguo (隋建国) to redefine the very essence of sculpture. In so doing, he revitalizes traditional art within the context of the modern era. These works function as mirrors, reflecting the artist’s inner emotional landscape and his profound insight into modern society. Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) artistic practice is not merely a formal breakthrough; it is a process of healing and repair for his own inner wounds. As expressed in “Earth Hangers” (地罟), his creative endeavors are not solely about the union of material and form, but also about the restoration and sublimation of the spirit and emotions. Each piece stands as a testament to his inner struggles and rebirth, with art serving as a means for him to express himself, mend his wounds, and seek spiritual tranquility.

Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) artistic language synthesizes the essence of both Eastern and Western cultures. Through a “reverse interpretation” of Western modern art, particularly Robert Rauschenberg’s use of ready-mades, combined with the philosophical principles of Chinese Zen, he has created an artistic language imbued with profound philosophical significance. His creative practice goes beyond mere experimentation with technique and materials; it is a profound reflection on social, cultural, and historical dimensions. Through these works, Sui Jianguo (隋建国) not only showcases the materiality and technicality of art but also conveys a powerful spiritual force and intellectual depth through the integration of form and content.

In Sui Jianguo’s (隋建国) works, one can observe that his artistic practice draws not only on the elements of Western modern art in terms of technique and materials, but also in his creative methodology, where he attempts to transcend the constraints of traditional artistic forms. He pioneers a new artistic language that carries the weight of Eastern philosophical thought. This language utilizes modern technology, while also incorporating the meditative spirit and aesthetic elements of Eastern traditions in a flexible and inventive manner.

Sui Jianguo (隋建国) himself once stated, “The impact of Robert Rauschenberg’s work on me was profound. The chance encounters of images, objects, or materials in his work, and his deliberate

avoidance of meaning, metaphor, and symbolic relationships between them, significantly reduced the logical cohesion of materials and forms. It was along the lines of Robert Rauschenberg's work that I began to understand the cultural and artistic currents of John Cage, Black Mountain College, and others. In fact, it was also a reverse process of understanding Chinese Zen. By 'reverse' I mean a process that moves from Pop art, Robert Rauschenberg, Black Mountain College, John Cage, and D.T. Suzuki's Zen to the reverse interpretation of Chinese Zen. This process is conducive to understanding how concepts traverse between different civilizations or cultural circles—misreading, extreme interpretations, and their subsequent transformation into new cultural and artistic energies."

Indeed, Sui Jianguo's (隋建国) artistic creation is a journey of exploration and understanding of Chinese Zen philosophy through a "reverse interpretation" of Western modern art. This cross-cultural exchange and collision of ideas not only result in a rich diversity of forms but also lead to unique explorations in intellectual depth.

3.2 Red, White & Black: Another Kind of "Red Humor"

Li Xianting (栗宪庭) has pointed out that Rauschenberg's artistic philosophy directly influenced the formation and development of several important artistic collectives within contemporary Chinese art, particularly the emergence of groups such as the Xiamen Dada, the "Red Humor" group in Hangzhou, and the Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition. The works of these collectives clearly exhibit artistic characteristics that resonate with the cultural symbols, political implications, and attention to the minutiae of everyday life found in Rauschenberg's art. For example, the "Red Humor" group, led by Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专), used a significant amount of red, black, and white in their work "Red, White & Black" (红白黑), making their artwork not only a reflection on the trivialities of daily life but also a form of violent visual expression. The choice of these visual symbols bears an intrinsic connection to Rauschenberg's concept of "chaos and disorder" and the use of "everyday objects" in his assemblage art. More importantly, the artistic methodology employed by the "Red Humor" group aligns closely with Rauschenberg's experimental works in their stance of rebellion against traditional artistic notions.

It is particularly noteworthy that Li Xianting (栗宪庭) provides a profound analysis of the fusion of Dadaism and Pop Art within the works of the "Red Humor" group. The group's works not only continue the rebellious spirit of Dada art, but also gravitate towards the formal qualities of Pop Art, presenting a "Pop" style imbued with strong political critique. Works such as "Red, White & Black" (红白黑) by Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专), Ni Haifeng (倪海峰) and Ma Haizhou (马海舟) artistically recontextualize the sloganistic and grandiose visual style prevalent during the Cultural Revolution. Through this extreme formalism and symbolic language, they aim to reflect the irony of everyday trivialities and criticize the extreme political atmosphere within society. This creative approach, as Li Xianting (栗宪庭) suggests, produces a form of "heterogeneous isomorphism" with the consumer culture of Western Pop Art: on the one hand, the works of the "Red Humor" group exude strong revolutionary and violent colors; on the other hand, they exist in stark opposition to the warmth and humor that characterize Western consumer culture, creating an ironic and humorous relationship between the two.

This analysis of "heterogeneous isomorphism" not only provides a new perspective for understanding, but also suggests that by comparing contemporary Chinese art with Western consumer culture and the political context in which Western art is situated, we can more effectively unveil the socio-cultural backdrop underlying the works. The humor presented here is not merely a superficial jest or lightness of form; rather, it is expressed through extreme colors and symbols that reflect the clash and fusion of two cultural systems, thereby offering a profound reflection on the intrinsic relationship between them.

Even as the second decade of the 21st century unfolds, viewers—particularly those familiar with the bloody history of the Cultural Revolution—are still profoundly shaken when they revisit "Red, White & Black" (红白黑), a spatial installation art piece. In light of Li Xianting's (栗宪庭) observations, we can further analyze the highly charged aesthetic experience, the visceral effects of its timely relevance, and

the distant yet resonant echoes of history embedded in the work. The exhibition space seems to be consumed, as the entire gallery is overwhelmingly dominated by a red scene, with the color red visually creating an intense sense of oppression, as though it threatens to engulf everything. Black, like the nightfall, casts a heavy, inescapable shroud over it, evoking a sense of unavoidable gravity. White, occupying a mere 5% of the space, acts as a cold blade, slicing through the suffocating atmosphere and immediately directing the viewer's gaze and emotions to the heart of the piece. The extreme contrast and collision of these three colors construct an emotional experience that is both solemn and grotesquely absurd.



Figure 3: “Red, White & Black” (红白黑, 1986) by the “Red Humor” group

Website Link: https://www.douban.com/note/536323096/?_i=5455137QZoW66L

In the overall composition of “Red, White & Black” (红白黑), the selection of color proportions is by no means incidental. Red, occupying a dominant 70% of the space, aptly reflects the extreme political symbols that pervaded society and daily life during the “Cultural Revolution”. The ubiquity and overwhelming nature of red resemble a force within the historical torrent, devouring the thoughts and speech of individuals, thereby erasing any opposing voices. Here, red is not merely a visual element; it functions as a symbol of history, embodying violent political fervor and a stifling emotional atmosphere. Upon entering the exhibition space, viewers are almost enveloped by a powerful current of red, with its pulsating and undulating waves seemingly stirring the sensory nerves at all times, creating a profound emotional impact.

Relative to other colors, black exists like a profound void punctuating the night sky, imbued with a sense of oppressive stillness. This stillness is not merely a matter of color's inherent coldness but also serves as a metaphor for the unspeakable pain and oppression embedded within history. As a symbol, black is often imbued with meanings of negation, suppression, and death, enveloping the entire work in an inescapable shadow, as though offering a profound questioning and reflection on the past. In contrast, white, though a seemingly insignificant 5%, does not thereby appear weak. Instead, it functions like a sharp blade, disrupting the monochromatic harmony of red and black, introducing a sudden equilibrium to the visual composition. White is not simply an ornamental accent; through its icy simplicity, it grants the

viewer a moment of respite. However, this respite is not one of complete liberation. The presence of white may be understood as a cold, detached response to suffering and a chilling, impartial scrutiny of history.

Another significant characteristic of “Red, White & Black” (红白黑) is the artist’s direct reference to and subversion of the *dazibao* (big-character posters) form prevalent during the Cultural Revolution. In the exhibition, the artists have utilized the *dazibao* (big-character posters) format to inscribe various statements, encompassing philosophical, quotidian, and journalistic content. The selection of these themes and the employment of this specific form clearly transcend a mere formalistic reproduction, instead constituting a profound reconfiguration and recreation of historical consciousness and cultural symbols. As a politically charged visual language, the *dazibao* (big-character posters) served as one of the most emblematic symbols of the Cultural Revolution, bearing immense historical significance. It functioned simultaneously as a tool of power and a manifestation of violence, a medium through which visual and linguistic control were intricately interwoven. During the Cultural Revolution, the *dazibao* (big-character posters) was not only a means of transmitting political ideology but also a vessel for the spiritual destruction and cultural reconstitution of the individual. By reintroducing this form, the artists are, in effect, reexamining this historical legacy, while simultaneously questioning and challenging the power structures and ideological forces that underpin this linguistic symbol.

However, the utilization of this form by Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专) and others is not a mere nostalgia or a direct restoration of history, but rather an approach imbued with a subversive and self-mocking irony. Through the *dazibao* (big-character posters) format, the artists not only highlight the unique aesthetic of Chinese characters but also enable these politically charged linguistic symbols to acquire a more complex interpretative space within a new artistic context. The political context and social oppression conveyed by the *dazibao* (big-character posters), when filtered through the artists’ hands, seem to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, reemerging before the audience. Here, the text is no longer merely a vehicle for political propaganda; it becomes a profound reflection on culture, history, society, and even individual identity.

“Red, White & Black” (红白黑) is not only politically charged in its formal aspects, but it also presents the unique allure of Chinese characters within visual art through the aesthetics of linguistic symbols. The artists, through their exploration and innovation in the writing of Chinese characters, elevate them beyond their mere function as vehicles for information transmission, integrating them as aesthetic symbols into the broader artistic creation. The act of writing Chinese characters, particularly those displayed in the *dazibao*, whether in the precise regular script or the more impetuous cursive script, bears a distinct historical imprint. Their form, structure, rhythm, and cadence are imbued with a deep historical sensibility. This sensibility, in conjunction with the meanings carried by the characters, creates a mutual reflection between the characters’ content and their emotional resonance, allowing the Chinese characters in “Red, White & Black” (红白黑) to transcend their role as mere symbols and transform into an “aesthetic experience” within the artistic composition.

More importantly, the artists, through this mode of writing, seek to achieve a dual realization of both cognitive and aesthetic value. In the exhibition, the audience is not only impacted by the visual sensation of color and the arrangement of text, but is also prompted to engage in a deeper level of reflection through the interpretation of Chinese characters as cultural symbols. To some extent, these works are not solely the creations of the artists; they also challenge the cognitive processes of the viewers. Upon encountering these works, the audience is first struck by the impact of color and form, and subsequently, through a more in-depth reading of the text, their cognitive engagement deepens, ultimately leading to a profound historical awareness and cultural identification. Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专) and his collaborators’ creations, therefore, operate within this dual cultural and historical dimension, eliciting a renewed value of Chinese characters in contemporary art.

The artistic value of “Red, White & Black” (红白黑) lies not only in its formal avant-garde nature but also in the profound historical significance it carries. As China’s first art exhibition centered around Chinese characters, its emergence signifies a pivotal breakthrough in Chinese contemporary art. This

breakthrough is not merely a challenge to artistic forms but also a profound reflection on the contemporary social, historical, and cultural landscape of China. The historical consciousness exhibited by Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专) and his collaborators reveals an acute awareness of past painful experiences, as well as a deep concern for the future trajectory of society. As an artistic work, “Red, White & Black” (红白黑) is not solely a visual impact; it also serves as a profound reflection on history, culture, and societal transformation.

The avant-garde nature of art lies not only in the innovation of its visual language but also in its capacity to provoke emotional and intellectual shock and reflection in the viewer. Through the intertwining of form and content, the artists have successfully imbued the work with the depth of history, the complexity of politics, and the multidimensionality of culture, rendering “Red, White & Black” (红白黑) a unique narrative of China’s social and historical landscape. This narrative is not merely an innovation in artistic language; it is also a reflection of historical and societal transformation, a conscious reckoning with the past, and a powerful call to the future.

Thus, it is evident that, akin to Sui Jianguo (隋建国), a group of Chinese contemporary artists, including Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专), have drawn inspiration from Robert Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy, techniques, and forms, demonstrating profound creativity and a unique spirit of reinterpretation. They do not engage in blind imitation; rather, they build upon Rauschenberg’s innovative departure from tradition, blending the accidental with materiality, to imbue this artistic language with new life and a distinct Chinese imprint. It is through this cross-cultural exchange and fusion that the artistic creations of Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专) and his peers transcend mere technical imitation, and, through ingenious transformation and reconstruction, they construct a fresh mode of expression that carries both the cultural depth of China and the significance of contemporary art.

3.3 Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚): A Profound Transformation in Artistic Themes and Content

Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚), as one of the central figures of the Chinese “New Wave” art movement of the 1980s, has closely intertwined his artistic trajectory with the profound societal transformations of that era. At this pivotal historical juncture, he emerged not only as a vanguard of contemporary Chinese art but also as an ardent proponent of Western modernist artistic ideologies, particularly drawing inspiration from the artistic philosophy of Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg’s art provided Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚) with a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, from which he extracted nourishment, particularly from Rauschenberg’s notions on the “relationship between art and life” and the “multiplicity of materials and forms”. Through this, Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚) re-evaluated and reconstructed his own artistic language, thereby reshaping his creative expression.

The artworks of Robert Rauschenberg often draw upon the mundane objects of everyday life as the foundational basis for his creative endeavors. Through his use of “ready-mades”, Rauschenberg challenges the boundaries of traditional art, revealing the inextricable and intimate connection between art and life. By stripping everyday objects of their original functional purposes, he imbues them with new cultural significance. This artistic innovation transcends the constraints of conventional thought, liberating art from the confines of pure symbolism and idealized form. Rauschenberg’s creative philosophy not only influenced Zhang Xiaogang’s (张晓刚) understanding of artistic form but also implanted a profound seed within him -- the realization that art is no longer merely an aesthetic pursuit. It is intricately intertwined with life, history, society, and emotion, becoming a complex, elusive, and even ambiguous entity.

In the 1980s, China was undergoing profound societal upheavals. The transformation of culture and thought, the reconfiguration of social structures, and the isolation and confusion of individuals within this new order emerged as the most defining themes of the era. Like many other artists, Zhang Xiaogang (张

晓刚) experienced the intense clash between traditional culture and modern thought. During this period, Rauschenberg's concept of the "ready-mades" provided him with a shortcut to break free from the constraints of conventional thinking, prompting him to reconsider and redefine the meaning and boundaries of art—particularly in relation to individual experience and collective memory. He came to realize that art is not merely the pursuit of lofty ideals or beauty, but is deeply rooted in the daily lives of individuals and the social realities they inhabit, encompassing profound reflections on human existence. It was under the influence of this intellectual awakening that Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚) created one of his most iconic works -- "Chinese New Year's Eve" (除夕夜, 1989-1990). This painting, with its simplicity yet striking impact, poignantly conveys the isolation, desolation, and psychological collapse of the individual. The figure depicted is strikingly solitary, his form dominated by an oversized head, with a sickly, jaundiced complexion and an almost pathological emaciation. The geometry of his eyes and eyebrows presents an eerie, unnatural distortion, creating a visual shock that immediately immerses the viewer in a foreign, oppressive space. On the table before the figure, a knife, two playing cards, and an unlit candle are placed with detached precision -- seemingly mundane objects, yet imbued with profound symbolic meaning and emotional tension, heightening the sense of existential disquiet.



Figure 4: "Chinese New Year's Eve" (除夕夜, 1989-1990) by Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚)

Website Link:

https://baike.baidu.com/pic/%E5%BC%A0%E6%99%93%E5%88%9A/10216444/0/0e2442a7d933c895d1435f2b0e4064f082025aafaa1d?fr=lemma&fromModule=lemma_content-image#aid=0&pic=0e2442a7d933c895d1435f2b0e4064f082025aafaa1d

The atmosphere evoked by "Chinese New Year's Eve" (除夕夜) is profound and unsettling. Traditionally, the Chinese New Year is a time for family reunion and joyous togetherness. However, in Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) work, this scene is suffused with loneliness and unease. The solitary figure, confronted by a knife, two playing cards, and a candle, exudes silence and doubt, as if contemplating a momentous, uncertain decision: will he, in this solitary night, seize the knife to harm himself or perhaps

another? These seemingly ordinary objects, in fact, mirror the inner turmoil and psychological disintegration of the individual. In this painting, they transcend their status as mere objects and become vessels of emotion and choice, carrying the artist's contemplations on society and the profound depths of the individual psyche.

Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) "Chinese New Year's Eve" (除夕夜) is not merely a depiction of solitude; it conveys a profound engagement with and exploration of complex emotions and human nature. The objects within the composition, though utterly mundane and quotidian, are arranged with such subtle precision that they convey an ineffable sense of tension. This emotional undercurrent, calm on the surface yet tinged with latent violence, is precisely expressed through the meticulous arrangement of details. Much like Rauschenberg, who through the collage of everyday objects melded the ordinary with the extraordinary and intertwined the personal with the social, Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚) similarly constructs a weighty and intricate emotional terrain through these seemingly banal items. Within this space, the contradictions and conflicts between the individual's emotional and psychological realm and the social environment are woven together, creating an art space rich with tension and reflection.

Subsequently, Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) artistic practice gradually evolved into a distinct visual language, in which he consistently incorporated quotidian objects such as beds, flashlights, and bathtubs. On the surface, these items may appear inconsequential, even trivial, yet they are intricately linked to specific memories and emotions of the individual. In his works, the relationship between these objects and the figures is not merely decorative; they bear symbolic significance, representing fragments of human emotion and traces of history. Through these objects, Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚) constructs an artistic realm that is both figurative and abstract, allowing the viewer to peer beneath the surface of these objects and uncover the most fragile, painful, and profound aspects of human nature.

Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚) contends that the political and historical undercurrents concealed within Robert Rauschenberg's work were not truly recognized until the 1990s. In his view, Rauschenberg's seemingly arbitrary collages and assemblages of "ready-mades" actually carried profound implications. Through his works, Rauschenberg, with a distinctly American blend of irony and humor, illuminated both the history and contemporary circumstances of the United States, while simultaneously reflecting the lived experiences of its people. This interpretation of Rauschenberg's art profoundly influenced Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) own creative practice, prompting him to continuously explore and represent the intricate web of social relations, as well as the intertwining of history and memory. In Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) works, one can discern a profound dialogue between the individual and society, between the past and the present. The seemingly ordinary objects and scenes often bear an ineffable emotional tension and serve as vessels of historical narrative, imbuing the work with a compelling sense of reflection and complexity.

Thus, Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) artistic creation is not merely a formal exploration, but a profound expression of thought and emotion. In these works, art transcends the realm of mere aesthetic objects, evolving into a vibrant system of symbols that encapsulate the shocks of an era and the fluctuations of the individual psyche. Through the redefinition and reconstruction of everyday objects, his art compels us to reconsider the details and emotions embedded in our lives, to reflect on the impact of history, and to contemplate the fate of the individual. All of this is deeply rooted in his understanding and reinterpretation of Rauschenberg's artistic philosophy -- his acute perception of daily life, his ability to capture the complex emotions buried within human nature, and his masterful manipulation of artistic forms and materials. It is within this intellectual collision and artistic practice that Zhang Xiaogang's (张晓刚) work unveils a unique, intricate, and profound contemporary artistic language.

3.4 Ye Yongqing (叶永青): Rejecting the Elitist Notion of Art

Ye Yongqing's (叶永青) artistic creation is profoundly influenced by Robert Rauschenberg, yet this influence extends beyond mere formal and technical imitation; more significantly, it reflects a profound inheritance and response to Rauschenberg's artistic spirit and philosophical ideas. Unlike Rauschenberg, who used the language of modernist art to challenge traditional boundaries, Ye Yongqing (叶永青) expanded upon this influence by focusing on the quotidian and the philosophy of life, imbuing his works with a distinct Eastern perspective and profound cultural connotations. Ye Yongqing (叶永青) resonated strongly with the themes and subjects present in Rauschenberg's work, particularly his approach to incorporating "everyday life" into the artistic process, an aspect through which Ye Yongqing (叶永青) found a point of resonance with his own artistic practice.

Recalling his first encounter with Rauschenberg's solo exhibition, Ye Yongqing (叶永青) remarked that he was deeply shocked, particularly by Rauschenberg's transformative approach to turning the most ordinary and mundane objects and phenomena into artistic creations. This groundbreaking artistic concept profoundly challenged his traditional understanding of art. Rauschenberg's treatment of the "everyday" was not merely a superficial reproduction of commonplace items, but a profound exploration of human existence, social phenomena, and philosophical inquiry through these objects. This approach led Ye Yongqing (叶永青) to the realization that art is no longer an exalted entity removed from life; it is no longer confined to the mere expression of color on a canvas or the display of technical prowess. Instead, art should attend to every detail of life, confront its absurdities and burdens, and, from this engagement, excavate artistic value that possesses both philosophical depth and spiritual resonance.

From Rauschenberg's art, Ye Yongqing (叶永青) derived immense creative impetus. He began transforming the myriad details and trivial objects of everyday life into the central themes of his work. In his pieces, commonplace items such as milk cartons, sanitary napkins, and coat hangers frequently appear on the canvas. These objects cease to be mere material presences; instead, they are imbued with artistic language and philosophical depth. Ye Yongqing (叶永青) is not content with evaluating the significance of these items through traditional artistic standards. Through his reimagining of these quotidian objects, he liberates them from their purely functional and utilitarian roles, allowing them to evolve into potent symbols within the artwork, filled with tension and meaning. Each object, each detail presented, becomes, much like Rauschenberg's artistic practice, a vehicle for expressing the complexities, absurdities, and philosophical nuances of life.

Ye Yongqing (叶永青) is particularly drawn to the free-spiritedness and playfulness conveyed by Rauschenberg in his artistic practice. According to Wittgenstein's notion -- "language is a game", and similarly posits that for art, then artistic language can also be considered as a game filled with infinite possibilities. In Ye Yongqing's (叶永青) creative practice, this playfulness manifests in the free transformation of form and the open-ended interpretation of content. He does not seek to create a standardized "answer", but rather uses his works to pose open-ended questions to the audience, inviting them to engage with the art and explore its deeper meanings through their own perceptions and understandings. In this regard, Ye Yongqing's (叶永青) artistic practice reflects a profound alignment with Rauschenberg's artistic language. Rauschenberg once remarked that his art must, at the very least, appear as interesting as the events unfolding outside the window, and this "realism" of art arises from its dialogue and interaction with the real world. Similarly, in his own creative endeavors, Ye Yongqing (叶永青) does not deliberately pursue formal perfection or rigidity; rather, he strives to find a path within the complexities and intricacies of everyday life that resonates with the viewer.

For Ye Yongqing (叶永青), art is not merely a form of visual expression; it is a profound exploration of the spirit and philosophy. Through his presentation of everyday objects, Ye Yongqing (叶永青) conveys to the viewer an attitude of engagement with reality: life is not merely an idealized pursuit; it is filled with absurdity, helplessness, and challenge. Yet it is precisely these seemingly meaningless details and phenomena that constitute the true face of our existence. Such honesty in art is a crucial insight Ye Yongqing (叶永青) drew from Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg once stated that his works "must at least

appear as interesting as the things happening outside the window.” It is this concept that inspired Ye Yongqing (叶永青) to shift his gaze from lofty ideals to the mundane realities of daily life, uncovering the infinite possibilities of art through his unorthodox approach to creation. The helplessness, absurdity, and bitterness of life do not stand in opposition to artistic expression; rather, they intertwine on Ye Yongqing’s (叶永青) canvas, creating a unique aesthetic experience.

In Ye Yongqing’s (叶永青) creative practice, the integration of the “everyday” with “art” is particularly pronounced. In his acrylic paintings, one often encounters objects and symbols that would be unimaginable in traditional art forms. These seemingly arbitrary and ordinary elements are seamlessly incorporated into his works, becoming indispensable components of the overall composition. Simultaneously, enigmatic and cryptic texts and symbols, akin to concealed incantations, are present -- often left unexplained, thereby granting the viewer limitless space for interpretation. This openness and freedom embody a significant artistic spirit passed down from Rauschenberg to Ye Yongqing (叶永青). It signifies that art is no longer a singular pursuit of beauty, nor a lofty spiritual ideal, but rather a profound experience that touches the essence of life. When confronted with these symbols and objects, the viewer can no longer rely solely on traditional artistic knowledge or frameworks; instead, they must engage in the interpretation of the artwork through their personal experiences and sensibilities.

Through this free and open approach to creation, Ye Yongqing (叶永青) not only challenges the constraints that traditional art imposes on form and content but also engages in profound philosophical reflection. He no longer views art as an idealized form of expression but as a tool for contemplation—a means of breaking conventions and challenging both self and societal perceptions. In his view, the power of art lies in its ability to explore, through meticulous form, the diversity of human existence, uncovering the contradictions and complexities of life, and, through this revelation, allowing the viewer to experience a spiritual jolt and intellectual awakening. Rauschenberg’s artistic language, particularly his method of finding artistic material in everyday life, provided Ye Yongqing (叶永青) with a completely new artistic perspective, enabling him to transcend the boundaries of traditional art and reconsider the meaning and value of life itself.

Particularly in China, Ye Yongqing’s (叶永青) artistic practice has introduced a fresh mode of thinking and insight into the domestic art scene. In a society deeply influenced by traditional culture, Ye Yongqing (叶永青), through the absorption of Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy, has dismantled the elitist and idealized frameworks of traditional art, proposing the notion that art can be intimately connected to ordinary people and everyday life. His works, with their seemingly mundane objects and absurd symbols, demonstrate that art is no longer a lofty and inaccessible pursuit but is instead deeply rooted in the soil of daily existence, serving as a form of spiritual expression that can be touched and understood by all. This concept not only offers a new perspective for the development of contemporary Chinese art but also presents global art enthusiasts with a novel realm of reflection previously unexplored.

Ye Yongqing’s (叶永青) artistic exploration represents a re-creation of Rauschenberg’s artistic spirit. Through his focus on everyday life and reflection on reality, he has constructed a unique artistic language imbued with both philosophical depth and artistic impact. In his view, art should not merely serve as an idealized symbol but should have the courage to confront reality, daring to unveil the absurdities and complexities of life, and, through its form, impart profound philosophical meaning and emotional resonance. As he himself stated, “The purpose of art is not to seek a correct answer, but to remind us that life is also an interesting game, irrespective of right or wrong, rank or wealth.” This sense of artistic playfulness and honesty is the most invaluable gift Ye Yongqing (叶永青) received from Rauschenberg, enabling him to transcend the role of an artist and emerge as a philosophical thinker, a keen observer of life, and a spiritual enlightener.

4. Conclusion

The re-creation by Chinese artists is both Sinicized and individualized. It transcends merely borrowing Rauschenberg's techniques of collage and assemblage in form, or incorporating the everyday objects admired by Robert Rauschenberg into the artistic realm. Rather, it involves a profound reflection on Chinese history, culture, and social realities, imbuing each work with traces of history, cultural weight, and the resonating voices of the era. In a distinctive manner, Chinese artists have interpreted the collision and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, thereby imbuing the language of art with new layers and depth. By combining traditional symbols, imagery, and materials with avant-garde techniques of modern art, they present the intricate relationships between the past and present, tradition and innovation, and the individual and society.

In this creative process, artists such as Sui Jianguo (隋建国), Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专), Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚), and Ye Yongqing (叶永青) engage not only in a dialogue with Western artistic ideologies but also in a complex and profound conversation with Chinese history and contemporary reality. Their works serve as both a reflection and a response to the societal transformations and historical sedimentations of China. The traditional Chinese symbols, totems, and cultural elements within their artworks are no longer merely nostalgic references; rather, through the regeneration and transformation facilitated by contemporary art, they radiate new meanings. This creative metamorphosis resembles an artistic "cultural renaissance", one that not only evokes a dialogue between history and the present but also turns each piece into a resonant space where history, society, and individual emotions converge.

Their artistic works are not merely collages of material and form; they are intricate assemblies of emotion and memory. Behind each piece lies the artist's inner world, a profound resonance of emotional turbulence and a heartfelt invocation of past recollections. In these works, the fractures of history, the pain of the individual, and the predicaments of society intertwine, presenting a complexity of emotion and a depth of thought. This resonance of emotion and dialogue with history imbue the works of Chinese contemporary artists with not only a visual impact but also an intellectual shock, provoking the viewer to engage in profound reflection and emotional resonance.

The artists referenced in this article each manifest their own distinctive artistic lexicon, creative style, and symbolic systems within the multifaceted development of contemporary Chinese art. Perhaps it is precisely the uniqueness and innovation of these artistic expressions that make it difficult to draw a direct, visual connection between them and the artistic movements sparked by Robert Rauschenberg in China during the 1980s. However, Rauschenberg, as a pivotal figure in the history of 20th-century art, has exerted a profound influence on the Chinese art world that transcends the surface-level interactions typically associated with his work. While Chinese artists have increasingly pursued a high degree of individualization and localization in both form and content, Rauschenberg's creative philosophy -- particularly his redefinition of the relationship between "everyday life" and "art" -- has provided these artists with significant philosophical inspiration, encouraging them to explore new realms in their individual artistic inquiries. Rauschenberg was not merely an artist, but a forerunner of thought, and his artistic language and conceptual framework represent an intellectual legacy that the Chinese art world has inherited. This legacy cannot be overstated, as it offers an inexhaustible reservoir of spiritual resources and creative stimuli for independent thinking and innovative pathways in contemporary Chinese art.

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