

Shanghai's State of the Creative Arts at the Opening of the Rockbund Art Museum

The [Rockbund Art Museum](#), situated on the Northern tip of the Shanghai [Bund](#) area, opened May 2010 in conjunction with the [2010 Shanghai World Expo](#) (expected visitors 70 million). The museum is part of a [redevelopment area](#) and is housed in the 1932 art deco building of the Royal Asiatic Society, once location of a natural history museum. As part of larger real estate development, still under construction at the time of the opening, the museum will fit into a most exclusive part of the inner city. According to the brochure of the Rockbund Investment Corporation that also owns the new museum the “urban renaissance” at the birthplace of modern Shanghai



celebrates “the glamour of h eritage reborn.” The aim is “to create the most elite luxury area in Shanghai.” Rockbund will re-establish the northern tip of the Bund as a hub for arts and culture. Apartments are sold with the promise “to live in the lap of glamour.”

Shanghai is a classic example of creative industries’ marriage with real estate developers. There is no active cultural policy of the state, apart from the top-down decisions where to allocate so-called ‘creative clusters’. These areas throughout the city consist of former manufacturing facilities in order to boost the prices of these former textile buildings and create ‘cool’ neighbourhoods. It is unclear if these industries have been driven out of the metropolitan area because of rising prices or if they left because of delivery problems and low rent elsewhere. Cause and effect chains picked up speed and are impossible to distinguish. As it was explained to me, the creative clusters are mainly occupied by more or less traditional medium-size businesses. What co-workers initiatives like Xin Dan Wei do is facilitate office spaces for freelancers and small groups that just started their own firm.

I interviewed Hsiangling Lai who arrived in September 2009 from Taiwan to

take up the job as the director of the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM). Director of marketing and development Shi Hantao accompanied her. Ms. Lia would like the museum to be a platform for issues in contemporary culture, a crossover approach of urban issues and visual arts that should also refer to the heritage of the original Shanghai Museum, which was located in the same building. International start curator Hou Hanru will do an exhibit, which asks the question what role a contemporary arts museum can play. Hanru will ask foreign artists to do site-specific projects. In contrast, the Shanghai Art Museum will not go beyond the milestones in art history like Picasso or Dali. How do art and life relate, Lai asks. "In Shanghai ordinary people do not visit contemporary museums that often and so far there are no plans from the municipality to build a contemporary arts museum. What they want are private developers to establish a school, an art district, theatre or museum. Galleries are seen as commercial entities that deal with Chinese contemporary arts." Instead RAM intends to build international relationships and work with overseas curators and art exchange programs.

In conversations the curator/artist [Shumin Lin](#), also Taiwanese, was mentioned. He was recently appointed CEO of the development of the Zendai Himalayas Centre real estate corporation. Lin, a "PhD-holding hypnotist" is known for his light boxes, video installations and holographic art. Lin is said to be "influenced by Buddhism, in particular the concept of reincarnation and explore themes of rebirth, humanity, humility and universality." The Himalayas Centre will include a lifestyle hotel, theatre, retail space and a modern art museum. The complex is located in front of the Shanghai New International Expo Centre, "an exclusive high-end residential area." Before Shu-Min Lin became president of Zinnia Creative Development Co., Ltd. and Shanghai Zendai Himalayas Real Estate he was involved in the 2006 Shanghai Biennale and was on the jury of 2007 Ars Electronica competition.

In the case of RAM the board of the Rockbund still is the sole sponsor of the museum. I asked director Lin if she wasn't worried in case of a recession or collapse of the real estate market, what was going to happen to RAM. The absence of a cultural policy by the government is greatly felt. The [Mori Art Museum](#) in Tokyo on the 53rd floor of the Roppongi Hills Mori Tower is mentioned as a model here. A few years ago a centre with artists studios was opened in a rural area, a one-hour drive by car outside of Shanghai. After an initial success artists moved out again because it was too far away. Audiences didn't show up. Artists are drawn to the metropolitan atmosphere,

even though rents are high there. The Shanghai visual arts centre M50 is often mentioned as a successful model how galleries and studios can cluster together. The Shangart gallery, famous for its early promotion of Chinese contemporary arts in the 1990s and that has been so successfully expanding throughout Shanghai and the world, is also part of M50. Another area would be [Tianzifang](#), a few narrow streets with “boutiques and laid-back cafés that have been drawing crowds of yuppies, fashionistas, designers and expatriates.”

RAM intends to go beyond the exhibition hall and will emphasize the role of arts education. Because of the highly competitive entry examinations there is hardly any emphasis on the ‘liberal arts’ in China. There is simply no interest. In her previous jobs working for museums in Taiwan Lai treated education as a must. The issue is not so much the level of artists. Some of the art academies in China are raising interesting new generations of visual artists. RAM likes to work with the last years’ students, the ‘young talents’, and set up a program for them in a small space outside of the museum. Once a year RAM would like to dedicate an exhibition to the ‘creative arts’, be it architecture, fashion, graphic or industrial design.

In response to the creative cluster policy Ms. Lia recommends to put more emphasis on software, and not on the hardware. People, not buildings. There should be mechanisms developed to encourage talents. Ms. Lia doesn’t see the amateurs as a threat for the visual arts. Amateurs remain within the limits of the technical; they execute and because of their lack of time to do research rarely expand their talents in the direction of the creative arts. Having said that, RAM is open for interesting projects, be it from professionals or amateurs, like a video art competition in which the museum would like to showcase young work, also through its website.

[Peasant Da Vincis](#) is the opening exhibition of the Rockbund Art Museum, curated by the Chinese artist [Cai Guo-Qiang](#). The exhibit features dozens of ‘cultural readymades’, built by Chinese farmers. The objects on display are a mix of imaginary machines, model airplanes, mini submarines, flying saucers, wooden helicopters and mechanical robots, carefully curated by Cai Guo-Qiang who constructed a few of the objects himself. Around fifty tiny birds fly around in the space, embodying the spirit of the countryside tinkerers. The artworks are anthropological artefacts, collected on a return mission to the Chinese countryside. They lack both the playful imagination of Jean Tinguely and the post-industrial violence à la Survival Research

Laboratories. The constructions and designs remain within the known shapes of the car, boat, kite, plane and robot. What's on display is the pleasure of building, in this case, constructed by ordinary Chinese farmers. Their aesthetics of unlikely variation borders to techno-primitivism. Not so much unrealistic the machines are deeply conceptual, and this is what must have been the attraction to put them on display in the arts context: pop conceptualism. As so often with everyday objects they only become works of art because of the context created by the artist-curator, assisted by a team of exhibition builders, photographers, critics and transport workers. Cia's Peasant Da Vincis utilizes art as a vehicle to reflect on the changes in the Chinese countryside and the gained freedom, the 'anti gravity' of the peasant imaginary. Bottom line: the exhibition is the artwork.

What is being played out here is possible futures for the 'Chinese peasant' beyond migration and poverty. What Cai Guo-Qiang has done here is a subtle play with the Shanghai 2010 World Expo "Better City, Better Life" slogan by bringing peasants 'art works' into the city. The larger question here is how the arts dreams up a newly constituted countryside in a prosperous China in which the promised redistribution of wealth from the cities to the peasants has, at least in part, materialized. Some hints in this direction can be found in the catalogue essay by Zhang Yiwu who talks about the "possibility of the emergence of the Chinese peasant. (..) What Cia Guo-Qiang has discovered here are self-taught peasants inventing out of their own ambition." The peasant Da Vincis "attempt to use their strange inventions to break through the restrictions of habit and conventional wisdom, and show how free and open their minds are, how rich their inner worlds."

A Shanghai artist I met called the exhibition "sad". No doubt there are romantic overtones. Cai Guo-Qiang has been collecting these industrial folk objects since 2005 and clearly put a lot his own enthusiasm into the exhibition. His own installation, filling the first floor, is a room full of flying kites, held up in the air by tiny propellers. Elegant, nearly invisible pocket video projectors project the kites. The poetics of this massive modesty is caused through the hidden tech. The other Cia art piece is a purpose-build rusty screening space in the shape of an aircraft carrier, on display in the entrance hall of the neighbouring yet-to-be renovated 1930s bank building.



It is not the simplicity and hardship of the peasant life that is celebrated here. What is striking is the absence of electronic equipment and 'new media'. What we get to see is an early industrial aesthetic, a passion for speed and its flipside: the accident (as theorized in such a sublime way by Paul Virilio). The tinkering peasant is caught in the early to mid-20th century techno imaginary. Like in so many now classic Chinese contemporary art works of Cai Guo-Qiang's generation (b. 1957) is the use of historical ingredients to create a deeply poetic atmosphere that is immediately understood and appreciated by the viewer. A visit to the countryside in order to recharge one's creative batteries? The problem here is not one of brutal appropriation. All contributing rural artists are properly credited. In the exhibition, the video documentation and the catalogue we can find out a lot about their personal lives and backgrounds. It is also pleasant that there were no references whatsoever to Mao's reforging of the Communist Party towards the peasants culminating in the peasant cult during the 'cultural revolution'. However, there is no doubt a grown interest in 'the countryside'. Perhaps we could say that China's wild phase of urbanization and related hyper growth is coming to a close. As designer Lou Yongqi of [Tektao Urban Design Consulting](#) explained me, there is no future anymore for farmers in the Netherlands. That chapter is closed. What we have in this part of Western Europe are large-scale agricultural industries, operated by a tiny workforce. In countries like China with hundreds of millions of farmers there is still a good chance to introduce sustainable, profitable models for modern farming. Yongqi's Design Havests project, situated on the Shanghai island Chongming is a [design & innovation pilot](#) with a remarkable global involvement to "revitalize rural villages in China by improving quality of life through the environment, communication, local business, public and domestic infrastructure. By creating links to an urban and rural network of social and economic exchange, communities are supported to foster everyday sustainability."

Peasant Da Vincis transmits a strong sense of personal dedication of the artist-curator. There is no hint of any exploitation. Yet, what remains is a strong sense of joy mixed with melancholy. In his catalogue essay David A. Ross writes “the museum has to find ways to the expanded notion of the creative.” Peasant Da Vincis achieves this goal, but it would be a true challenge to position this project in the midst of our global, digital, networked reality, which is—and we all know this—precisely Made in China. What is our craftsmanship? How do the lightness and indifference of the digital buzz weight against the ‘longevity’ of agricultural life? Is the intensity of the real-time presence making us blind and deaf for the poetic qualities of our contemporary condition? Will the overkill of recording devices forcing us to the small towns and villages of our ancestors in order to regain the capacity to tell a story, in this case to recast the central role of the Chinese peasants into downtown Shanghai?

Why these characters are labelled Da Vinci remains unclear as they do not even pretend to be inventors. Obviously Cai Gou-Qiang admires and celebrates his hobby inventors—but that doesn’t turn them into Leonardo Da Vincis. Defying ‘basic engineering principles’ alone does not turn passionate builders into visionaries. What lacks here is exactly the futuristic element, and this is what turns the exhibit into a romantic exercise. It is homage to the Chinese peasant and their transformation, and sacrifices, to make possible the incredible urbanization (under the guidance of the neo-liberal Communist Party). It is the peasant who made the cities—and this is simple yet strong message amidst the hundreds of Shanghai skyscrapers, on this symbolic place of the Bund, in this historic year of the Shanghai World Expo.