

# IIAS Outreach

## IIAS' outreach activities

Heleen van der Minne

IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY science and arts occupy a relatively separated position. Whether it is just or not, IIAS finds it important to bring these worlds together. IIAS has been organising outreach activities for a number of years now, whereby 'outreach' should be understood as crossing the borders of 'pure' scientific events; reaching out to a diversity of other cultural domains, such as film, literature, dance and other forms of art. In so doing, IIAS is also reaching out to a wider audience, not only to Asia scientists, but also to others with various interests in Asia. Scientists and non-scientists meet, become acquainted with each other's worlds, and broaden their Asian horizons and understanding. Reaching out to other cultural domains is part of IIAS' policy to transcend disciplinary borders. IIAS has the firm conviction that science and arts, both creative processes, are overlapping domains, which can and do inspire and lead to fresh approaches in all disciplines.

### Outreach collaborations

Over the years IIAS has been cooperating with outstanding art institutions and organisations such as the Eye Film Institute (the former Filmmuseum), the Dutch Foundation for Literature, the VVAK (Society of Friends of Asian Arts) and the Prince Claus Fund; together we have put together lectures, conferences, publications in the IIAS Newsletter, and other events.

In 2013 IIAS specifically focussed on visual arts, in cooperation with the leading museums in the Netherlands: the Tropical Museum in Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, the Prinsenhof in Delft, the Groninger Museum and the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. Our collaboration with the Museum Het Prinsenhof, the Delftware museum, concerned the exhibition 'Delft-Jingdezhen: The Blue Revolution, 400 Year Exchange'; IIAS supported the exhibition with a lecture held by Christine van der Pijl-Ketel, 'Shipments and Sherds'. She described the varieties of Chinese porcelain produced for the Dutch market and transported by the 17th century VOC. IIAS editor Sandra Dehue wrote an article for The Newsletter about this renewed joint project between Delft and the Chinese city of Jingdezhen, in which contemporary Chinese and Dutch ceramists exchange their expertise on modern ceramics, inspired by the Chinese blue and white porcelain of 400 years ago (issue #64, p.51).



In April 2013 the world famous Rijksmuseum reopened its doors to the public after an extensive multi-year renovation. Its Asian art collection was accommodated in a brand new building, the Asia Pavilion. On this occasion The Newsletter published an article, in which the Asia curators Menno Fitski,

Anna Ślącza and William Southworth wrote about the collection's wonderful artefacts hailing from various regions of Asia (issue #64, page 56).

Professor Titus M. Eliëns, Head of Collections at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague wrote The Newsletter article 'DelftWare WonderWare', about the museum's magnificent blue and white Delftware collection, and the history of the Netherlands' most iconic national product, which was initially intended as an imitation of Chinese export porcelain. (issue #63, page 48)

IIAS doesn't focus on only ancient and antique arts; the institute finds it equally important to shed light on modern and avant-garde arts as well. Recently, IIAS organised a lecture, held by professor Jeroen de Kloet, about the limits of critique in Chinese art, within the framework of an exhibition of young Chinese artists, composed by the famous artist and activist Ai Weiwei, at the Groninger Museum. (see the text by Jeroen de Kloet on this page)

**IIAS keeps reaching out and kindly invites people and organisations willing to cooperate with our outreach events and/or publications in The Newsletter, to contact us. Please send an e-mail to Heleen van der Minne, coordinator Projects & Events. (h.m.van.der.minne@iias.nl)**



Portrait of He Bin, Paper, 16th century  
© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

The Beijing Forbidden City, Silk, c. 1400-50 (?)  
© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

## Upcoming event

On 31 January 2014 IIAS will be hosting a lecture about the fine and applied arts of China's Ming dynasty – to be held by professor Anne Gerritsen – in cooperation with the VVAK and the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, around the exhibition 'Ming, Emperors, Artists and Merchants in Ancient China'

Showing till 2 February 2014  
in the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam  
[www.nieuwekerk.nl/en](http://www.nieuwekerk.nl/en)

## Chinese art and the problem of critique

Jeroen de Kloet

IN THE WORK 'ONE METER OF DEMOCRACY' (2010), artist He Yunchang invited his friends over to vote for, or against, cutting a one-meter long and 0.5 cm deep wound in his body. Twelve of his friends voted for, ten against, with three abstentions. Following this democratic procedure, the artist decided to proceed with his plan, and had a long cut made in his body. The documentation of this performance work is on display in The Groninger Museum, as part of Fuck Off 2, a show curated by Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi and Mark Wilson. The images display the body with a thin bleeding line running from the shoulder to below the knee. The close up, in which the depth of the cut is visible, is particularly disturbing. One cannot help but wonder if this self mutilation is necessary in order to contemplate the violence of democracy? And what does this work signify in a country that lacks democracy? In pointing to the violence that democracy may allow for, or even produce, could it be read as a statement in support of the government? Clearly not for the artist, who writes, "it's a luxury to talk about democracy and art in this country, because we lack a fair and reasonable environment." (catalogue, p.65) The performance is disturbing and abject, and it is tempting to theorise it with the work of Kristeva or Bataille. But somehow, it fails to convince me. Not because of any belatedness, as other artists in and outside China have done similar work (much) earlier – I never quite understand the tyranny of the new and groundbreaking, be it in art or academia. It fails to convince me because its violence disturbs me without inspiring further reflection, doubt or questions.

The title of the show smacks of an equal lack of ambivalence: within the comfort zone of a provincial city in the Netherlands, an artistic protest against the Chinese authorities is unleashed. In the catalogue, it is particularly the text of Feng Boyi that frames the show in a binary opposition between allegedly political, liberating art and an authoritarian government. In his view, the works "uncover the cruelty of the Chinese social crisis: this cruelty is precisely that we live in an environment in which our basic rights are trampled and morality is lost." (catalogue, p.21). Art is celebrated as an aesthetics resisting the vulgar, he claims, "Chinese official, mainstream, base pop culture dominates everything: In China we hear nothing more than vulgar noise..." (p.22). Not only do artists carry, in this narrative, the geopolitical burden of representing Chineseness, they are also warriors against the alleged stupefying powers of popular culture. In effect, Feng, operating in the field of "high art", is reiterating and reproducing a beguiling if not unfruitful opposition between high and low culture.

Back to the works! They resist such generalisations, and while space does not allow me to engage with many, let me pick out a few. The work of Chen Yufan and Chen Yujun takes

urbanization, and with it the construction of bizarre buildings that pop up in first- and second-tier cities, as its source of inspiration. For example, the Fangyuan Mansion in Shenyang, a gigantic Chinese coin with the square hole in the middle. The artists rebuild these grotesque architectures, now with carton, and as such comment on unbridled processes of urbanization. Xia Xing takes news photographs as the starting point, and devotes one year to one specific news story, comprising up to 60 oil paintings. We see the Bo Xilai scandal that made world news in 2012, now as a series of oil paintings, all of them copies of news pictures. As such, they instigate reflection upon the mediation of scandals. In turning a spectacle into an artwork, what does this tell us about art? What about the role of media and their intricate ways of constructing a scandalous reality? Finally, the pictures of Ren Hang depict young people, sometimes in rather complicated sexual poses, often injected with a large dose of homoeroticism, and above all, detached and alienated from their environments. As such, his works speak of a general sense of estrangement of the generation that was born in the 1980s – the first generation to witness only progress and very little political turmoil – in a world that seems filled with opportunities.

These are just some glimpses on contemporary art that happens to come from China (which does not make them primarily reflect upon life in China). When thinking through the possibility of critique for art, be it in China or elsewhere, it would be better to remember Foucault: "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."<sup>1</sup> The second, less often quoted part of the sentence strikes me as urgent: we need to think critique within the parameters set by the system, and only from there can it search for its lines of flight, can it try to provoke a different distribution of the sensible. To think critique as inherently oppositional to and exterior of a political system ignores the multiple ways in which any system penetrates deeply into every aspect of our lives, just as it ignores its global entanglements. When thinking this way, Chinese contemporary art also speaks to our struggles, our anxieties and our doubts.

**Jeroen de Kloet is Professor in Globalisation Studies, Director of the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS), and affiliated to the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), at the University of Amsterdam.**

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, M. 1978. *The History of Sexuality – An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, see p.95