

## Its not too western, is it?

### I spent two months this year hanging out in Beijing.

It is an incredible place. New building is going on at a furious pace, the air is dry. Really dry. The city is all go. If you want to confront any strange paranoia you have on needing personal space, Beijing is not a bad start.

I stayed in a small apartment off the third ring road in Tuanjie Hu, in the eastern part of the city. At 10 every morning behind the local market two small glass windows open. About this time of day I was always very conscious of where I was in relation to my temporary home. A long trestle table would be immediately filled with steamed buns and pan fried dumplings and I could have my favourite local snack.

Within a week of being in Beijing my bird flu fear had dissolved. I learnt to treat the news with the same mix contempt and denial as those around me.

Having had a year out of the studio, going to Beijing was starting back at work. I went to China wanting to do several things. To find out what people were doing, attempt to speak some Mandarin and to try out some ideas. I had seen some of the large exhibitions on contemporary 'Chinese art' organised in Australia over the last ten years, but none of them really left me with any idea of what is going on for artists there. What is it like to be working at the moment in Beijing?

In my eight weeks in Beijing, I met with and interviewed over twenty art workers. Most of whom have migrated from other provinces and, in some cases, other countries to work in the capital, looking for opportunities and stimulation from what is a large and supportive contemporary arts community. Film makers, painters, writers, curators, VJ's. People know that Beijing is exactly where they want to be.

The interviews gave me a chance to ask people questions that have come up in my own practice about identity and nationalism. But also to ask many questions that I felt made no sense.

I guess I left Australia feeling repulsed by this weird thing of what protecting 'our way of life' means, what securing 'national borders' involves and what exactly 'Australia's national security' is. That I should go to Beijing and ask people there what they think about this seems a bit idiotic, yet it was strangely satisfying to know that people there really do not know what it means to be Australian and frankly do not care. In some ways the lack of interest was the answer I was looking for. Faced with the indifference to the idea of the 'Australian' my own ambivalence was confirmed.

I asked Hua Ji Ming, an artist from Hubei Province, if he had unlimited resources to make a project, what he would attempt. He would come to Sydney, invite the Mayor, the Prime Minister and as many big



Hua Ji Ming and Hong Fan, *Crawling the Great Wall*, 2001, performance. Image courtesy of the artists and the Long March Project.

Australian celebrities as he could find to crawl around the Sydney Opera House. 'Actually if I had the money and I had to, I would pay them to do it.'

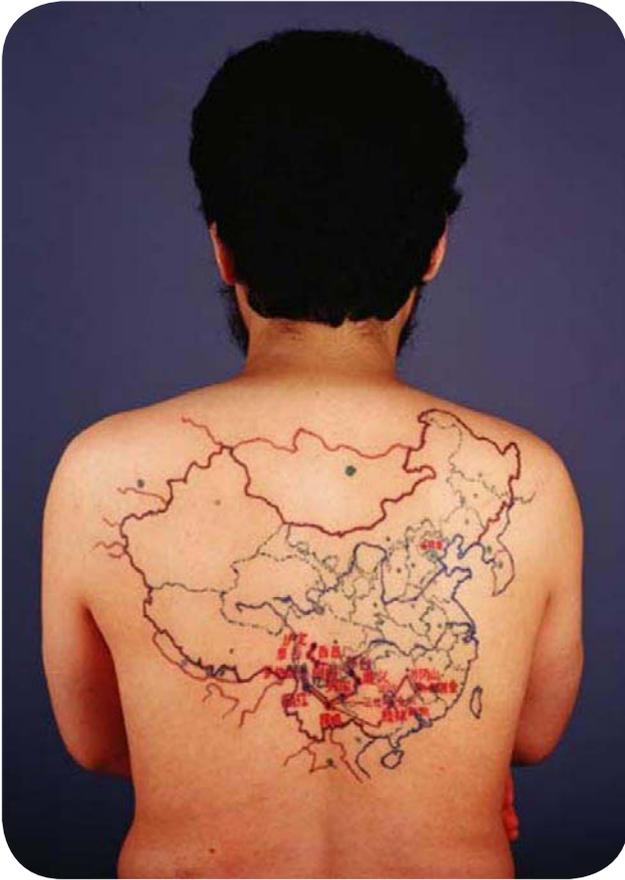
### The Wall

In 2001 Hua Ji Ming and Hong Fan (also an artist and his partner) along with their son, crawled a section of the Great Wall. 'I thought people might get angry or try and stop us. But people cheered, they liked it I think.' I told him about the art student from Goldsmiths who crawled from his college all the way to Downing Street in London last year. A comical protest against further increases in tertiary fees for students, he vomited three times because of the filth on the pavement. Hua Ji Ming laughs knowingly, 'yes, I nearly did that.'

In China the government is very nervous about performance art and despite its popularity amongst artists it is generally excluded from the major official art events. The second Shanghai Biennale, coming up in September this year, however, has announced that performance will be in its program. Until now artists have simply organised alternative projects that run parallel to these events which attract just as many people.

### Long March

There are several projects that really stood out for me,



During the three months between July 1 and October 1, 2002, artist Qin Ga tattooed a map which shows the route of the art project, *Long March – A Walking Visual Display* on his back.

that seem to propel themselves beyond of the Beijing art community and the narrow international biennale circuit. The *Long March – A Walking Visual Display* is one of these. Taking the historic route of the Long March, this project has created a new space to talk about history, cultural ownership and globalisation. Stop 13 of the march's route is The 25,000 Cultural Transmission Centre located in the north-east of Beijing at the Dashanzi Art District. This temporary detour from the original route has enabled the project to host seminars, festivals and projects.

Long March curator Lu Jie is right when he says that in some ways China is one of the freest places at the moment. There is no doubt about it. The lines have moved in terms of what people can and can't do in China. Projects like this are creating important exchanges that talk about the conditions in which people live. The strong symbolism that artists working in China have employed since 1989 has broadened, fractured and sharpened. Despite the obvious restrictions in China there is increasing scope to experiment and explore the possibilities of conceptual art. The frenetic economic changes and movement of people into the cities and the overturning of past practices enable limits to be stretched. Artists can afford to live in Beijing, the cost of living is still very low, there are an increasing number of artists run spaces and the local and international audiences are growing.

### Separate Paths

Yue LuPing's *Separate Paths* was at the Cultural Transmission Space in March 2004. An on-going inquiry, Luping presented a series of interviews he conducted with people in Xiao Cheng, a small village of Yunan in the north of Shanxi Province. An artist from Xian, Luping stayed with the people of the village during the Spring Festival this year. There have been many wars over the past thousand years between the peoples of the surrounding areas. Tribes have mixed. He is interested in exploring why, despite the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region, each person he spoke with proudly claims to be Han Chinese. 'Of course it is more important what people declare themselves to be than what any DNA test would say,' says Luping, surprised at the outcome of the interviews. He didn't go there to tell people what percentage of Han they were. Where does that certainty come from? How we define ourselves tells us a lot about how we learn history. What we accept to be the living or perhaps the "good culture". The nation.

When one artist asked me whether I think contemporary art in China is 'too western,' I felt lost and embarrassed about being asked to be an arbiter of the 'western'. At the moment in China if something is 'too western' it is many things. Mostly negative. It is too commercial, too American, it's too loud and that's just the tip of it. I really don't know what this question exactly means but perhaps it is something about finding acceptance in new ways and checking out where I put things.

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#### Notes

*Long March Project* (curator, Lu Jie):  
<http://www.longmarchfoundation.org/english/homepage.htm>

Ren Qinga / *Miniature Long March*:  
<http://www.longmarchfoundation.org/images/quancheng/qg/e-index.htm>

Yue Luping / *Separate Paths*:  
<http://www.longmarchfoundation.org/english/six%20phase.htm>

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