A Twisted Frame:
Gu Xiong's *Barricade of Bicycles* (1991), Dissident Pop and the National Gallery of Canada

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ABSTRACT

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Charles Patrick Thomas Leonard

The acquisition of artwork by national institutions may heighten the relationship between a nation's publics and its domestic culture. However, such acquisitions are not devoid of an interpretive process in which dominant discourses guide institutionalization. This thesis examines the National Gallery of Canada's 1996 accession of Chinese-born Canadian artist Gu Xiong's *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989* (1990) as situated within a complex set of values that were conferred to the work by the institution through the processes of selection, accession and exhibition. Originally presented as part of an installation, the ink and acrylic on paper contour drawing was the first work by a Chinese contemporary artist purchased for the National Gallery's permanent collection. The figurative style of the drawing typifies currents of 1980s Chinese modernism and Political Pop. This thesis argues that the acquisition of *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989* privileged the object's political content because of the global awareness of China's complex socio-political and cultural conditions following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. The thesis begins with a description and exhibition history of *Barricade of Bicycles* in relation to its contexts of production and the artist's migration story. It then considers the reception of contemporary Chinese art in Western contexts. Focusing on Political Pop and the theme of destruction in relation to Xiamen Dada, it proposes the term "Dissident Pop" to refer to these discussions. The thesis concludes with a consideration of the Gallery's purchase in relation to these contexts as well as the politics of representation and Canada's foreign policy at the time of the work's acquisition.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the circumstances and reasons for the purchase in 1996 of the ink and acrylic on wove paper drawing by Chinese artist Gu Xiong (b.1953) titled *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989* (1990; 251 x 600 cm) by the National Gallery of Canada. [1] Originally presented as part of an installation, the monumental contour drawing was the first work by a Chinese contemporary artist accessioned into the Gallery's permanent collection. I argue this particular acquisition was a curatorial decision situated in the context of changing economic ties between Canada and China and made in view of the artwork's politically dissident subject matter as well as the rising global market interest in Chinese contemporary art.[2] In the process, I examine the forces that gave this work its conceptual shape and its value as cultural capital, including the emigration of Chinese artists in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, many of whose practices were steeped in the modernist idiom popular in China in the 1980s. The tragic events at Tiananmen Square which peaked in June of 1989, memorialized in the twisted mass of bicycle parts depicted in Gu's *Barricade*, weighed heavily upon international responses to the communist Chinese state as well as the production and reception of works by contemporary artists in China during the 1990s.

The creation and acquisition of *Barricade* amidst dialogical currents of identity politics within Canada and the emergence of a global civil society founded on economic

[1] Throughout this text, I have followed standards of attribution for Chinese names, in which the surname occurs first when read left to right. The artwork at the centre of this study is variously referred to as *Barricade of Bicycle, June 4, 1989* (the full title assigned to it following acquisition) and *Barricade of Bicycles*, two titling variations that significantly inflect the margin of interpretation. Where possible, I have tried to distinguish between the full installation and the drawing purchased by the National Gallery of Canada. The title for both is frequently simplified to "*Barricade*".

[2] National Gallery of Canada Archives, "Gu Xiong: Barricade of Bicycles," National Gallery of Canada Acquisition Proposal, 1996.

growth and human rights, inaugural interest in Chinese contemporary art by the Gallery and revealed a desire to disentangle a stratum of overlapping classifications. The permeations of diasporic Chinese artists into foreign contexts destabilizes fixed essentialist notions of "Chinese" or "Canadian" identity. In Gu's case in the Canadian context, classifying *Barricade* as a work by a Canadian artist and incorporating it into the art collection of Canada's national museum conceptually raised the issue of these unstable categories; so too does the manner in which the this artwork is framed to underscore a political message.

The decline of communist systems at the end of the Cold War seemed assured by events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square massacre. However, China's adoption of a "one nation, two systems" approach to accelerate growth and modernization of the Chinese economy also positioned China as a formidable ideological and economic competitor. In this context, scores of Chinese artists living, exhibiting and producing work abroad in North Atlantic nations achieved unprecedented significance, particularly those whose output were lauded as "dissident art" in their underscoring of victimhood, identity or politics. The reception of post-Cultural Revolution , post-Tiananmen Chinese art in Europe and North America during the 1990s spoke to the re-conceptualization of international relations with China and attempts to envision a global civil society on Euro-American ideological terms motivated by an emergent paranoia regarding Chinese economic ascendency.

Three key overlapping contexts are therefore significant to address in this thesis in order to provide a comprehensive critical analysis Gu's *Barricade of Bicycles* and the reasons for its purchase in the Canadian context. The first is the artistic development of

Chinese art and its correlative political and social history in the twentieth century from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the pro-democratization movements in art and society until the end of the 1980s. This includes, among other significant events, the end of the Cultural Revolution, the liberalization of cultural policy, and the development of the Chinese avant-garde idiom that informs the visual language of Gu's work in general. This would also be to take into account the popularization, in the immediate post-Tiananmen years, of Chinese art outside China which initiated a thriving international market in Chinese cultural objects both contemporary and historical.[3]

The second context is constituted by Gu's biography, particularly his artistic development and his relocation to Canada after the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 to produce *Barricade*. The work, possessing a clear emotional resonance and political gravity, would seem a natural artistic response from a recent immigrant from China to Canada, given the short time following the events it depicts. It is a strikingly overt reference to Tiananmen, and hence to China's authoritarian repression and state-orchestrated violence against civilians at a time when their open acknowledgement invited censure and continues to do so. Another remarkable aspect is its creation during a period when artistic liberties in China had been considerably scaled back, and "unofficial art" critical of the state banned altogether. At the same time, *Barricade*'s existence is largely predicated on its own production and exhibition within the Canadian context and its eventual purchase by a major national institution. It is thus categorically framed, viewed and received in Canada not only as a work of Chinese contemporary art, by a

[3] Wu Hung. "A Case of Being Contemporary: Conditions, Spheres and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art," *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011), 395.

Chinese contemporary artist working in Canada, but also as a product of Canadian art and political discourses.

Notably, Gu was one of the very first Chinese contemporary artists to exhibit in Canada (with Gu Wenda at the University of Toronto, in 1986). [4] Before the protests, Gu had been prominent in the 1980s Chinese avant-garde modernist movement and in 1986 had undertaken a year-long residency in Canada at the Banff Centre, an educational institution dedicated to initiatives in the fine arts located in Banff, Alberta.[5] In February 1989, he participated in famous *China/Avant-garde* and the subsequent Tiananmen protests. With the support of Canadian curator Alvin Balkind, he fled the country shortly after to return to Canada to the Banff Centre, where he produced *Barricade*.[6]

The third context is the general political and cultural conditions in Canada with regard to Canada-China relations and the mandate of national cultural institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada that play an increasingly pressurized role in the recognition and reception of both Chinese Canadian artists and newly emigrated artists from China such as Gu. The work's historical conditions – including those surrounding his exhibition in and migration to Canada – inscribe *Barricade* with observable meaning, value and substance. Based on interviews and primary research at the National Gallery of Canada, I will argue the valuation and purchase of Gu's *Barricade* by the Gallery was motivated in part by its expository character regarding historical narratives, particularly the ascendance of Chinese contemporary art and China as an economic world power, both of which are undeniably bound to processes of globalization. The conditions and

[4] Fei Dawei, "The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas," *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), LX.
[5] Gu Xiong. *The Yellow Pear* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1997), 5.
[6] Ibid.

motivations surrounding this purchase refer repeatedly to the object's persistent cultural cachet, retained in the nationality of the artist and his migratory experience in an era of Chinese diasporic movement motivated by a changing economic and political climate.

The usefulness of viewing Chinese cultural exports as an important part of Canadian domestic culture in a globalizing world is found in its prospective hybridization while simultaneously reinforcing difference between the two nations. This was, I suggest, achieved through the acquisition of an artwork by a Canadian artist of Chinese descent for the Gallery's permanent collection because it created both a distinction between notions of liberty and dissidence between Canada and China while offering a subtle suggestion of global cultural unity. The purchase was thus favourable for economic development for both countries (if on terms decidedly consistent with self-assigned Euro-American values, such as economic expansion and individual liberty). Yet a greater complexity of consequences surrounding the purchase emerges upon a more in-depth consideration of the artwork's subject matter. While the depiction of the aftermath of state violence against citizens is visually present in the artwork, it is also in a reminder of the motivations for the artist's move to and permanent residency Canada. Viewed within a narrative of exile and protest, an apparent malaise with Chinese communism is brought to bear. Its accession further suggests that China's historical resistance to notions of progress proceeding from the European enlightenment, a resistance unfavourable to the non-Chinese nations economically, are addressed by these nations culturally through a paradigm of globalization, hybridization and assimilation.[7] Not only contextually but formally, the work's purchase embodies the synthesis of cultures in a manner favourable

[7] Liu Xiao Ping and He Gong, "The New 'Mission' of Young Chinese Artists," *Border Crossings* (Fall 1993), 4.

to the concept of a single global cultural reality, itself a useful predicate for economic development and expansion.

From within these interrelated contexts, I will argue the framing of Gu's Chinese contemporary artist-émigré identity through the notion of dissidence both with regard to the artist and subject matter (the reception of which I will call "Dissident Pop), related to the acquisition of Gu Xiong's *Barricade of Bicycles,* is able to bring forward a productive discussion regarding Chinese economic and cultural prowess, the state of globalization, and the evolving concept of Chinese and Canadian identity.

Outline of Sections

This thesis is made up of three sections. Section One establishes the context and parameters of this study, the impact of the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square on contemporary art in China, the *China Avant-garde* exhibition that same year, the artist's biography and migration story, and other occurrences upon which the purchase of *Barricade* drawing by the National Gallery of Canada – is predicated. It provides an introductory description and exhibition history of the *Barricade*, offering a preliminary analysis of the artwork in relationship to the contexts discussed.

Section Two discusses in more depth the reception of contemporary Chinese art in Western contexts and the work's relationship to dominant discourses, focusing on Political Pop tendencies and the destructive impulses of Xiamen Dada as contributing to a critical understanding of the resulting series of work that led to the creation and purchase of *Barricade*. In addition to elaborating on the formal aspects of *Barricade*, this

section proposes and defines the notion of "Dissident Pop" to describe the complex cultural cachet imparted on Chinese Political Pop art.

Section Three considers the specific Canadian context of the work's, including its national political climate and identity politics, and provides an analysis of findings. It questions and examines the motivations for the National Gallery of Canada's purchase of the *Barricade* drawing at a time when contemporary Chinese art was beginning to boom in the international art market. It concludes by proposing that the work's value as "Dissident Pop" in conjunction with embodying signifiers of modernity and democracy, "westerners" and corporatism, and, ultimately, the ambition of consolidating a viscous Canadian cultural identity that is simultaneously domestic and transnational were key reasons for its acquisition for the Gallery's permanent collection.

SECTION ONE

Chongqing to Banff: Tiananmen, China Avant-garde and Gu Xiong's Journey to Canada

Throughout the 1990s, a single iconic image dominated foreign media with regard to domestic Chinese politics: that of an anonymous Chinese citizen staring down a column of tanks on the streets of Beijing (fig. 2).[8] Photographs and video from the morning of June 5, 1989 showed the defiance of the pseudonymous *tank man* against the state military apparatus that had been deployed against the civilian population the day before.[9] The culmination of more than a decade of social and economic reforms steered by a Chinese reformist government, the seven weeks of protests toward political reform in Tiananmen Square resulted in a massive response by the People's Liberation Army on June 4, 1989, leading to the deaths of as many as 2,300 civilians.[10] Piles of bicycles and other barricades erected throughout the city were meant to slow the ingress of military convoys toward the square.[11] The tank man and the barricades became a fulcrum of the global media spectacle's fascination with the resistance; images of material sacrifice and opposition between the individual and the state that seemed indicative, outside China, of a transition in Chinese society.[12]

Focused in Tiananmen Square but occurring throughout the city, the 1989 protests began with the death in April of Hu Yaobang, the deposed Secretary General of

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[8] Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.
[9] Patrick Witty, "Behind the Scenes: The Tank Man of Tiananmen," *The New York Times* (June 3, 2009).
[10] Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen*, 2.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Gao, "From Elite to Small Man," 149.

the Chinese Communist party who had failed in a push for a specific slate of liberalizations in the progress of political, social and economic reforms.[13] Led by students and supported by the Chinese intelligentsia, the protests attracted millions and accordingly sought a disparate array of democratic changes.[14] With the suppression of the protests came the conclusion that, after years of progress toward liberalization in popular thought and previously stifled by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the effort of the Chinese cultural elite toward the reformation of Chinese society had failed.[15]

These developments and sentiments found significant parallels in the burgeoning realm of Chinese modernist art, a realm in which Gu Xiong's practice took shape. In February 1989, an ambitious retrospective exhibition titled *China/Avant-garde* featuring Chinese art of the 1980s was offered official sanction and a place in China's National Art Museum.[16] Though largely detached from the established signifiers and connotations of the European art tradition, the exhibition's 297 works featured examples of Chinese artists working actively in every major twentieth-century European style.[17] The exhibition, however, was closely watched by the authorities; artists accustomed to the freedom of operating outside of official sanction and in secrecy found that much of their experimentation did not translate into an officially sanctioned environment.[18] This was particularly so for those artists, Gu included, who combined installation with *in situ* performance works, several of which were deemed by the authorities to be in violation of

[13] Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen*, 67.
[14] Ibid., 1.
[15] Jeffrey Hantover, "What You See is Not What You Get: Chinese Painting After June 4," *China's New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2001), LXIV.
[16] Thomas J Berghius, "Performance Art and the Role of the Body in Behavioural Action in China, 1986-1989," *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong, TimeZone 8, 2006), 78.
[17] Gao, "From Elite to Small Man," 152.
[18] Berghius, *Performance Art In China*, 85.

rules governing acceptable artistic practice.[19] Works that included the washing of feet, a definitively private practice in Chinese culture, and the on-site cooking of traditional and foul-smelling "stinky tofu" were ultimately overshadowed by the artist Xiao Lu, who fired a pistol into an installation she and artist-boyfriend Tang Song had lent to *China/Avant-garde*; the entire exhibition was subsequently shut-down by the authorities three hours after opening.[20] Though a series of re-openings and closures followed, performance work was ultimately barred from the exhibition.[21]

The fate of *China/Avant-garde* brought a number of consequences to bear for the Chinese artistic community. In the wake of the Chinese social experiments in liberalization and free expression, the immediate results of the 1989 protests in Beijing were initially the indefinite suspension of social reforms which did not resume until Deng Xiaoping embarked on his famous southern tour of China in 1992.[22] Artistic liberties indulged during the 1980s were repealed in similar fashion afterwards, returning artists to a situation in which artistic practice was closely monitored.[23] A resultant spate of what was locally referred to as "leave-the-country-fever" seemed to grip much of the artistic community following the events of 1989, a phenomenon that contributed in large part to the global success of contemporary art by Chinese artists.[24] It is to this narrative of

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[19] John Clark, "Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre," *Pacific Affairs* 65: 3 (1992), 336.
[20] Berghius, *Performance Art in China*, 90.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Clark, "Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre," 336. *De facto* leader of China following Mao's death on 9 September 1976, Deng , often described as a pragmatist, emerged declaring the inauguration of a new period of progress and the adoption of the "Four Modernizations" that would usher in new economic prosperity (agriculture, industry, defence and science and technology). These reforms required the assistance and public affirmation of intellectuals who would be hesitant to participate in cultural programs following the Cultural Revolution; what resulted was a need to permit an outpouring of grief and emotion for the "ten years of chaos" while not undermining party rule. Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1986* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1990), 161, 198.
[23] Wu, "Major Traditions in Contemporary Chinese Art," 15.
[24] Melissa Chiu. "The Two World's of Chinese Art," *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan: Charta,

migration that Gu belongs: an outbound transition motivated perhaps less by economic mobility than by the opportunity to freely explore and cultivate artistic expression which had begun with Chinese reforms before being rescinded.

Born in 1953 in Chonqing, China, Gu began drawing everyday objects to pass time when he was sent to a farm for re-education during the Cultural Revolution.[25] A member of a family alleged to have had connections to dissident elements in academic circles, 17 year-old Gu worked in rice fields for 17 hours a day for the duration of a four-year period.[26] Daily drawing became a mitigating factor in the monotony of his period of forced labour, in which he filled multiple sketchbooks a day to pass time.[27] Gu would maintain these initial, pastoral approaches to art: upon first seeing his work, Balkind noted how Gu was preoccupied by small-scale genre scenes "clearly inspired by classical Chinese scroll painting," though likely also redolent of his isolation in the countryside.[28] Among Gu's earliest non-Chinese influences was Impressionist Vincent Van Gogh, furthering early interest in pastoral scenes while permitting exploration of new artistic concepts. For several years toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, Gu worked as a sewing machine repairman while continuing to develop his artistic abilities.[29] When universities reopened after the Cultural Revolution, he was recruited to attend as a desirable candidate in view of past scholastic achievements; he was, however, initially refused admission, again on the basis of political connections.[30]

2006), 8.
[25] Robin Laurence. "Artist Overcomes Life of Obstacles," *Vancouver Sun* (September 21, 1991).
[26] "Gu Xiong: Food Service Employee," *Food Service Employee Newsletter* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1991), 23.
[27] Laurence, "Artist Overcomes Life of Obstacles."
[28] Henry Tsang, "Shock culture: A Performance by Gu Xiong and Henry Tsang," *Front* (March-April 1991), 8.
[29] Ibid.
[30] "Gu Xiong: Food Service Employee," 23.

In the 1980s, Gu began to explore experimental streams of Chinese art, participating in a conceptual visual discourse as a part of the performance art group Xiamen Dada. He was accepted eventually to study at the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts in 1982 which led to his first visit to Canada. In the spring of 1985, the Banff Centre underwent its regular adjudication process to determine which applicants for visual arts studio residencies would be accepted for the coming winter cycle.[31] Gu stood out from a handful of applications from China, all from the Sichuan Institute, for what Balkind and his colleagues determined was a "sure hand, clear evidence of talent and a potential not evident among the others. We accepted him immediately."[32] Gu was invited for a year-long artist residency at the Banff Centre in 1986, during which Balkind, whose office was across the hall from Gu's studio, remarked that his practice was not progressing and that he continued to confine himself to small-scale genre work (fig. 3).

Balkind's insistence that Gu begin to work on a larger scale was to significantly expand his practice upon his return to China.[33] The large-scale mural *Enclosure* (1989), similar to his later *Barricade* but combining elements of performance with installation and surface-based work, was mounted for the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition. The multi-media work consisted of a series of giant canvasses on the walls and floor of the gallery uniformly depicting a wire fence and was regarded by journalist Tani Hansen as an effective synthesis of "eastern" and "western" art historical traditions (fig. 4).[34] The wire fence had a hole cut in it; in his performance, Gu stood in front of the fence

[31] Alvin Balkind, "Gu Xiong, 1991: The Crusher," *Fine Art Magazine* (January 1992).
[32] Tsang, "Shock culture," 9.
[33] Ibid.
[34] The problematic application of east-west binary discourse was frequently observed throughout my research in the field of Chinese art; Hansen's comment typifies the early reception of Chinese modernism and contemporary art as being "neither", that is, not conforming easily to east-west categorization. Tani Hansen, "A Taste for Freedom: China's Avant-garde Art and Artists," *Eastern Art Report* (Vol. 4 No. 1. 1992-1993), 41.

demonstrating that he had penetrated the barrier, but was confronted with yet another unbroken fence.[35] Among a series of artworks produced by, according to Hansen, artists "at a loss to produce anything particularly Chinese," Gu's work seemed to encapsulate the literal enclosure of the exhibit itself and the "dilemma of the protestors, who have been permitted to have the exhibition, only to find it backfiring in their faces."[36]

As mentioned above, *China/Avant-garde* was shut down by Chinese authorities shortly after opening. This failed attempt to formalize the modernist and experimental movements of the 1980s under the aegis of state authority found parallel in the suppression of the reformist Tiananmen protestors months later. Gu was present in Beijing for the protests and personally witnessed the construction of bicycle barricades.[37] His return to Banff in 1990 following the massacre situated him among the post-Tiananmen wave of artists and intellectuals who in some cases abandoned university positions in favour of liberty, career advancement or other changes abroad.[38] Yet this was a decision of some consequence: in an interview Gu reported that "when the airplane took off, I had a very big cry. And when I got to Banff, I just slept and slept – three days, only getting up when I had to."[39]

The first artwork Gu undertook after arriving in Banff was *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989*, working 14 hours a day on the drawing until it was completed.[40] The piece developed into an ink and acrylic on wove paper contour drawing made up of four sheets,

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[35] Tani Hansen. "Open doors shut on modern art," *China Now* (No. 130, Summer 1989), 17.
[36] Hansen, "Open doors shut on modern art," 17.
[37] Laurence, "Artist Overcomes Life of Obstacles."
[38] Hansen, "A Taste for Freedom: China's Avant-garde Art and Artists," 41.
[39] Frank Nowosad. "Pedals and Chains: A Chinese Artist Remembers Tiananmen Square," *Victoria Times-Colonist* (May 9, 1991).
[40] National Gallery of Canada Acquisition Proposal.

each measuring 250 x 150 cm.[41] Like much of Gu's surface-based work, *Barricade* demonstrates an "all-over" effect influenced by American Pop and the repetition of material objects; formal similarities emerge in comparison with several of his works, such as *Crushed Coca-Cola Cans* (1994, fig. 5).[42] While demonstrably influenced by the work of Andy Warhol (fig. 6), Gu's artworks advance the study of material repetition by presenting objects in a state of disintegration or destruction, the critical distance between them collapsed. Gu's interest in the presentation of surface-based work is additionally combined with the exploration of spatial concepts through performance and installation, a concern *Barricade* demonstrates in its positioning opposite piles of bicycles and projections of the lonely tank man in Tiananmen.

The vision of single bicycles emblematic of individual sacrifice subsumed with the mass of Gu's *Barricade* serve collectively as a monument, memorializing lives lost in an incident perceived widely as a collective attack on all Chinese civilians.[43] The bicycle barricades, constructed from a mode of transportation vital to the conduct of Chinese life, offered a simple analogy for the submersion of the individual beneath a collective loss.[44] In the drawing, two treads intersect the barricade of bicycles crushed by the apparent passage of a tank over top, and allude to the event's decisive outcomes: both the massacre of civilians and an end to a decade marked by optimistic belief that intellectual power and artistic endeavour could reshape Chinese society.[45] As a means of livelihood and symbol of individual sacrifice at Tiananmen, the crushed bicycle had become emblematic of the

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Stephen Bann, "Pop Art and Genre," *New Literary History* (Vol. 24, No. 1, Winter 1993), 115.
[43] Gao, "From Elite to Small Man," 149.
[44] Li Qiao, "Death or Rebirth? Tiananmen: The Soul of China," *Beijing Spring 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Documents* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc), 22.
[45] Nicholas D Kristoff, "Beijing Death Toll May Be At Least 300; Army Tightens Control Around City But Angry Resistance Goes On," *The New York Times* (Monday, June 5, 1989).

resistance and of its human costs. Gu would make several versions of the image in the early 1990s, such as the oil on canvas *Enclosure* (1990) and several silkscreen editions of *Barricade of Bicycles* (1993; edition of 50, 18 x 36 inches), and present his project in many configurations with and without performance or installation under the titles *Barricades* or the *Enclosure* series.

Gu relocated to Vancouver, British Columbia following the end of his second Banff residency in 1990. Upon its completion, *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989* was first exhibited as an installation at Banff's Walter Philips Gallery in 1989. Whether in concert with performance, installation or image, the work was subsequently presented in the 1991 Tiananmen Memorial Art Exhibition, *Echoes After the Storm*, at the Asian Centre of the University of British Columbia; Gu's solo exhibition, *Enclosure IV,* at Victoria, B.C.'s Open Space Gallery in 1991; and the international touring group exhibition *Goya to Beijing* (1990-1991) organized by the Canada-China Foundation and the Vancouver Society.[46] These exhibits established the emerging analysis of the work, each one negotiating differently its representation of political content. *Goya to Beijing* paired *Barricade* with works such as Hong Kong artist Michael C. Wong's *I Remember* (1989, fig. 7) that vividly and literally depict the human impact of violence in Tiananmen. In *Enclosure IV*, involving the largest installation of bicycles, the installation of *Barricade* participated in a more symbolic presentation of the massacre as a site of memory, exploring the prevalence of bicycles in the event and their enduring importance as a point of material access to it (fig. 8).[47] The gallery was filled with an over-abundance of bicycles both real and depicted that converged into a single spectacle underlining the

[46] For full exhibition listings, see "Gu Xiong: Biography," Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver. http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/artist/xiong/bio.html
[47] Norman Gidney. "Multi-media Artist Tells of Massacre," *Victoria Times Colonist* (March 31, 1991).

bicycle's cultural significance and the evident magnitude of the sacrifice, and by extension the tragedy of the Tiananmen massacre. "A bicycle is to a Chinese family what a car is to a Canadian family," according to Gu, who obtained donations of 300 bicycles from the public to pile into the gallery in an improvised barricade similar to those erected at Tiananmen.[48] "One bicycle is one person," he wrote. "Many bicycles are together. There is unity. It is people's power. Tanks can roll over the barricades of bicycles, but people's inner power is not conquered."[49]

In advance of *Enclosure IV*, Gu and Open Space director Sue Donaldson considered asking the Canadian government for the loan of a tank to park outside.[50] Significantly, this idea was partly thwarted by logistical issues and partly because, according to Donaldson, the Canadian government had made the decision to resume trade with China that had been suspended following the events in Tiananmen in 1989, making their request unwelcome if not untimely.[51] This anecdote reveals a notable intensification of the Canadian state's conceptualization of its relationship with China following the social repression depicted in Gu's *Barricade* and widely-observed in the Canadian media. The subsequent period between the creation of the ink and acrylic drawing *Barricade* in 1990 and its sale in 1996 to the National Gallery of Canada was marked by this ongoing public discourse of proximity and policy and significant enough to affect the final configuration the *Enclosure IV* exhibition in Victoria, B.C.

Following acquisition, *Barricade* was displayed as a stand-alone image at the National Gallery of Canada from June 30, 1998 to January 4, 1999 as part of a group

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[48] Nowosad, "Pedals and Chains."
[49] Christopher Brayshaw and Gu Xiong, *Gu Xiong: Barricade of Bicycles – June 4th 1989 and Cafeteria #1* (Surrey. BC: Surrey Art Gallery, 2007), 3.
[50] Gidney, "Multi-media Artist Tells of Massacre."
[51] Ibid.

exhibition titled *Fundamental Freedoms: The Artist and Human Rights.*[52] Curated internally by the Gallery's Janice Seline, the exhibition's fifteen artworks were selected from works in the Gallery's permanent collection that were categorized as Canadian and American.[53] The exhibition paid tribute to "artists at the forefront of the fight against human-rights abuses, while lamenting the wrongs those artists have fought."[54] On seeing *Barricade* for the first time, one critic observed that Gu had created an ambivalent image, "a design that seems abstract at first glance but, on closer inspection, takes on the shape of scores of crushed bicycles – the bicycles crushed by tanks as Chinese soldiers moved in to kills the protestors in the square."[55]

The barricade that Gu depicts, intersected by two parallel treads where a tank has passed over it, represents the weight and measure of personal sacrifice and, in the twisted and indistinguishable parts, the convergence of historical events with personal narratives in which the individual can lose definition. In the work, the crushed bicycles cannot be distinguished from one another thus collectively evoking the loss of human life. In a sense, the work's emotive character stands as Gu's lament for the necessity of his departure, coinciding with his memorialization of individual sacrifice. While an image such as Beijing artist Yue Minjun's Cynical Realist painting *Execution* (1995, fig. 9) may refer to Tiananmen but ultimately remains allegorical, Gu's work acknowledges, in the depiction of damaged bicycles, the moment of conflict between civilian and state. A depiction of a barrier erected by people to prevent the passage of troops resonates in its

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[52] "Fundamental Freedoms: The Artist and Human Rights," *National Gallery of Canada: Past Exhibitions, 1998.* http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/exhibitions/past/details/fundamental-freedoms-the-artist-and-human-rights-479.
[53] Paul Gessell, "Canada's Wart's Exposed in Art," *The Montreal Gazette* (Saturday July 4, 1998), D8.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

empathy for individual sacrifice and its political directness as well as responsiveness, although up to a point, to major movements in the early days of Chinese contemporary art such as Political Pop. The political circumstances that Gu, emigrated to Canada, was able to directly depict could not be represented so boldly by Chinese artists who remained at home. "He is a classic example of an artist straddling two cultures, both of which provide sustenance and pain and which find their way into his work in an amalgamation of early Chinese influences and western expansion and daring," according to Balkind.[56] Gu himself repeats this sentiment, saying that his work is defined by "a western style but a Chinese idea."[57] At the same time, through recurrent themes of personal experience and family history, he embraces the experience of displacement he and his family have undergone. Material objects such as bicycles or domestic items frequently appear in Gu's practice as access points to memory, repurposed for reasons specific to personal or historical narratives. For him, "our experiences in Canada are always linked to our past in China. We continually weave the old and the new together in our bodies and souls, destroyed and reborn in the clash of two cultures."[58]

The success of Gu's works such as *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989*, can be seen as symptomatic of the welcome reception abroad of the notion that China, like its artists, operates on capitalist/consumerist economic and cultural terms. Insofar as it may be categorized as a contemporary Chinese artwork, *Barricade* brings forward considerations of the market interest contemporary Chinese art but, if one considers its institutional embrace as a work by a Chinese-Canadian artist also the seeming "embrace

[56] Gidney, "Multi-media Artist Tells of Massacre."
[57] Laurence, "Artist Overcomes Life of Obstacles."
[58] Gu, *The Yellow Pear*, 5.

of the periphery by the centre."[59] Gu's artistic development and the impact of Tiananmen, *China Avant-garde* and the experience of displacement, together comprise a foundational aetiology for the creation of *Barricade* and his practice since living in Canada. The artwork's exhibition history develops frames of interpretation that consider its signifiers as tied to perceptions of historical events, cultural identifications and artistic developments.

[59] Chiu, *Breakout,* 43.

SECTION TWO:

Dissident Pop: Discourses of Contemporary Chinese Art

When exhibited as an installation, Gu Xiong's *Barricade of Bicycles* project locates the drawing within discourses of conceptual process-based art and performance.[60] These conditions of creation and display align the artwork with the modernist aesthetic streams in Chinese art circa 1970s and 1980s defined by contemporaneity, transnationality and political content. This section provides a brief overview of the reception of contemporary Chinese art outside China, demonstrating the complexities of foreign categorization as it applies to *Barricade*, with a focus on distinctions between Chinese Political and American-style Pop art subject matter, its foreign valuation, and the persistent theme of destructiveness in Xiamen Dada. In mapping the development of Political Pop to which *Barricade* in some senses belongs, the second half of this section situates the artwork within a comprehensive account of Gu's aesthetic practice in relation to what I call "Dissident Pop."

The experience of displacement provides a subtext to the analysis of Gu's practice and *Barricade*, a work whose creation in a Canadian context reduces significantly the possibility of political ramifications befalling the artist. For a Chinese artist in the 1980s the most desirable career move was to leave China, and by the early 1990s numerous artists had relocated to France, Australia, the United States and to a lesser extent Canada.[61] These artists settled abroad ostensibly felt "free" to explore aesthetic issues as they chose, reflecting often on the emotive dimensions of displacement

[60] Gidney, "Multi-media Artist Tells of Massacre."
[61] Chiu, *Breakout,* 36.

and combining sentiments of longing, resentment, injury and confusion in response to rapid political upheaval.[62] This line of questioning is largely interpreted in foreign contexts as a kind of political engagement and at the heart of Chinese contemporary art practice.[63] Literal political interpretations, rather than formal content, are often linked to signifiers of "Chineseness" (such as aspects of Chinese nationalism, political criticism or dissidence) as characteristic of Chinese artistic expression.[64] However these signifiers are in fact an amalgamation of cultural elements gleaned both from artists' experiences in China and abroad.[65] In her formulation of the concept of transexperience, Asian art historian and curator Melissa Chiu stresses "the transformation of Chineseness in different cultural contexts" and the necessity of an identity perception governed by the realities of migration or travel between mainland China and the rest of the world.[66] In art by contemporary Chinese artists, the results of transexperience are most evident in a strategic interplay between past and present and the emergence of more globalized identities through the recovery of national iconography and its juxtaposition to globalization. This interest in globalization among artists, however, is often off-set by an interest among non-Chinese audiences primarily in signifiers of "Chinese nationalism."[67] When, Tan Chang writes, "in the age of globalization and migration, one's identity has become an issue of itinerary instead of fixated, essentialist topography," the reception of Chinese contemporary art outside China is still frequently fraught by the perception of a

[62] Ibid., 37.
[63] Zhu Qi, "Do Westerners Really Understand Chinese Avant-garde Art?" *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium,* ed. John Clark (Hong Kong, New Media Art Ltd., 2000), 57.
[64] Chiu, *Breakout*, 36.
[65] Ibid., 35
[66] Ibid., 38.
[67] Ibid., 43.

singularity of "Chineseness" under antiquated geographical and experiential parameters.[68] The cachet of contemporary Chinese art and artists on the international market remains that they retain a distinctive "Chineseness" in spite of a core issue in Chinese contemporary art being the negotiation of globalized identities, or the fact that many exhibitions of Chinese art can only be held abroad for political reasons.[69] Artworks in market circulation, such as Gu's *Barricade*, exchange hands at the moment of converging valuations such as these, their possible interpretations achieving optimum flexibility in their ambivalent depiction of transexperiences.

The location, distribution, exhibition, and sale of Chinese contemporary artworks outside of China is undeniably still governed by East/West discourses as the international art market continues to frame works abroad along a binary axis of totalitarian-homeland-China and liberal-settlement-west.[70] Among the most basic presumptions symptomatic of the conceptualization of Chinese artists is that if they are not propagandists working under strict censorship (compared to artists living in the "West" who have the freedom of expression), then they must unequivocally be dissidents.[71] This discourse however has shifted somewhat in recent years. Rather than viewing contemporary Chinese artists as "catalysts of shifting geo-political perceptions," a prevailing tendency of the past two decades is to view them as proponents of commercial "sham avant-gardism," or as *dissidents.*[72] Cultural critic Rey Chow has observed that among detractors of post-liberalization Chinese cultural exports, there is a

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[68] Tan Chang, "What Asia? Whose Art? A Reflection on Two Exhibitions at Singapore Art Museum," *Yishu* 12:2 (2013), 47.
[69] Chiu, *Breakout*, 44.
[70] Aihwa Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot: Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global," *Current Anthropology* 52:4 (August 2012), 482.
[71] Ibid., 474.
[72] Ibid., 482.

further tendency toward the criticism of work that appears to commodify the experience of victimization.[73] Despite this, the appreciation and awareness of Chinese contemporary art remains largely predicated on Paul Kagawa's maxim that all "third-world-artists" are defined and viewed as "voice[s] of the oppressed."[74]

It is therefore necessary as a starting point in the examination of foreign interest in Chinese contemporary art to view it as a process of "othering" in which distinctions, both positive and negative, are drawn between involved parties due to constructions of race, nationality and other social categorizations. The growth of an international market in contemporary Chinese art is rich in socio-political textures although it is evident that the circulation of artworks is never distant from processes of comprehension through self-other differentiation. Foreign interest in Chinese art in the 1990s occurred at a time when the former Western Bloc nations beheld the decline of monolithic communist systems around the world. The prevailing belief was that this signalled a further step toward the emergence of a global civil society, a function of "structural integration of entire regions into a single modern world system."[75] As discussed above, the popularity of art from China was facilitated by the movement of Chinese artists into foreign contexts, many of whom continued to work in response to contemporary Chinese art developments and recent history.[76] It seems, furthermore, that political themes were the mainstay of these artists abroad, while artists who remained in China remained occupied with local issues and narratives rather than with broad social questions.[77] The successful creation of an

[73] Rey Chow, "From Writing Diaspora: Leading Questions," *The Rey Chow Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 31.
[74] Chang, "What Asia? Whose Art?" 38.
[75] Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 471.
[76] Chiu, *Breakout*, 11.
[77] Ibid., 35.

international market for works of Political Pop and other similar streams served, to some degree, to confirm the condition of Chinese society as totalitarian and its experimental artist dissidents; the expanding criticism of these artists, their works and continuing production, and of the market in general seems to stem from a suspicion of entrepreneurialism.[78] The question of reception is governed by a number of paradoxes. Criticism of the use of commercially viable political imagery as a form of opportunistic "self-orientalization" is itself, for example, predicated on the belief that the depiction of victimization, violence or memory of life in a totalitarian state is in fact the truest representation of that reality.[79] According to Aiwha Ong, New York critics complain that many Chinese contemporary artworks follow a formulaic approach to marketability, characterized by a Warholian repetitive style and the insertion of Mao into novel contexts.[80] This perspective of the critics thus neglects the manner in which valuation is given to these works to the exclusion of others through a conscious process of selection. In fact, this supposed "Chinesesness" in Chinese art communicated through political commercialism has been an irreducible part of its cultural appeal to collectors who otherwise have found little interest in experimental art.[81] Intellectuals and curators accustomed to thinking about "East and West" in absolute terms fail to recognize that the political dimensions or narratives in artworks are not necessarily outwardly indicative of "Chineseness" but must be read in and from the artworks themselves.[82]

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[78] Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 471.
[79] Hiu M Chan. "Displacing the East/West Binary: Aesthetic and Cultural Crossover in Film and Visual Culture," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 5 (Summer 2013). http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue5/HTML/CReportChan.html
[80] Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 474.
[81] Ibid., 482.
[82] Ibid., 474.

The emergence of Chinese contemporary art in general or Political Pop especially garnered a complex response in both the manner and arguments for its embrace or rejection. Whether rejected for opportunistic commercial avant-gardism or heralded as an expression of an emerging global civil society, the reception of Chinese contemporary art is governed by a conceptual "East and West" binary in which "Westernization" represents progress. [83] The Chinese turn toward policy liberalization and the adoption of a hybrid-capitalist system represents, on one hand, a significant shift in global affairs and the apparent prevalence of capitalism and Euro-American cultural tendencies, a change seconded in the eagerness of diplomatic missions (Deng Xiaoping to the United States in 1979; US President Ronald Reagan to China in 1984).[84] On the other hand, it is seen to represent the irony of Communist China providing vital support to foreign capitalist economies during times of hardship.[85] The subsequent paranoia and fascination that arise from the Chinese ascension is manifested in the emergence of contemporary Chinese art. A critical turn toward the examination of contemporary Chinese art by museums, galleries, auction houses, collectors, scholars and critics signalled the generalized awareness of China as an emergent partner as well as competitor. As Ong writes, criticism of Chinese art's formal aspects in 1990s was "haunted by the apparent passing of avant-gardism to Asian artists and the worry that the explosive growth of Asian art markets threatens contemporary western art."[86] The fear that American critics might cease to occupy the position of "preeminent arbiters in the world of modern art" is echoed in the

[83] Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 482.
[84] Robert Everett, "The Federal Government, Politics and National Institutions," *Canadian Annual Review of Politics and Public Affairs* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001), 37. "Chronology of U.S.-China Relations, 1784-2000." *U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian.* http://history.state.gov/countries/issues/china-us-relations.
[85] Michael Schuman, "Why Do We Fear A Rising China?" *Time* (June 7, 2011), http://business.time.com/2011/06/07/why-do-we-fear-a-rising-china/
[86] Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 482.

dual eagerness to trade with China and fear of its economic prowess.[87] The relationship between contemporary Chinese art and the international art market is one of unconscious, collective consideration of the role of China in a globalized world.

China's "local" to "global" transition, fundamental to the proliferation of Chinese artworks globally, is in large part that which furnishes recent Chinese art history with its contemporaneity.[88] While hotly contested, contemporaneity is generally defined by artworks that "respond to the visual lexicons that have prevailed in the 'global art world'," an attribute which gives Chinese art post-1989 its reinforced status outside China.[89] Contemporary Chinese art is shaped in the absence of a systematic explanation and definition of what is contemporary art or contemporary art from China more specifically. It can initially be understood as "art that self-consciously defines itself as 'contemporary'... and that is also accepted as such by curators and art critics worldwide," but is also deeply responsive to historical developments and political shifts.[90] Contemporary Chinese art is distinguished from the modernist experiments of the 1980s primarily by this narrative of transmigration and its stimulation of foreign interest, both in the circulation of artists and of artworks. It is a phenomenon that, while made up of mainland Chinese artists but crucially is not geographically limited to the Chinese mainland, is shaped by the "Chinese" qualifier and thereby distinguished from contemporary art in general, even though it is commonly accepted that all contemporary art is comprised of increasingly homogenous international visual lexicon.[91]

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 482.
[89] Chang, "What Asia? Whose Art?" 41.
[90] Wu, "A Case of Being Contemporary," 290.
[91] Ibid., 41.

The development of Chinese contemporary art up to the point of the acquisition of Gu's *Barricade* drawing by the National Gallery of Canada has a relatively accelerated history. Under Deng Xiaoping, the concurrent paradigm shift in Chinese society and the rapid economic mobilization that occurred after 1979 were paralleled and responded to in artistic practice. After the death of Mao in 1976, the redirection of the society and the changes that it underwent constituted an enormous project of redefinition, the dismantling of a former regime and its replacement with another. The modernization of the artistic idiom was no different, and the intentions, while diverse, seem to have generally engaged in a process of both reflection and progress. [92] Artists began to encounter and experiment with an entire spectrum of suddenly available artistic information from abroad, creating works in everything from academic realist to impressionist styles.[93] An influx of foreign art exhibitions "represented a crucial stage in the awakening of Chinese artists' awareness of aesthetic ideas never previously part of Chinese cultural discourse."[94] The development of new, unofficial art groups began in 1978 when artists convened to investigate similar styles or aspirations, some of which lasted as long as a single exhibition and while emblematic of progress the very existence of these groups was an ongoing test for the authorities.[95]

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[92] According to Jiang Jiehong, the devolution of centralized aesthetic standards in 1976 following the end of the Cultural Revolution with the death of Chairman Mao removed artists from many of the imperatives of authoritarian control, propelling them into a situation in which they were simultaneously stimulated by a wealth of foreign art but without an established modernist perspective with which to apply it. Jiang Jiehong. *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 5. The resultant influx of cultural information could be described as a social encounter with "foreign culture" broadly, and a situation in which artists reflected on the swift departure of a hegemonic Socialist Realist visuality they had experienced between 1966-1976. The ensuing artistic liberties were fundamental in Deng's public policy. Galikowski, "*Art and Politics in China, 1949-1986,* 158, 161

[93] Galikowski, 198.

[94] Ibid., 170.

[95] Ibid., 166.

The so-called '85 movement active in the mid-1980s, the peak of the experimental phase, consisted of the spontaneous formation of approximately a hundred different art groups who "sought to create a new form of elite culture in order to improve traditional culture and to enlighten the masses."[96] The transition of power from a strong state ideology with an intellectual elite to a concentration of agency in the growing middle class created a distinct attitude toward to the role and value of the individual in society.[97] The rationalization and purification of Chinese culture required for it to modernize were in need a corresponding humanism and a belief in the value of individual freedom. This was an invaluable concept during the economic and cultural reforms of the 1980s, a period in which humanism and individualism could successfully constitute a consumer or an independently minded, modernized artist. Among the major tendencies of the '85 movement was the belief that acts of modernization invoked for artists their own stewardship of their country's future.[98] In general terms, the aspiration of the widely fragmented '85 movement was the modernization of Chinese culture now on Chinese and not Western visual idioms. This took the form of works in varying levels of figurative cohesion and abstraction, works engaging with Chinese traditional media, works involving the deployment of Chinese characters in revised environments or the imagining of false characters.[99]

By contrast, Political Pop, a movement which began in the late 1980s, was characterized by an ambivalent attitude towards the depiction of political realities in the

[96] Gao, "From Elite to Small Man," 150.
[97] Ibid., 149.
[98] Chang Tsong-zung, "Into the Nineties," *China's New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ, 1993), 10.
[99] Ibid.

deployment of the visual language of American advertising culture.[100] The movement made visual reference to the sensibilities that developed in American and British Pop art in the 1950s, a tendency adopted by many Chinese artists in the late 1980s in efforts to attract the attention of an international market.[101] Several major Chinese artists had been turning toward Pop strategies of self-promotion and marketing since 1988, even before Tiananmen, believing that the optimism guiding the avant-garde in a search for social change had failed them.[102] Political Pop was "inspired by western contemporary art but stylistically derivative of propaganda art and a result of long-term engagement between western academic realism and socially conscious art," representing the re-appropriation of the language of mass culture in view of the Chinese national transition toward a consumer society.[103] Typical elements of American consumer products and advertising aesthetics were combined with images of Chinese Communism, political propaganda and the Cultural Revolution in what curator and art historian Gao Mingu has described as a "double-kitsch" of contrasted visual clichés.[104] The confluence of these cross-cultural sources in Political Pop "simultaneously celebrates and critiques the similarities between the ideological power of advertising and the ideological power of Cultural Revolution propaganda."[105] The movement's inception began following the liberalizations in cultural policy and the introduction of American Pop art, possibly stimulated by Andy Warhol's visit to the People's Republic of China in 1982 and a China-touring Robert Rauschenberg retrospective in 1985. A towering image in Chinese Political Pop is undoubtedly Warhol's

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[100] Lin Xiaoping, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-garde Art and Independent Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2010), 15.
[101] Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, 15.
[102] Gao, "From Elite to Small Man," 151.
[103] Chang, "Into the Nineties," 2.
[104] Gao, "From Elite to Small Man," 152.
[105] "Political Pop," *Art Speak China.* http://www.artspeakchina.org/mediawiki/Political_Pop_

1972 *Mao* silkscreen series (fig. 10), in which the artist appropriated and repurposed the Chairman's official portraits. The proliferation of works in an exploratory Pop style following the encounter with American Pop nevertheless failed to reflect on its foundational context, with neither artists nor critics fully understanding its meaning.[106] The application of Pop techniques was explicitly fame-driven by the time of its full inception in 1988, a tactic which had a significant impact on Chinese international art stars and the global market for their commodities in the post-Tiananmen period.[107] The stated significance of the turn toward consumer-friendly Pop was its implicit contention that the experimental and modernist efforts of Chinese artists in the 1980s had failed to significantly reorient the society in which they worked.[108]

Important in the dissemination of Chinese art abroad, Chinese Political Pop represented a "turn" toward contemporaneity and market-awareness among Chinese artists and, unlike many of the other modernist experiments that characterized Chinese art in the 1980s, had the marketing advantage of being recognizably "Chinese" in foreign contexts through the rapid establishment of a familiar brand.[109] This turn toward contemporaneity marked the end of a kind of historical thinking about Chinese art in a continuous sweep, a moment in which the trajectory of Chinese art history experienced an uncommon rupture.[110] The relationship between this and the outward-looking artistic body, jaded by their attempts to reform society and happy to relocate and sell art abroad, is profound. The artist Wang Guangyi, in response, famously called for a "liquidation of

[106] Yi Ying, "Choice and Opportunity: The Fate of Western Contemporary Art in China," *China's New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ, 1993), 45.
[107] Germaine Barmé. "Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing From China, 1989-93," *China's New Art Post- 1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ, 1993), 51.
[108] Jiang, *Burden or Legacy*, 15.
[109] Wu, "A Case of Being Contemporary," 395.
[110] Ibid.

[the] humanism" that had defined Chinese artistic practice from 1985, inaugurating his reflexive Pop aesthetics with *Mao No. 1* (1988, fig. 11) whimsically featuring the late Chairman in greyscale and wearing a melancholic expression.[111]

The overlapping of everyday material objects in Gu's *Barricade of Bicycles*, suggesting their place in a broader narrative of production, distribution, use, and eventually destruction, emerged and exists within the Political Pop framework, deploying material objects in repetition in a politically resonant yet still highly ambivalent image. Existing in multiplicity, each individual unit is beholden to a conceptual whole, subject to revision of understanding and purpose.[112] The exploration of objects in state of destruction, decomposition and submersion into a mass suggests a developed analysis of the state of objects, the society in which they exist, and the state of both.[113] These are among the hallmarks of the notable aesthetic stream of Chinese Political Pop to which *Barricade* belongs both stylistically and chronologically.

The fundamental ambiguity of *Barricade of Bicycles* reflects its place in a trajectory of Chinese art history rather than Western postmodern discourses in which dissimilar cultural elements are combined in pastiche for their own sake; the drawing's rendering of violence is both literal and abstract through the depiction of the aftermath (immediate absence) of violence.[114] *Barricade*'s Political Pop lineage proffers it a common recognizability in non-Chinese and Chinese cultural contexts as evidence of the historical convergence of consumerism and Chinese Communism. Endowed with a

[111] Chang, "Introduction: Into the Nineties," 3.
[112] Jennifer Dyer, "The Metaphysics of the Mundane: Understanding Andy Warhol's Serial Imagery," *Artibus et Historiae* 25:49 (2004), 35.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Gao Minglu, "Introduction," *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 10.

recognizability driven by the popularity of such artworks among foreign collectors, such works appeared to evoke the ethos of their time: the end of the Cold War and its indication of the "victory" of global capitalism and the advancement a global civil society on terms dictated by the predominant values of North Atlantic nations.[115] Political Pop's brand value was therefore significant at the moment of the Cold War's dissolution in the blending of capitalist and communist kitsch aesthetics.[116] The movement of Chinese artists into foreign contexts as a stimulant in this popularity adds a crucial element of complexity and paradox.[117]

The parameters of Political Pop are challenged by their reliance on appropriated subject matter, making the meaning of artworks like *Barricade* contingent upon the context in which they are viewed. Whereas American Pop had largely been an expression of or response to commercial culture, Chinese Political Pop espoused an ambivalent approach to cultural critique in a climate that viewed all ideas representative of Western culture as oppositional to dominant Chinese political and cultural norms in and of themselves.[118] This wide use of Pop techniques, therefore, and their presence in *Barricade* and elsewhere in Gu's work, contains signifiers that vary depending on the viewer and context. Works of Political Pop produced by artists in China that, often out of political necessity in addition to international marketability, reduced critical discourse to obscured references to totalitarian repression were largely collaborative efforts of artists and viewer; viewed through the lens of the 1989 events in Tiananmen, the allusions to

[115] Ong, *"What Marco Polo Forgot,"* 474.
[116] Chang, "Into the Nineties," 2.
[117] Chiu, *Breakout,* 11.
[118] Fei, "The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas," 74.

dissidence were possible but the efficacy of this criticism in the context of social justice remained questionable.[119]

It is from within this discursive context that I propose the term "Dissident Pop" to refer to specific instances in the foreign reception of works by Chinese contemporary artists, specifically those who developed styles consistent with American Pop art aesthetics featuring ambiguously political subject matter.[120] The early prevalence of Chinese Political Pop created a false perception of politically dissident subject matter when viewed by a non-Chinese audience; a trend that accelerated following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and global migration of Chinese artists.[121] Predicated on the apparent illustration of a violent history, the perceived presence of dissident contents in Chinese art outside China, where much of this art was made, belongs as much to interpretation (and the location of that interpretation) as to the literal rendering of political subject matter.[122]

The visual presence of memory and experience are discernible in addition to *Barricade*'s political aspects, disqualifying the contention that the work is political alone in exclusion to other values, sentiments or allusions. The artwork therefore stands as evidence of the external valuation of cultural objects in the 1990s, such as through the categorical discursive processes of "Dissident Pop," and their efficacy in the consolidation of concepts favourable to abiding political prerogatives. *Barricade* evinces many characteristics of Chinese art of the late 1980s early 1990s – particularly those

[119] Hanover, "What you see is not what you Get," 78.
[120] Gao Minglu. "From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-garde in Mainland China," *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 149.
[121] Zhu, "Do Westerners Really Understand Chinese Avant-garde Art?", 57.
[122] Ibid.

employed by artists in the prominent artistic trend called Chinese Political Pop. Yet unlike the works that typify the Political Pop movement, Gu's drawing rejects a playful examination of a violent history in its lingering images and makes a direct if ambiguous reference to a violent event and the sacrifice of individuals within it. It is additionally distinct for its formal ties to, exploration of and departure from canonical American Pop art. “Dissident Pop” thus descries the external valuation of a foreign audience, who assess the work of diasporic artists working in politically safe environments as contesting the monolith of Chinese Communist power, a mythology rooted less in comprehension than in projected political desires.

Although fully developed and exhibited in Canada while at the same time emerging from Chinese Political Pop tendencies, Gu’s *Barricade* could be seen as not explicitly containing subversive, “dissident” elements, while nevertheless serving as a conduit between knowledge of events like Tiananmen and the conclusion that events like it are unjust.[123] To close this section, I argue the ambivalence exuded in Gu’s *Barricade* is not only a critical engagement with Chinese Political Pop and an artistic response to the Tiananmen Square tragedy but also a reflection of the artist’s evolving practice through involvement with the destructive impulses of Xiamen Dada.

Conceptual and performance art emerged as an important part of the '85 movement, their proponents demanding total divorce from the trajectories of the Cultural Revolution and the movements that followed it.[124] Artists objected to utopian ideals and embraced anti-subjectivity and anti-authority and frequently sourced Dadaist works in

[123] Hantover, “What you see is not what you Get,” 78.
[124] Berghius, *Performance Art in China,* 24.

their own production.[125] Gu's induction into experimental art practice came with his association with the Xiamen Dada group of performance and installation artists, engaging him in a variety of projects designed to undermine the authority of the artistic object. These processes were largely explored by Xiamen Dada and other artists and groups through the destruction of objects both aesthetic and mundane.[126] In questioning the physical integrity of the aesthetic product, destruction became the principal strategy for critical deconstruction; the ongoing rupture and reform that became conditions of the Chinese search for modernity found their parallel in the breaking down of physical forms.[127] In November 1986 at the Xiamen Art Gallery, this tendency was advanced by Xiamen Dada when the group made a series of ephemeral works out of garbage and found objects found in the gallery's vicinity, dismantling and reassembling in the vicinity of sixty exhibited works into increasingly arbitrary compositions.[128] The performance exhibition, sometimes referred to as the *Burning Event*, ended with the incineration of its entire contents.[129] The organizers announced that because the artists "had no way of knowing where these works would be exhibited, burning them has become an end in itself... Without destroying art there can be no peace in life."[130] In his 1986 article, "Xiamen Dada: A Kind of Post-Modernism?" artist Huang Yongping responded to the event by advocating for the expulsion of all formal, subjective doctrine in artistic

[125] Ibid., 23.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Francesca Dal Lago, "The Voice of the 'Superfluous People': Painting in China in the Late 1980's and Eary 1990's," *Writing on the Wall: Chinese New Realism and Avant-garde in the Eighties and Nineties* (Groningen: Museum, 2008), 22.
[128] Berghius, *Performance Art in China,* 25.
[129] Philip Tinari, "Xiamen Dada," *U-TURN: 30 Years of Contemporary Art in China [1983-1987]*. 2.1. (New York: AW Asia, 2008).
[130] Ibid.

production, including rationalist painting.[131] He saw destruction as a viable, new direction for Chinese art, a contention achieving full articulation in his 1987 artwork *A History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (fig. 12). This work, in which the written histories of Chinese and western art literally converge, signifies the critical departure from the past that the Chinese materialization of artistic modernism represented.

The function of destructive gestures in Chinese art of the 1980s appears to favour the disruption of normal comprehension of static objects and human actions.[132] Xiao Lu's pistol shot that ended the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition in 1989 was apparently fired on the grounds that her work needed "a more destructive effect"; but the sentiment could just as easily be shifted to the exhibition generally, and the perhaps reasonable contention that the only way for it to secure legacy, notoriety or enduring relevance was for it to destroy itself through the provocation of state censors.[133] The stream of aesthetic destruction, one which evidently dominated aspects of late-1980s Chinese art, recurs in Gu's practice and affirms his affinity to it. Referring to a series of early 1990s sketches based on crushed cans, Gu said that "common objects look dead, and only come to life when they are 'Killed.'"[134] Gu's work diverges from American Pop lineage in its exploration of convergence between Warhol's neutral and flat depiction of the mundane and that of American Pop sculptor John Chamberlain and his crushed automobile bumpers (fig. 13). According to Balkind, Gu's crushed objects "are varied, and take on the same diverse character that we see in people, even, in fact, the personality in the

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[131] Martina Koppel-Yang. "The Artistic Identity: Controversies," *Semiotic Warefare: The Chinese Avant-garde 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 72.
[132] Eric Wear. "Interpretations," *China's New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ, 1993), 82.
[133] Hansen, "Open doors shut on modern art."
[134] Balkind, "Gu Xiong, 1991: The Crusher."

crusher. Thus they become individual portraits, each different from the other."[135] The ready analogy of the crushed bicycle as a model of individual suppression in *Barricade* found application in other instances of contemporary Chinese art. In a 1992 performance called *Street Action: Crush Bicycles* by Song Shuanson and Wang Yazhing, ten bicycles were loaded onto a truck in Taiyuan, Shanxi, discarded in the fast lane of the street, crushed with a steamroller, burned, painted and buried.[136] The destroyed object signifies a moment of renewal, individuation and liberation of the destroyer and the departure from the dominant cultural stream.

In works such as *Crushed Can (Molson Dry)* (1991, fig. 14), Gu furthers the discourse of historical rupture in the guise of destruction, neither celebrating nor lamenting the advent of modernity in China. The exhibition of works like *Barricade* similarly prompted questions of the "end" of artistic objects, incorporating them as distinct but harmonious elements of installations. It is significant, in light of this, that Gu did not consider his work to be oriented toward commercial Pop (as marketable art objects) despite its appropriation of American Pop and Chinese Political Pop aesthetics. In a statement regarding his mentor, Gu said Balkind told him that "if you do commercial art you'll never stand out in this culture. So I didn't get into commercial art."[137]

This statement stands in contrast to *Barricade*'s distinct commercial viability and recognition as a self-contained work of art despite its obvious political subject matter and the ephemerality of its varying presentation as also installation and performance. As discussed, critical discourse was uncommon and "dissidence" not necessarily welcomed

[135] Ibid.
[136] Li Xianting, "Notes and Illustrations to Major Trends in the Development of Modern Chinese Art," *China's New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ, 1993), 117.
[137] Laurence, "Legacy of laughter helps to drown out the tears."

of artists in China in the 1980s.[138] What gives contemporary Chinese art its "contemporaneity" is the outward engagement of Chinese subject matter with the world and the assimilation of historical discourses both familiar and foreign, many of which are readable in this work.[139] The political dimensions of transexperience, defining pillars that shape the reception of contemporary Chinese art, are vital to Gu's practice and his artworks that question the flow of Chinese artists between polarities of liberty. With *Barricade* and other works, Gu participates in a discourse of destruction both in his works' visual representation and through the erosion of the singularity of the object, locating it within a process in which it is but one part. What objecthood *Barricade* loses in its presentation as an installation or performance is regained when the individual drawing, installation, performance or a combination of these components is subsequently purchased in a commercial market. Yet this supposed "dissidence" can be little more than a facsimile of free speech in which imported models of social comment are fraught by their lack of established, attendant signifiers. Whether artistic dissent like Political Pop would achieve the same intended efficacy when conducted in a foreign context is difficult to assess, particularly when its proponents generally do not live in this context at all or rarely.[140] Participating in this conversation, Gu complicates the dimensions of *Barricade* which is otherwise a straightforward depiction of the effects of a massacre. The work centres around the failure of intellectual culture to create social change in China, a failure manifested in the closing of the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition and the Tiananmen Square massacre. Yet its readability as a literal rendering of historical violence alone (more easily legible than formal discourses of objecthood or the exploration of personal memory or

[138] Barmé, "Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing From China, 1989-93," 51.
[139] Gao, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art,* 8.
[140] Chiu, *Breakout,* 8.

conviction) complicate the motives of the National Gallery of Canada in their purchase of the drawing. As discussed in the next section, the purchase of the work reflects the perception of the work's political dimensions and apparent dissident character.

SECTION THREE:

Framing at Arm's Length: Identity Politics, Foreign Policy and the National Gallery of Canada Purchase

The global circulation of artworks by Chinese contemporary artists in the 1990s ran concurrent to a dramatic transition in international politics, resulting in a shift in their artworks' the monetary and cultural value.[141] In the Canadian context, the emergence of contemporary Chinese art was situated in a political climate that was attentive not only to China and its rising position on the world stage as opportunities for expanding trade and economic growth but also the still resonant memory of the tragedy of Tiananmen. This section discusses the circumstances and motivations surrounding the purchase of Gu's *Barricade of Bicycles* ink and acrylic on paper drawing by the Gallery in 1996, detailing the prevailing political climate within Canada and the pressures of identitarian politics informing the institution's decisions regarding acquisitions. I argue that the purchase of *Barricade* required a paradoxical categorization, exemplifying contemporary Chinese art while reflecting contemporary art production within Canada. Gu's "Canadianess" was underlined in the designation of *Barricade* as an artwork appropriate to acquire for the Canadian collection at the Gallery, while the work's subject matter thematically typified the powerful resonance of similar examples of contemporary Chinese art that encapsulated Chinese voices aimed at dissidence and protest. Given this paradoxical categorization, I argue the Gallery purchase reflected ways in which the general foreign reception of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s contained the unconscious signification of the victory of global capitalism, and the emergence of a global civil

[141] Ong, "*What Marco Polo Forgot,*" 472.

society, while simultaneously voicing apprehension of China's ascension as a world power despite its poor human rights record.[142]

Canada sought to renew relations with China during the 1993-2003 Liberal administration following a brief suspension of diplomatic ties in the period immediately after Tiananmen. Then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien signed multiple bilateral agreements and personally led four "Team Canada" diplomatic visits to the country during his ten-year tenure.[143] The Chretien government's approach to China was frequently subject to criticism for its apparently exclusive concern with the development of economic ties and limited interest in discussing the Chinese record on human rights.[144] The ongoing trade missions (which sometimes include educators and cultural figures), according to the Canadian Trade Commission:

> … generally follow a structured program in which one or more countries are visited, mission members spending an average of 1.5 to 2 days in each city within a one week period. The program includes business briefings, plenary/sector sessions, site visits (when possible), and effective networking events. Participants are introduced to potential partners in the host country and have pre-arranged business-to-business meetings tailored to their individual needs.[145]

Whereas the Canadian government under Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1984-1993) had suspended trade with China following the events in Tiananmen in 1989, the diplomatic platform upon Chrétien's 1993 election as Prime

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Everett, "The Federal Government, Politics and National Institutions," 37.
[144] Ibid.
[145] "The Canadian Trade Commissioner Service." *Site of the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service to Help Companies Do Business Abroad: Market Studies, Contacts Abroad, Services of Our Offices Abroad.* http://www.tradecommissioner.gc.ca/eng/trade-missions/general-info.jsp#Q3. October 2013.

Minister exclusively supported the advancement of human rights as economically beneficial, an incentive toward improved foreign exchange.[146] The 1994 Team Canada mission led by the newly elected Liberal government established bilateral China-Canada contracts in the amount of $8.5 billion, representing both the most prosperous trade mission in Canadian history and a significant reversal in policy.[147] The consistent diplomatic and trade initiatives led by the Chretien Liberals in the 1990s prompted former Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji to refer to Canada as China's "best friend."[148]

It was during this shift toward improved relations and trade between China and Canada, two nations with fundamental political differences, that the National Gallery of Canada sought to acquire Gu's *Barricade* drawing for their permanent collection of Canadian art. While framed as a valuable contribution to Canadian national culture, the work simultaneously created an "other," contributing implicitly to definitions of Canadian identity while crudely aligning itself with the images of dissidence, free-speech, and Chinese persons living in Canada. Gu's work, in ways established in this study as typical of Chinese Political Pop, achieved both its potential diplomatic and "othering" objectives through its evasion of firm categorization. At the time of purchase, Gu self-identified as a Chinese artist living in Canada as distinct from other possible ethnic categories (for example, Chinese-Canadian, or Canadian).[149] Notably, the acquisition proposal indicates that Gu, his wife and daughter were all Canadian citizens at the time of accession in 1996.[150] This is significant in that the artwork was therefore, from its inception to its

[146] Everett, "The Federal Government, Politics and National Institutions," 37.
[147] B. Michael Frolic, "Canada and China at 40," *Asia Colloquia Papers* (Toronto: York University, 2011), 18.
[148] Pitman B Potter and Thomas Adams, *Issues in China-Canada Relations* (Toronto, ON: Canadian International Council, 2011), iv.
[149] Frolic, "Canada and China at 40," 18.
[150] National Gallery of Canada Acquisition Proposal.

purchase, conceptualized as a product of Chinese cultural reality but understood and valued as a consequence of the artist's migration story. Yet, similar to increasingly popular indirect treatment of political subject matter in Chinese contemporary art, the very subject matter of *Barricade* – a direct and unequivocal reference to the violence at Tiananmen in 1989 – signalled that it could not have been freely created in the Chinese context, and very likely would not have been.

In view of a national policy shift towards liberal Canada-China trade and the increasing international attention to contemporary Chinese art, it is significant that the Gallery developed a concurrent interest in the acquisition of work by a Chinese artist with strong, thematically political aspects. During periods of economic growth, it is not unusual that mutual interests between nations can be expressed and bilateral relations established through mutual patronage and goodwill from one country's artists and culture to another's as a form of cultural diplomacy.[151] Writing on China-Canada relations, The necessity of achieving and maintaining a harmonious relationship is stated by Pitman B Potter and Thomas Adams, who write that "political and diplomatic cooperation on issues of direct bilateral concern [between China and Canada] and also on issues of global import remains critically important. Commercial and trade ties linking Canada with the world's second largest and fastest growing economy are of obvious significance. Cultural and civil society ties, including immigration patterns and the ancillary effects they generate, are also important."[152] American political scientist Harvey Feigenbaum writes that, where "culture is an expression of national identity, and as such is to be promoted and protected as a public responsibility," the ascent of national institutions is correlative

[151] Harvey B Feigenbaum, "Globalization and Cultural Diplomacy," (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2011), 21.
[152] Potter and Adams, *Issues in China-Canada Relations*, 1.

to the expression of matters in foreign and domestic affairs, a situation to which the Canadian context is not immune.[153] Such instances of cultural diplomacy inevitably arise in the exhibition and purchase of artworks by Asian artists outside Asia, frequently beholden to "a conflicting process engaged at once in promoting Asian identities that are seen as intrinsically different while at the same time proclaiming their sameness."[154]

In the context of the purchase of *Barricade*, it was just as important that Gu is Chinese as it was that he is a (Chinese) contemporary artist active in Canada. The acquisition would signal that Canada was "Chinese" place with a desire to represent the presence of its Chinese population – an agreeable statement that would be seen as in support of trade and the consolidation of a national culture with a global reach. Artist Germaine Koh, the curatorial assistant who worked on *Barricade*'s accession to the Gallery, explained in an interview that the purchase was not directly influenced by governmental policy.[155] Though federally funded, the Gallery operates at arms-length from the government, and curatorial decisions were not directly influenced by political climate or pressures.[156] The purchase of *Barricade*, however, a work then unlike any other in the Gallery's permanent collection, occurred at a time when governmental policy was decidedly in favour of closer Canada-China ties. It is thus unlikely in this political climate that the first-time purchase of a work by a contemporary Chinese artist would be void of any political dimension.[157]

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[153] Feigenbaum, "Globalization and Cultural Diplomacy," 21.
[154] Pauline Yao,"Full Circle: Redefining Asian Art and the Institution," *Yishu* (3.2, 2004), 47.
[155] Germaine Koh (former curatorial assistant, National Gallery of Canada), in discussion with the author, July 2013.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Further research directions include examining the acquisition of other works by Chinese-Canadian and mainland Chinese artists subsequent to this purchase.

In an interview with the author, Diana Nemiroff, Senior Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada from 1990 to 2005, recounted how she had decided during a visit to Gu's studio to purchase *Barricade*, a work she had previously seen in exhibition.[158] When the drawing was acquired, Nemiroff worked under the National Gallery's Assistant Director Brydon Smith; his approach, she said, was "quite hands-off and gave all the senior curators considerable leeway regarding acquisitions. His response would have been positive; he was open to new directions and interested in political subjects in art."[159] According to Nemiroff, at the time of purchase there was no particular awareness of contemporary Chinese art; the work was in fact purchased with budget allocations for contemporary Canadian artworks, specifically a separate allocation for works on paper. In 1996, the allocation's annual total was $50,000 and the work was likely purchased for between $10,000 and $20,000.[160] Nemiroff reported that purchases over $20,000 "would have to be balanced among various priorities. In that range, we might not have been able to purchase everything we wanted. Below $10,000 purchases could be relatively free, even spontaneous."[161] According to her, purchases representing such a significant portion of the annual allocation would have "loomed larger in such a context," and been "relatively accessible, but not inconsiderable."[162]

On the decision to purchase *Barricade*, Nemiroff stated that "there was no awareness of any political agenda to be played by federal institutions where art purchases were concerned. Each federal institution had its own mandate, laid out in its collections policy, governing directions followed and general criteria. The process was not politicized

[158] Diana Nemiroff in discussion with the author, August 2013.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.

and there were no foreign relations considerations... There was no discussion of possible reaction from the Chinese government."[163] Interested in Gu's experiences at Tiananmen and story of migration, her reasons for the acquisition were "divided about equally between what I found to be its eloquent formal resolution and its political and very personal subject matter."[164]

With the acquisition of *Barricade*, the gallery thus obtained an artwork that carried a myriad of signifiers which find their critical intersection at the moment the artist left an artistically restrictive environment for political safety and career advancement and arrived in Canada. The purchase functioned as an investment into a culturally-relevant object that would "expand the representation of artists dealing with and/or exemplifying the contemporary phenomenon of immigration and displacement," in addition to the support for a growing contemporary art scene within Canada.[165] However, although not stated, the additional cultural currency of this work, by a Chinese-born contemporary artist, was also significant given the context. Created within the democratic context of Canada, the work's content criticized China as an authoritarian, communist while never making this criticism explicit or literal. In this way it established a crucial frame of synthesis between China and Canada, while enforcing their parameters of difference.

In the Canadian context, the effect of Canadian multiculturalism has frequently been the erasure of nuances of identities between persistently diverse cultural communities.[166] According to Stuart Hall, representation in diasporic environments (although ostensibly not exclusive to them) is important to the substantiation of

[163] Diana Nemiroff, August 2013.
[164] Ibid.
[165] National Gallery of Canada Acquisition Proposal.
[166] Lily Cho. *On Eating Chinese: Chinese Restaurants and the Politics of Diaspora* (Toronto: UFT Press, 2010), 13.

identity.[167] Identity, in the context of the diasporic artist's own projected identity through art, is most effective when it is recognizable to both the self and to what art historian John Clark refers to as the diaspora's "receiving community."[168] Cultural narratives that seek to efface diversity, in favour of a mythology of sameness and equality, tend to foster representations of statistical ethnic minorities as a homogeneous group; yet this is by no means representative of reality.[169] In the context of Chinese restaurants, for example, generalized aesthetic tropes in decoration are employed and recognizable to both Chinese- and not-Chinese Canadians.[170] There exists a process of detachment from identity with submersion in a foreign culture and how, as a strategy for maintaining cultural values, representation of identity may interact at the point of caricature or hyperbole. And yet within this simplified visual system, the knowledge of the complexity of one's own identity is maintained.[171] Gu's critical engagement with and visual rendering of the 1989 events of Tiananmen Square signifies something self-conscious about this process of detachment, reconfiguration and analysis, all within the Canadian context in which *Barricade* was made. For example, *Barricade* typifies, at the same time, the global context of Chinese contemporary art, especially Political Pop art in 1990s, in ways the artist was doubtlessly aware of and whose appeal he could himself assess.

The purchase of *Barricade,* amidst a transition in view of Canada's international discourse regarding trade and foreign affairs with China, was also concurrent to a peak in discourses of Canadian cultural and race politics, marked by a wide proliferation of

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[167] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989), 223.
[168] Chiu, *Breakout*, 10.
[169] Henry Tsang. "In Search of a Cultural Centre," *Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* (Vancouver: The Chinese Cultural Centre, 1991), 8.
[170] Ibid., 47.
[171] Cho, *On Eating Chinese*, 63.

related exhibitions, knowledge production and cultural activism that had begun in the 1970s and 80s.[172] This period saw artists and other cultural producers attempt to re-inscribe a critical discourse of race into cultural affairs and processes.[173] These intra-national, anti-racism activities were not uncommon among English-speaking North Atlantic nations in 1990s, where shifting perceptions in social, racial or ethnic identities were at play.[174] In Canada, these activities emerged from within the more easily negotiated terrain of smaller galleries and artist-run centres. Canadian national institutions, in turn, began to observe how "the old civil agenda of desegregation and access to jobs was merging with, and in a sense being replaced by, a politics of representation" and reflected this through shifts in programming.[175] The Banff Centre, for example, hosted a residency called *Race and the Body Politic* in 1993, a year after the Canadian Museum of Civilization launched the exhibition *Indigena (*1992) that combined works by contemporary First Nations artists with historical and traditional objects.[176] With *Land, Spirit, Power* (1992), the National Gallery of Canada stated a commitment to represent First Nations contemporary artists, beginning the recognition of racialized identities as distinct and valued categories within the institution.[177]

The Canadian "struggle with its self-definition as a culturally-diverse nation" was reflected in the tone of these exhibitions in the 1990s, as it was in scholarship concurrent to the purchase of *Barricade* which investigated, for example, the category of

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[172] Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Perspectives: Asian Canadian Art Matters," Asian Art Archive *Diaaalogue* (July 2010). http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaalogue/Details/863.
[173] Monika Kin Gagnon, *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics* (Montreal: Artexte Editions, 2002), 12.
[174] Ibid., 22.
[175] Ibid. Gagnon, *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics,* 22.
[176] Monika Kin Gagnon, *Other Conundrums:Race, Culture and Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1999), 21.
[177] Gagnon, *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics,* 68.

"Asian Canadian" as a political project.[178] Within these discourses, there arose persistent efforts to increase the institutional representation of artists of colour and Indigenous artists. The purchase of Gu's *Barricade* advances these efforts, although not unproblematically, through the simplification of Gu identity to "Canadian" via his residential status in Canada and in reinforcing a major art institution's reputation of cultural inclusivity. In their analysis of the use of identity politics by institutions, Avigail Eisenberg and Will Kymlicka observe that dominant groups are not passive in the framing of minority cultures or traditions, but apply frames to these traditions "in such a way as to preserve their own power and authority against potential challenges."[179] The personal rewards that artists, for instance, accrue with individual recognition by national institutions are inviting but ultimately conceal "ongoing processes of assimilation or exclusion of vulnerable groups."[180] In Canadian museums, the institutional professionals involved in the circulation of artworks by non-white artists are generally white, a Eurocentric norm deemed necessary to "authorize" and permit discussion of objects as art rather than ethnographic subjects.[181] With implications of engagement "at an ideological level with definitions of what constitutes and is valued as culture, and more specifically, national culture," this inequity is compounded by racial assumptions and expectations from artists of minority groups (i.e. not of Canada's "founding" nations, British or French) to produce artworks that explore solely issues of cultural identity.[182] While Nemiroff referred to the official "arm's length" relationship between the federal

[178] Jim, "Perspectives: Asian Canadian Art Matters."
[179] Avigail Eisenberg and Will Kymlicka. *Identity Politics in the Public Realm: Bringing the Institutions Back In* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 3.
[180] Ibid., 3.
[181] Gagnon, *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics*, 47.
[182] Ibid., 43, 47.

government and the National Gallery of Canada, there is nevertheless "a manner in which [the institution] still represents state-sanctioned culture," processing and framing objects, identities or events in accordance with prevailing Eurocentric ideologies.[183]

These developments in discourses of identity in relation to Canadian institutions are related to significant demographic changes within Canada in response to global politics. From the mid-1980s to approximately the year 2000, Canada saw an influx of migration from Hong Kong in anticipation of the return of the former British colony to the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997.[184] A crisis concerning the shape of mainland administration of Hong Kong motivated a mass migration abroad following the signing of an accord of retrocession by British and Chinese authorities in 1984.[185] Canada took an aggressive stance on the recruitment-style admission of skilled immigrants from Hong Kong who fearful the handover wished to emigrate, leading to allegations from British scholar George Segal of "immigration without responsibility."[186] Nevertheless, Hong Kong migrants seeking refuge from feared economic and civil sanctions generally preferred Canada over other destinations, particularly Vancouver. The migration tendency only intensified post-Tiananmen: Canada received around 30,000 arrivals from Hong Kong every year between 1991 and 1996.[187] The migration was to profoundly impact cities like Vancouver, providing a significant infusion of economic growth through the arrival of skilled labourers and demographic boom.[188] The 1996 Canada census reported

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[183] Gagnon, *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics*, 43.
[184] Ming K Chan, "Friends Across the Pacific: Links Between Canada and Hong Kong in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," *The China Challenge: Sino-Canadian Relations in the 21st Century* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa press, 2011), 84.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ashley Ford, "Enter the dragon: Hong Kong and Vancouver have ties that won't be severed with the raising of the Chinese flag next week," *The Province* (Vancouver, BC: June 26 , 1997).

that the greater Vancouver area had 279,040 residents self-identifying as Chinese, comprising 49 per cent of the city's "visible minority" population.[189] The impact on Canada's third-largest city was so great that, when fears regarding the Chinese administration of Hong Kong deflated post-1997, Vancouver found itself in economic jeopardy in view of a mass exodus of Hong Kong residents back home.[190]

Nevertheless, the Vancouver environment between 1989 and 1997 was highly politicized, and it is here that the frequent and early exhibition of *Barricade* inscribes the work with its Dissident Pop characteristics. We have seen in this study how the formal aspects of Gu's *Barricade* drawing made it inalienable from a trajectory of Chinese art, particularly of Chinese trends in Political Pop. The appreciation of the apparent value of the work in Canadian and global cultural context must also take into account that the drawing in fact belonged to a larger conceptual project that also at times featured donated bicycles, projections and other elements such as performance. *Barricade*'s exhibition record reveals its frequent display in Vancouver-based exhibitions with political themes that would have resonated with an expatriate Chinese (including Hong Kong) population that wielded increasing economic and cultural sway.[191]

A major figure in the Vancouver scene was Zheng Shengtian, an artist and curator who relocated to the city post-Tiananmen at around the same time as Gu. Zheng, an organizer of the *Echoes After the Storm* Tiananmen memorial exhibition, has played a significant role in connecting Chinese contemporary artists with the international

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[189] "Visible Minorities: Where They Live," *BC Stats: 1996 Census of Canada,* Government of British Columbia. http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/Census/1996Census.aspx

[190] Scott Morrison, "Vancouver seeing exodus of Hong Kong Chinese," *Financial Post* (Toronto, ON: April 1, 1997).

[191] The Tiananmen memorial show, *Echoes After the Storm,* traveled to Hong Kong following its 1991 exhibition in Vancouver, deepening the political dimension in the relationship between the two cities. "Gu Xiong: Biography." Notably, to date *Barricades* has been exhibited primarily in Canada

community both through exhibitions, promotion and authorship both in China and abroad.[192] Serving as conduit between the Hong Kong contemporary art gallery Art Beatus and its Vancouver branch director, Zheng's role in the promotion of Chinese contemporary art in Canada critically impacted its frames of reception. The political climate in early-90s Vancouver inspired by Tiananmen and the Hong Kong handover made the appeal of political subject matter significant to the distribution of artists and their visibility as political figures. It was most likely in this environment that Gu's *Barricade* was first seen and noted by Nemiroff previous to its purchase and display. The politicized context of exhibitions such as *Echoes After the Storm* and *Goya to Beijing* framed the emergence of this work in the politicized cultural climate of Vancouver, bolstering its appeal at time when discourses of identity politics and critiques of institutional representation were in full force.

While Nemiroff states that there was no particular awareness of Chinese contemporary art at the time of Gu's *Barricade* drawing's purchase, the Gallery was nevertheless turning its mandates toward the representation of Chinese subject matter inspired by its political dimensions. These initiatives were led largely by Nemiroff, who established a reputation for the composition of progressive and challenging curatorial projects during her 21 years at the Gallery.[193] The mid-1990s witnessed an increasing responsiveness from the Gallery to currents in contemporary art and the politics of representation and interest in contemporary art by Asian artists particularly accelerated

[192] Zheng founded the English-language *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* with artist Ken Lum in 2002, and *Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art* with Hank Bull in 1999. Joni Low, "Zheng Shengtian Helps Bring Best of Asia to Art Toronto," *Canadian Art* (October 23, 2012). http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/10/23/zheng-shengtian-bridge-builder/

[193] "Nemiroff's modus operendi is an activist agenda... passionate, intelligent choices, whether they are popular or not." Curator Kitty Scott, nominating citation for Diana Nemiroff for the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts (awarded, 2012). http://ggavma.canadacouncil.ca/en/Archive/2012/Winners/Diana%20Nemiroff.aspx

following *Barricade's* purchase, in which Nemiroff played a pivotal role. Prior to 1996, the Gallery's collection of "Asian" artworks was primarily a large endowment of historical sculpture from the Indian subcontinent.[194] Two eighteenth-century ink paintings by Hua Yan, which had been gifted to the Gallery in the 1960s, were the only Chinese artworks in its permanent collection.[195] After the acquisition of Gu's work in 1996, the Gallery purchased six additional contemporary Chinese artworks: three map-books by Chinese artist Hong Hao (purchased in 2000) and three ceramic busts by Ah Xian (purchased in 2005), who is categorized as "Chinese-Australian." Vancouver-born contemporary artist of Chinese heritage Ken Lum had work accessioned by the Gallery in 1992 and 2000.[196] According to Gallery's dossier on the artists, Lum's work explores issues of race and class relevant to tendencies in representational politics, the Vancouver art scene and shifts in Gallery's mandate through Nemiroff.[197]

Barricade's purchase also occurred on the horizon of the international group exhibition *Crossings*, presented at the National Gallery of Canada from August 7 to November 1, 1998, curated by Nemiroff. The acquisition of Gu's *Barricade* is significantly connected to *Crossings*, which included works by Chinese contemporary artists, including Chinese-born, New York-based artist Xu Bing's *Book of the Sky* which was displayed in *China/Avant-garde* in 1989.[198] Among many highly successful

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[194] "About the Collections: Asian Art," *National Gallery of Canada.* http://www.gallery.ca/en/about/934.php
[195] "Hua Yan," *Collections: National Gallery of Canada.* http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artist.php?iartistid=2548
[196] "Collections: Ken Lum," *National Galery of Canada.* http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artist.php?iartistid=3389
[197] Ibid.
[198] Paul Gessell, "Courageous Crossings: The Gallery Veers from the Safe to the Daring," *The Ottawa Citizen* (Ottawa, ON: August 8 1998).

exhibitions she has curated, Nemiroff has described this exhibition as her favourite.[199] Critic Paul Gessell wrote that "*Crossings* is about exiles, the experience of migrants, refugees and immigrants coping with a new land while still rooted in the old. Most of the 15 artists are themselves exiles, living in Canada, the United States or Europe; many are from repressive or war-torn countries."[200] With this exhibition, Nemiroff astutely addressed persistent issues in the shape of Canadian arts and culture in response to world affairs: "...with immigration, with everybody moving around, it's harder and harder to speak about identity... I decided that I wanted to deal with the subject of displacement, to show in an exhibition how complicated such a concept could be."[201]

Stirring controversy that was widely addressed in Canadian media*, Crossings* was largely composed of installation works with a distinctive (if ambivalent) political dimension.[202] *Barricade* can be seen as playing significant early role in this turn in the Gallery's exhibition initiatives. Both in formal articulation and subject matter, the work was precedent to a range of acquisitions and exhibitions at the Gallery by Asian Canadian artists. In the concurrent tension of renewed relations between Canada and China, a massive and politically motivated relocation of Hong Kong residents to Vancouver, and the rise of contemporary Chinese art in aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, *Barricade*'s purchase signalled an important moment of reflection on the changing shape of Canadian society, its relationship to its people and to the world.

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[199] "Diana Nemiroff: Faculty of Arts: Department of Visual Arts," *University of Ottawa,* Ottawa, ON. *http://www.visualarts.uottawa.ca/faculty/nemiroff.html*
[200] Gessell, "Courageous Crossings."
[201] "Crossing Exhibition Shows Canada's Transformation," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, ON: March 28, 1998).
[202] Frederica Wilson, "Defending Diana," *The Ottawa Citizen* (October 18, 1998).

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined how contemporary Chinese (Canadian) artist Gu Xiong's 1990 drawing, *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989*, ended up being acquired by the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection of Canadian art, by tracing the development of Political Pop to the moment of *Barricade*'s accession in 1996. My critical analysis suggests that *Barricade* – conceived and witnessed in China and executed in Canada by an artist straddling both countries – responds simultaneously to both Chinese and Canadian contexts, by bringing forward discussions on human rights, divergent economic systems, and the international art market, as well as cultural exchange. Gu's *Barricade*, as a Chinese-Canadian artwork, paved the way for the transition into a globalizing acquisition policy and the diversification of what is conceptually valuable to the Canadian national art collection. Subsequent acquisitions of work by contemporary Chinese and other Asian artists living and working in Canada account further for the National Gallery's globalization of its permanent collection and a simultaneous negotiation of "Canadianess."[203]

In the last section, I argued that the Gallery's acquisition of *Barricade* was motivated by the work as being an example of both contemporary Chinese art and Canadian art by discussing the various political and cultural contexts in the mid-nineties that would have informed and compelled the Gallery to go through with the purchase. As an example of what I propose to call Dissident Pop, as discussed in Section Two, the cultural cachet of *Barricade* benefited from the assumption that the artist was at risk in the work's production, and that the artist is therefore an active dissident, while at the same

[203] Gagnon, *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics*, 22.

time was also invested with associations to discourses of freedom of expression, the history of Chinese migration to Canada, and diplomatic relations between Canada and China. Approaching *Barricade* as Dissident Pop enabled the discussion to work against the view of the work as solely an indication of malaise in Chinese communism expressed through the growth of dissident artistic strands which in fact are responding to art market demands, dislocation and relocation in foreign environments.

Gu's *Barricade* is ostensibly political; but it is also intensely personal. It corresponds to memory, and it is memory and experience, not a political agenda, which gave rise to this work. For the purposes of this study, its political subject matter, not contrived to stimulate a critical discourse on political reform, was most significant for how it was received and valued as cultural capital. These contents revealed the impossibility of extracting this work from the trajectory of Chinese art history. Its Pop art derivations were not directs links to a European-American art discourse so much as evidence of the encounter of Chinese artists with the "west" culturally.

Ultimately, as the first purchase by the National Gallery of Canada of a work by a contemporary Chinese artist who immigrated to Canada and obtained Canadian citizenship, Gu's *Barricade* and this history of its journey has been significant in bringing forward this discussion of the range of cultural, social and economic developments in both contemporary Chinese and Canadian art contexts from the 1970s to the 1990s, signalling the continuously changing shape of global economic ties and future becomings of both Chinese-Canadians and transnationals.

FIGURES

fig. 1 Gu Xiong. *Barricade of Bicycles,*1991. Ink on paper. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/servlet/imageserver?src=WI745416&ext=x.jpg]

fig. 2 Jeff Widener. "*Tank Man,"* June 5, 1989. Photograph. Associated Press.[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/d/d8/Tianasquare.jpg]

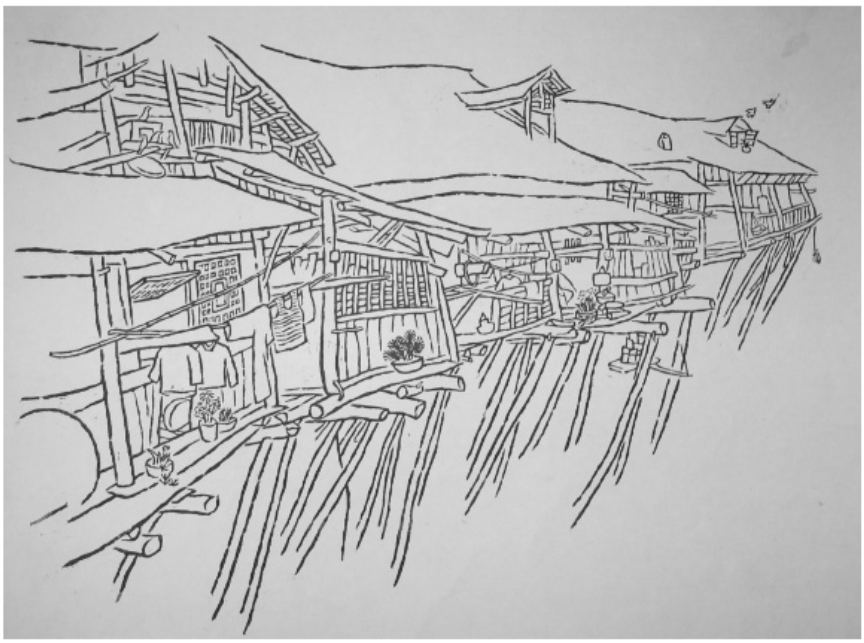

fig. 3 Gu Xiong. *Untitled (Chinese Village Row)*, ca. 1985. 17.5 x 20.5 inches. Woodblock print. Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver. [http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com]

fig. 4 Gu Xiong. Photograph of Gu Xiong with *Enclosure* installation, 1989. [http://www.banffcentre.org/]

fig. 5 Gu Xiong. *Crushed Coca-Cola Cans*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas.
[http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~dmg/html/exhibitions/0304/bing_xiong/]

fig. 6 Andy Warhol. *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, 1962. Silkscreen print.
[http://academics.smcvt.edu/gblasdel/art/A.%20Warhol,%20Green%20Coke%20bot.jpg]

fig. 7 Michael C. Wong. *I Remember*, 1989. Lead pencil on paper, coloured pencil. [http://www.goyatobeijing.org/gallery/wong_03.html]

fig. 8 Gu Xiong. *Enclosure*, 1991. Bicycles. Dimensions variable. Open Space Gallery, Victoria, BC. [http://www.openspace.ca/node/634]

fig. 9 Yue Minjun. *Execution*, 1995. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/5/5f/Chineseart_Executionpainting.jpg]

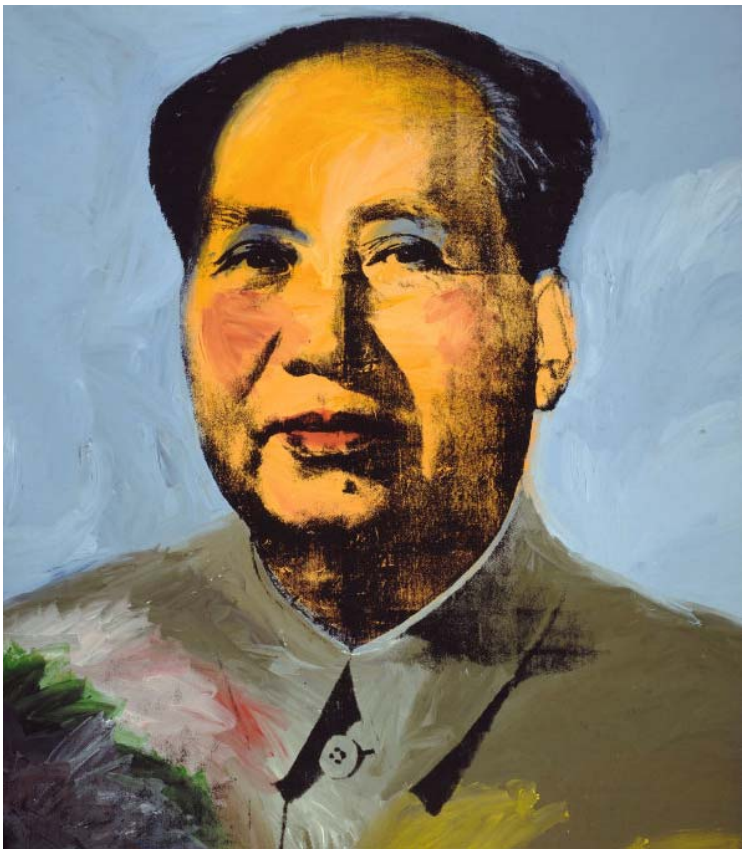

fig. 10 Andy Warhol. *Mao*, 1973. Silkscreen print. 176 x 136 inches. Art Institute of Chicago. [http://www.artic.edu]

fig. 11 Wang Guangyi. *Mao No. 1*, 1988. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [http://www.artmarketmonitor.com]

fig. 12 Huang Yongping. *A History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987. [http://visualarts.walkerart.org/oracles/details.wac?id=2453&title=Writings]

fig. 13 John Chamberlain,. *Remnant Gardens*, 1986. Automobile bumpers. Pace Gallery, New York. [http://www.pacegallery.com]

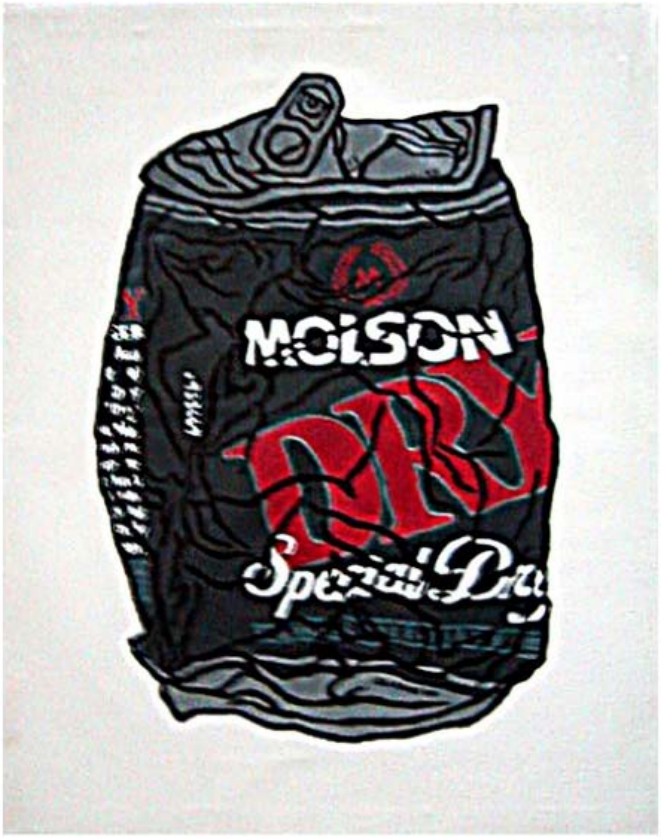

fig. 14 Gu Xiong. *Crushed Can (Molson Dry)*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas. Diane Farris, Vancouver. [http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/secondary/xiong.htm]

FIGURES

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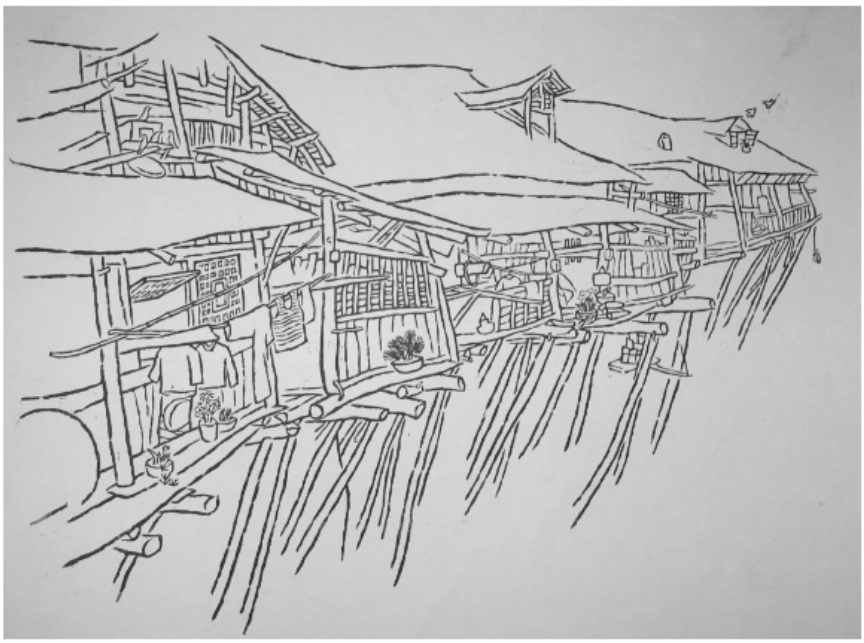

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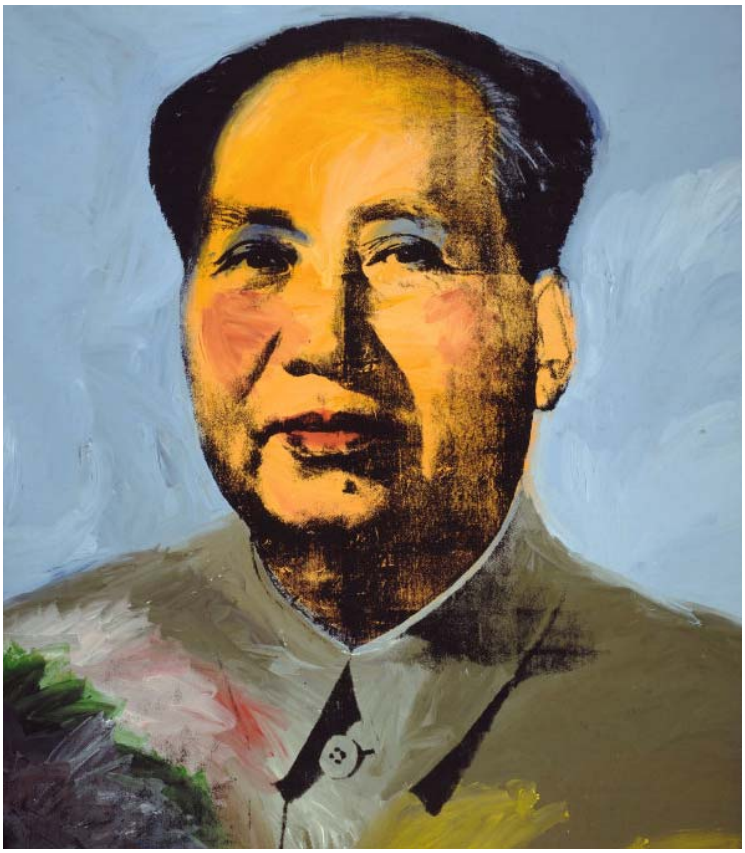

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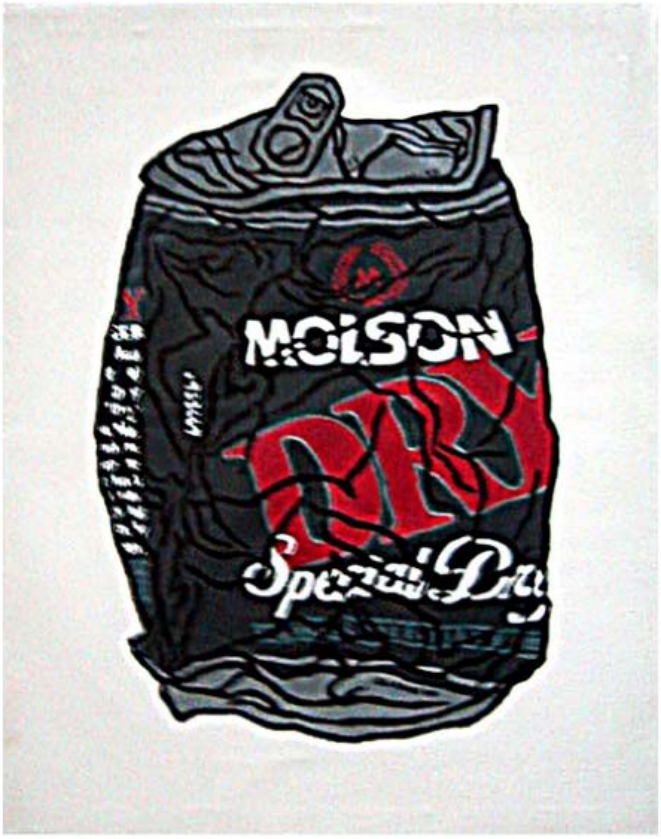

fig. 14 Gu Xiong. *Crushed Can (Molson Dry)*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas. Diane Farris, Vancouver. [http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/secondary/xiong.htm]

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