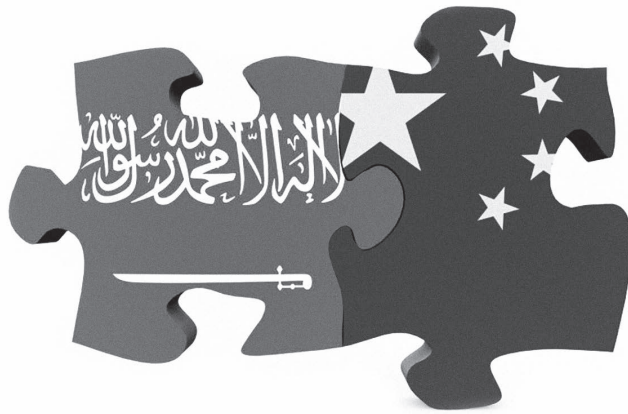


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# Crossing the river by feeling the stones



## ON THE POLITICS OF OPENING AND REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA AND CHINA AT THE 1ST DIRIYAH BIENNALE

At the inaugural Diriyah Biennale, the first contemporary art biennale of its kind in Saudi Arabia, an installation of sculptures from Wang Luyan's *Corresponding Non-Correspondence* series (2010–19) took centre stage in the first section of the show. Figures rendered in paper, card, wood and metal were poised on spartan plinths and within box frames, each expressing the artist's interest in paradoxical relations, with descriptive titles amplifying each equation. *Two People Who Walk Along the Right/Left Side While Walking Towards/Away from Each Other* (2011), for instance, shows two steel figures positioned side by side in walking position, their formal distillation making it possible to see them going in both directions the work's name describes.

In 2019, the artist gifted ten large-scale versions of such walking figures, collectively titled *The Walkers*, to Whittier College in the United States, where, in a reflection of art imitating life, the artist's brother studied in the 1990s, just as Wang Luyan in turn befriended an alumnus from the college in China at the same time. "*The Walkers* appear to be advancing and retreating simultaneously – the uncertainty of the direction" they "are headed towards represents the ambiguity of one's dreams and goals," Wang explained on the occasion. "People may have already deviated from their goals even though they think they are moving toward them. While moving towards the future, one is also moving backwards towards the unforgettable past."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'College Receives Sculpture Donation from Famous Chinese Artist', Whittier College website, 26 March 2019; <https://www.whittier.edu/news/tue-03262019-1203-pm/college-receives-sculpture-donation-famous-chinese-artist>

Such is the nature of progress, perhaps, as witnessed by Wang in China, where, as scholar Elizabeth J. Perry points out, “efforts to commingle revolutionary and pre-revolutionary symbolic resources” in the service of cultural governance, have been preceded by “episodes in CCP history when party leaders actively encouraged vicious attacks on elements of Chinese tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Among them is the Cultural Revolution’s violent call to obliterate “The Four Olds” – “old things, old ideas, old customs and old habits” – in the 1960s and 1970s, whose demonization of traditional Chinese culture, given its associations with imperialism and feudalism, and bourgeois Western influences writ large, would later give way to a re-orientation of nationalist propaganda that sought to unify China’s imperialist and revolutionary past in the service of what Xi Jinping has, in the twenty-first century, referred to as the “great revival of the Chinese nation.”<sup>3</sup>

It is from within this frenetic movement between past and future—always located in a present rendered thickly static by intersecting politics, temporalities, trajectories, commonalities and subjectivities—that Wang has operated as an artist. First, as a member of the avant-garde Stars Group, a collective of mostly self-taught artists who famously staged an exhibition in 1979 on the gates (and nearby trees) of the country’s most prestigious art institution, the China National Art Gallery (now known as the National Art Museum of China), from which they were excluded due to their lack of formal training in one of the state’s art academies.<sup>4</sup> That ballsy, guerrilla show was a sign of the times. Mao’s recent death had created a path for his successor, Deng Xiaoping, to introduce reforms that opened up the economy to foreign investment and accelerated development, whose liberalizing knock-on effect was the opening up of China not only to the world at large, but also to itself.

“At that time, there were a lot of interesting people around artists, like poets and musicians,” said Stars member Huang Rui, who was also included in the Diriyah Biennale, when 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong Kong presented a fortieth anniversary exhibition of that 1979 Stars show. “Deng Xiaoping’s movement for Reform and Opening Up gave us a certain confidence, and sometimes confidence was all we had.”<sup>5</sup> When the Dongcheng Branch of the Beijing Public Security Bureau ordered the artists to remove their works on that exhibition’s third day – because they were “affecting the normal life and social order of the people” – the Stars staged a protest on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>6</sup> As *CAFA Art Info*’s Yang Zhonghui writes, after they marched, the show’s “detained paintings were returned and the closed exhibition was allowed to resume.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, ‘Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: “Re-Orienting” Party Propaganda’, in *To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power*, Vivienne Shue and Patricia M. Thornton eds, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 29–55. Viewed online at Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Core; <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/to-govern-china/cultural-governance-in-contemporary-china-reorienting-party-propaganda/FDC3BC7F5D16463D0379C529ED31D424>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

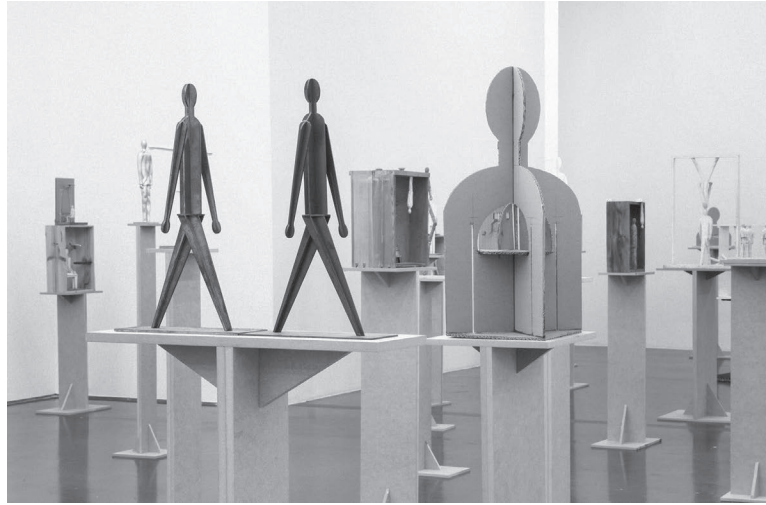
<sup>4</sup> Yang Zhonghui, “‘Stars 1979’: A Retrospective Approaching Historical Reality”, *CAFA Art Info*, Central Academy of Fine Arts, 14 January 2020; <https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/opinions/reviews/details/8327047>

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Movius, ‘Stars Art Group, China’s artistic freedom fighters, celebrate 40th anniversary’, *The Art Newspaper*, 28 March 2019; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/03/29/stars-art-group-chinas-artistic-freedom-fighters-celebrate-40th-anniversary>

<sup>6</sup> Yang Zhonghui, “‘Stars 1979’: A Retrospective Approaching Historical Reality”, *CAFA Art Info*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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Another Stars exhibition followed in 1980, this time taking place inside the National Art Museum,<sup>8</sup> just one more milestone that defined a radical new wave in Chinese contemporary art that rode the momentum of Deng's reforms. But then that momentum reached a decisive turning point in February 1989, when the *China Avant/Garde* exhibition opened at the National Art Museum, only to be closed down after artist Xiao Lu shot at her own installation. Months later, a student uprising networked across the country like wildfire, sweeping all walks of life into a moment of unprecedented hope, until that movement, which effectively called for more open dialogue between the people and their government (democracy was one call, but not the only demand) was snuffed out in a military crackdown centred around Tiananmen Square in Beijing that June. (An event that the state is still regrettably unable to engage with in earnest as part of the people's history.)

While many artists left China following the events of June 1989, Wang Luyan remained. Having co-founded the New Measurement Group with artists Gu Dexin and Chen Shaoping in 1989—a previous iteration was formed in 1988—the artist collective leaned in to a conceptual practice that prioritized an objective, collective approach to art. Bound by a “language of regulations”, the New Measurement Group removed nearly all traces of their individualism.<sup>9</sup> In the five soft-bound books they created in the 1990s, known as the *Analysis* series, for example, each artist is represented by “a symbol, a coloured line (identified as A1, A2 or A3, for instance), or other signifiers that would be used to create a composite image based on a set of collectively pre-defined rules.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Bailey, ‘Mirror, Mirror—Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World’, *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 17, no. 3, May/June 2018, p. 92

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 23 in Stephanie Bailey, ‘Mirror, Mirror—Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World’, *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*

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Read in context, the collective, on the one hand, responded to the excessive subjectivity they perceived in Chinese contemporary art at the time. But that subjectivity was, in fact, a radical gesture among artists amid the conformist demands of state communism—as highlighted in 1993, when artist Song Shuangsong staged a performance at the National Art Museum in retaliation against the removal of around eighty percent of the works in an exhibition titled *Country Life Plan*, deemed by officials to be lacking in their positive representation of “life in the People’s Republic.”<sup>11</sup> In response, Song went to the gallery with a barber and proceeded to have his long hair—“a symbol of his individualistic way of life”—cut off.<sup>12</sup> “You would have thought, to witness the scene that ensued, that the Government of Deng Xiaoping would be destroyed by this haircut; it was as though Song Shuangsong had been caught holding a bomb rather than a performance,” wrote Andrew Solomon in *The New York Times*.<sup>13</sup> “Everyone was thrown out of the room. The doors were secured with heavy chains and padlocks. The exhibition was closed down permanently and immediately. Song was led out roughly between two guards.”<sup>14</sup>

Solomon quotes Gu Dexin in his article, whose response to Song’s action points to another potential motive, on the other hand, behind the New Measurement Group’s rational logic—beyond resisting a romantic individualism and embracing socialist conformity. “Imagine,” the artist laughs, “having hair and clothes such that people in the market or at the bus station could tell you were an artist!” to which Solomon concluded: “Their individuality is infinitely more powerful because it is camouflaged.”<sup>15</sup> It’s an observation that hits anywhere in the world where artists have learned to conform in order to subvert the state system to which they must answer as citizens, and points to the refraction of meaning that can occur as a result—like when practices do not necessarily articulate their intentions clearly whether in their work or in their explanation of it, often on purpose and for their own safety.

As I have written before, the New Measurement Group pushed the idea of objective collectivism to its limits, offering, as Hou Hanru called it, a “counter propaganda” to the propaganda, thus exploring “a new model of linguistic research which could function as an alternative to the ideologic-centric one.”<sup>16</sup> What “the artists had recognized,” Hou noted, was “the need to create a constructive space for real modernization and democracy in China”<sup>17</sup>—a need that reflected itself quietly, and often with irony, in the work of artists from this period.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Solomon reported

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Solomon, ‘Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China,’ *The New York Times*, 19 December 1993; <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/19/magazine/their-irony-humor-and-art-can-save-china.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> See Stephanie Bailey, ‘Mirror, Mirror—Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,’ *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 17, no. 3, May/June 2018, p. 92

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Quoting Hou Hanru from *On the Mid-ground*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002, p. 28

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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in his article: “What looks radical often is radical, but not always in the ways you think. In Nanjing dialect, the sounds ‘i luv yoo’ mean ‘Would you care for some spiced oil?’ ‘What the West does, encountering our art,’ the artist Ni Haifeng said, ‘is to think we’re saying we love you, when we’re only having a private conversation about cooking.’”<sup>19</sup>

Take, for example, Wu Shanzhuan’s *Today No Water* (1986–97), which comes from the artist’s *Red Humour* series: hundreds of pages of A4 paper filled with notes, drawings, diagrams, and lists, mostly written in red, referring to a common public notice that characterized life in China at the time—a gesture designed to exhaust meaning by pushing it to a nonsensical abstraction. Or Zhang Peili’s iconic *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* 水 (1991), which features CCTV news anchor Xing Zhibin reading a dictionary definition for water, amplifying the fact that, while she reported on the student movement in April and May of 1989, the events of 4 June went unmentioned on that day’s broadcast. *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* 水 is now on view in Hong Kong as part of the Sigg Collection exhibition at M+, with its poignancy amplified by the mantra of the recent Hong Kong protest movement, ‘Be Water’, which in the context of the New Measurement Group could translate to how the trio used the state’s logic to operate with, for, and against it, all at once. (Plausible deniability is not only a tool for fascists.)

The *Analysis* books themselves appeared in different languages, based on where the books were showing—mostly abroad, with Chen Shaoping counting only one time the Group showed in China.<sup>20</sup> *Analysis III* (1994), for example, re-configures ‘Letter to Beijing’ by ZERO artist Gunther Uecker, which was sent to the New Measurement Group ahead of a joint exhibition organized by curator Hans van Dijk in cooperation with the Goethe Institute. Apparently, the exhibition was meant to take place at the Hanmo Art Gallery in Beijing, but since Uecker’s letter mentioned human rights, it was not allowed to go ahead, and was eventually staged at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in Berlin in 1995, reflecting the strong links that were forged between European art institutions and contemporary Chinese artists in that decade and beyond.<sup>21</sup> (In 2007, ahead of the Beijing Summer Olympics, which was to showcase China’s twenty-first century ascension to world power, the Chinese government invited Uecker to finally show *Letter to Beijing* at the National Art Museum of China, where he presented the UN Declaration of Human Rights on nineteen large screens with words partially obfuscated by black paint.)

Around 1995, the New Measurement Group disbanded—a reaction to their increasing popularity among Western institutions in particular—and destroyed most of their work. Chen Shaoping apparently stopped making art almost immediately, followed by Wang Luyan’s retreat from the Chinese art world in the late-1990s and early 2000s, with Gu Dexin abandoning his artistic career in 2008.<sup>22</sup> “When recently asked why he had given up exhibiting his works from the mid-

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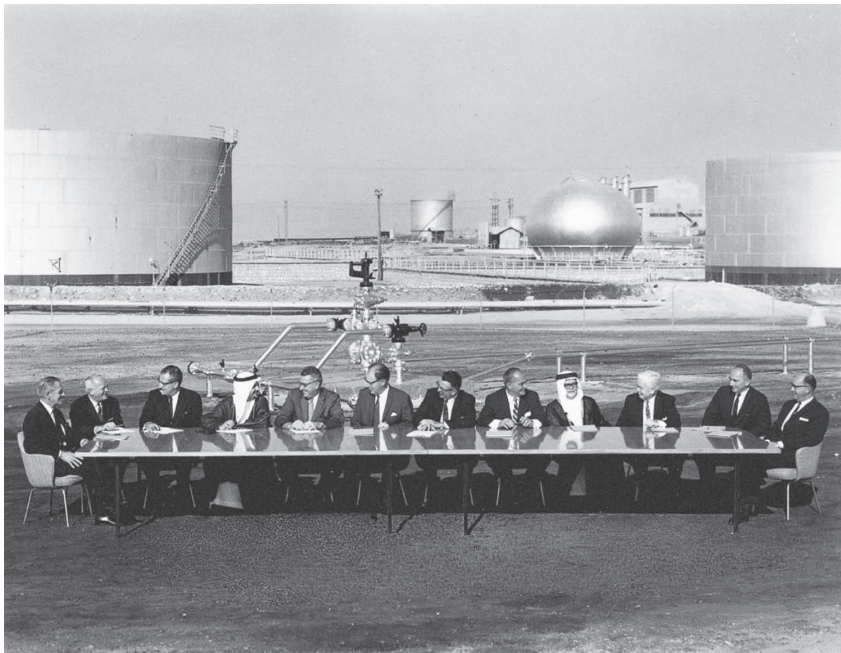
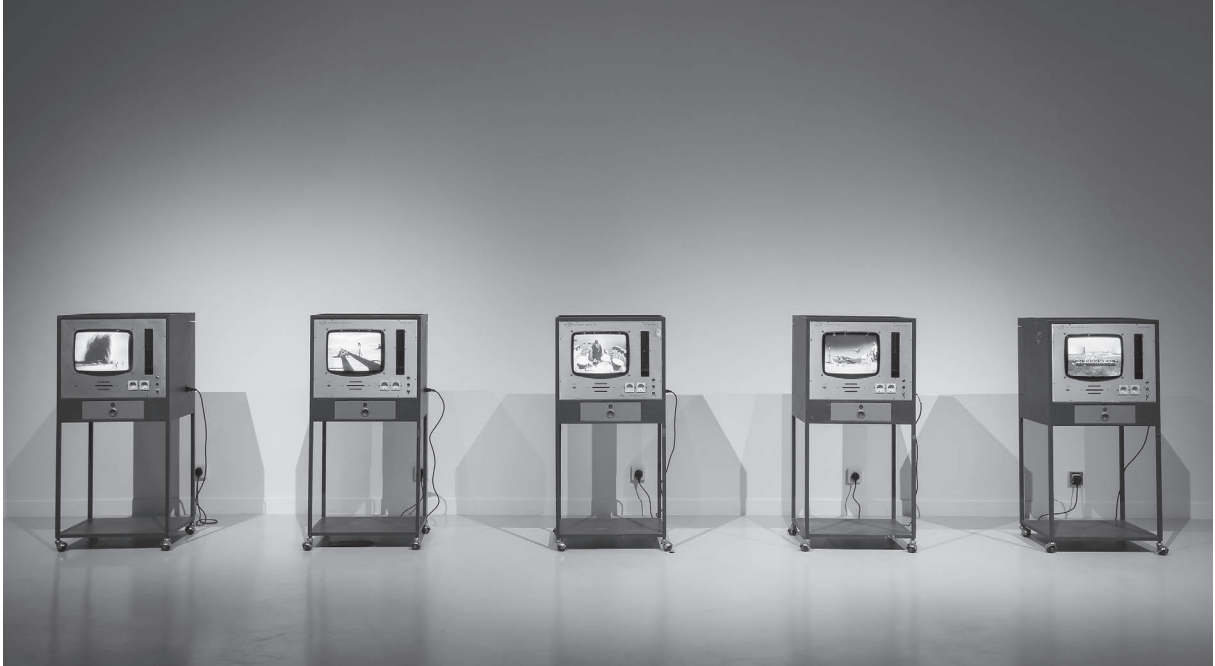
<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-garde Art in New China*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2008, p. 206

<sup>21</sup> See Fiona He, ‘Introduction: Hans Van Dijk Archive’, *Ideas Journal*, Asia Art Archive, 1 December 2012; <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas-journal/ideas-journal/hans-van-dijk-archive>

<sup>22</sup> Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu, ‘Crimes Without a Scene: Qian Weikang and the New Measurement Group’, *e-flux journal*, Issue 65, May 2015; <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/65/336470/crimes-without-a-scene-qian-weikang-and-the-new-measurement-group/>

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1990s, Wang remarked matter-of-factly that there was simply no suitable ‘soil’ for his ideas to take root in,” wrote curator Carol Yinghua Lu in 2007. “During that time Western influences and market forces practically hijacked the dominant narrative within Chinese contemporary art, promoting a homogeneous practice that thrived on formulaic and graphic reiterations of China’s revolutionary past and political reality, and excluded multifaceted, in-depth investigations of art itself.”<sup>23</sup>

Wang’s was a telling rejection of the growing Western appetite for Chinese revolutionary pop at the time—whether ironic, cynical, or not—as Chinese artists became increasingly fetishized on the post-Tiananmen world stage. The neutering effect of that post-’89 boom for Chinese art in Western exhibitions and markets, which sought out a very particular kind of art, was somewhat mirrored by the Chinese state’s response to the socio-political upheaval that Deng Xiaoping’s liberalizing economic reforms triggered, leaning further into its pursuit of economic development and “leaving little room or appreciation for non-pragmatic thinking and cultural discussion,” according to Wang.<sup>24</sup> But while Wang stopped exhibiting, the self-taught artist, who once worked as a lathe operator at the Beijing Furnace Factory, continued to create designs for installations, images, and sculptures preoccupied with the contradictory nature of relation, with forms engaged in the aesthetics of technological progress.

Some of these designs were fabricated for *Sawing or Being Sawed*, the artist’s first solo show since his retreat, staged at Arario Gallery in Shanghai in 2007. Installations like *W-Set Square* (2007), a giant pair of set squares rendered in stainless steel and each inscribed with different measuring scales, hinted at, to quote Yinghua Lu, “Wang’s profound distrust of established ideas and systems.”<sup>25</sup> The meaning behind such gestures was extended in *Diagramming Allegory*, a 2013 exhibition staged at Beijing’s Parkview Green Exhibition Hall with an overtly geopolitical bent. *W Symmetry Wath D11-06* (2011) shows two watches forming something of a Venn diagram. A fighter on each face points a gun at the other—one holds an American M-16 rifle and the other a Soviet AK-47—with the numbers 9 and 11 appearing between them, thus drawing a relational link between the history of the Cold War, its politics and proxies, and the events of 11 September 2001, whose repercussions now stretch out to the disastrous withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan between 2020 and 2021.

With the monolithic state blocs that defined the Cold War binary in mind—which pushed the world into divisions between communism or capitalism—Wang’s image “underpins the reversibility of the killer and the killed. In other words,” writes Chiu-Ti Jansen, “a slaughter is not a relationship between a killer and the killed, but between a killer and a killer.”<sup>26</sup> But Wang does not settle on that conclusion, either, because being killed is what all too often prompts one to kill in turn, after all—as demonstrated in a work like *W Fire at Both Ends Automatic Handgun D13-01* (2013). A giant handgun “equipped with artillery facing both forwards and backwards and the shells shooting in both directions at once,” is “positioned not to point at the giant target pasted on the

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<sup>23</sup> Carol Yinghua Lu, ‘Wang Luyan’, *Frieze*, 1 November 2017; <https://www.frieze.com/article/wang-luyan>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Chiu-Ti Jansen, ‘Wang Luyan’s Allegory of Civilization’, *Sotheby’s*, 11 June 2013; <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/wang-luyans-allegory-of-civilization>



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wall, but at the shooter” – such that, as Jansen summarizes, “pulling the trigger becomes an act of self-destruction,”<sup>27</sup> or as David Spalding put it in his *Artforum* review, “every action simultaneously triggers its opposite.”<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps this is the allegory that Wang diagrammed in that 2013 show, when thinking about the reference to ‘9/11’ he makes in that work: not so much a ‘both sides’ argument as much as a statement about the ramifications of proxy wars between world powers, which can, have, and do trigger human crimes and tragedies that accumulate into one hell of a chimeric ouroboros; in the case of ‘9/11’, of American violence returning to its heart, with an attack on one of its core instruments, the World Trade Center, constituting an act of revenge, resistance and abject violence all at once: and at base, a profound human tragedy and trauma experienced on an individual level by those directly impacted by the events (as is the case with any person subject to geopolitical aggressions to which they are connected by dint of their citizenship or lack thereof). The Twin Towers were the bastion of a post-WWII international economic order, after all; one that centred the United States through the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group in 1944 at the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference hosted in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire – what economic historian Harold James called “the intellectual sugar” that “cover[ed] and mask[ed] the bitter taste of the pill of *Realpolitik* dollar hegemony.”<sup>29</sup>

With that in mind, Wang’s equation problematizes the clarity of positions in wars and conflicts that are complex, opaque, and far from clear cut; such that one person’s terrorist could be seen as another person’s freedom fighter, depending on who is looking, and from what angle. To take all those points into account – to view history and its effects not from a single side, but as the prism that it is – brings to mind the phrase used in the aviation industry to describe the conditions of visibility that were observed on that September day in 2001: severe clear. Such is the view of the accumulation of intertwined, intersecting, and contradictory realities that have shaped a world still reeling from the legacies of the twentieth century, both its historical roots and its contemporaneous wars, in which a cruel Manicheism pitted peoples, geographies, and ideologies against each other, sometimes within the boundaries of their own nation states, with disastrous and ongoing effects.

Today those divides have both flipped and multiplied into a complicated multipolarity, despite George Bush Jr.’s attempts at dragging the twentieth century’s clear, US-led separations into the twenty-first when he defined the so-called Axis of Evil following the 11 September attacks in 2001 by declaring: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with [America] or you are with the terrorists.”<sup>30</sup> Then and now, the purity of that statement does not match up to the intersecting trails that led to the events that ignited America’s War on Terror, which professor Radhika Desai described as “particularly ‘aggressive’ form of ‘US imperialism’” that signalled

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> David Spalding, ‘Critic’s Pick: Wang Luyan’, *Artforum*; <https://www.artforum.com/picks/wang-luyan-40837>

<sup>29</sup> Harold James, ‘The multiple contexts of Bretton Woods’, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2012, p. 428

<sup>30</sup> ‘Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation’, *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2001; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html)

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“the end of globalization.”<sup>31</sup> Today, the end that Desai observed is bearing fruit, as the multipolar world heralded across a spectrum, from decolonial thinkers on one side to Chinese Globalists and Duginist Neo-Eurasianists on the other—the latter defined by Putin advisor Aleksandr Dugin’s rejection of a unipolar Atlanticist world order—is coming into being.

All of which recalls Wang’s diagrammatic sculptures on view at the first Diriyah Biennale, which locate the paradoxical reality of multipolarity in the human body, thus both focusing and extending questions of meaning and embodied experience in a world where words, terms, and positions that have been historically used to describe and assert certain ideologies and conditions have become increasingly fluid, contingent, and unstable. Such was the experience speaking with one American art critic in Dubai in 2022, who wistfully described Singapore as “socialist”—a descriptor that has since made everyone I know in Asia laugh immediately, every time I recount the story. (It is certain that this person’s idea of socialism is vastly different to the Singaporean development model, after which the Dubai model was drawn.)

Today, the frames of reference that have traditionally been used to organize and define populations are failing to describe the sheer complexities of the moment, and in fact, seem to only highlight the violence—and ignorance—of projecting such all-encompassing terms altogether, insofar as they reduce the nuances of human experience to gross generalizations that fail to take into account the particularities of context. As Chiu-Ti Jansen muses when reflecting on Wang Luyan’s *The Walkers D12-01* (2012), a set of mirror-finished stainless-steel figures who seem to be walking backwards and forwards at the same time: “Perhaps this is what the artist sees as the great paradox of civilization.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> As quoted in Mark T. Berger, ‘After the Third World? History, Destiny and the Fate of Third Worldism’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, p. 30

<sup>32</sup> Chiu-Ti Jansen, ‘Wang Luyan’s Allegory of Civilization’, op cit.

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Among the sculptures by Wang shown at the Diriyah Biennale that exemplified this paradox was *Differences in Direction of Identical Decision* (2017), depicting a figure walking forward, the head becoming the connecting point for another body extending up from it, this time upside down and walking to the side, in a manner that, as with Wang's other walking figures, could be going either left or right. *Persons Lifting Their Right Arms or/and Left Arms* (2018) illustrated a more overt but still ambiguous call to action, with two figures standing side by side, each one raising an arm with a hand balled into a revolutionary fist, as if to express a shared point of departure from either side of the political line. Other political equations like *The Inverted Person from the Inversion* (2017), showing a plywood figure standing on top of the panel out of which it was cut, were extended in works like *Collective of Imprisoned Individuals Who Escape from Imprisonment* (2017), in which a line of figures cut out from corrugated card cross the bottom of a packing box frame, with the cardboard panels from which those figures were cut lining the top of the box, outside of the enclosure.

These were apt figures to showcase in an exhibition whose curatorial theme extended Wang's diagrams from one point of the world to another, which explains why such a large section of the Diriyah Biennale's first chapter was given over to them. Working with curators Wejdan Reda, founder of Sahaba Art Consultancy in Jeddah, and curators from the China-based institution Ullens Contemporary Center for Art (UCCA) Shixuan Luan and Neil Zhang, the Diriyah Biennale's artistic director Philip Tinari, the director and chief executive of UCCA, effectively curated a relational temporality that was originally intended to be staged as part of a Saudi-China cultural year, before COVID-19 scuppered those plans. That relational temporality opened up a generative space to reflect on where the world stands, as the twentieth century bleeds into the twenty-first. It did so by linking Saudi Arabia today, and its ambitious Vision 2030 economic and social development program launched in 2016 to develop, diversify, and modernize the economy, with China in the late-twentieth century, defined by Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up project, which paved the way not only for China's so-called economic miracle and its ascendancy in the twenty-first century, but for the social upheaval that would define that period in which the New Measurement Group emerged.

A phrase from that transformative chapter in Chinese history inspired the exhibition title, *Feeling the Stones*, which comes from the phrase "crossing the river by feeling the stones", which was used in China to encapsulate the ethos of Reform and Opening Up. As scholars Xiaobo Zhang, Arjan de Haan and Shenggen Fan write, that period had been triggered by the lessons learned from "the disastrous performance of the ideology-based process in the planned economy era, such as the Great Famine (1959–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976),"<sup>33</sup> with the Communist Party's 11th Congress in 1978 signalling a shift in "the policymaking process from ideology-based to evidence-based under the slogan of 'seeking truths from facts'" – a "programmatic attitude approach towards reform" that placed "great weight on demonstrated evidence on the ground instead of on theory."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Xiaobo Zhang, Arjan de Haan and Shenggen Fan, 'Introduction: Policy Reforms as a Process of Learning' in *Narratives of Chinese Economic Reforms: How Does China Cross the River?* Xiaobo Zhang, Shenggen Fan & Arjan de Haan eds, Singapore, Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2010, p. 6

<sup>34</sup> Xiaobo Zhang, Arjan de Haan and Shenggen Fan, p. 5

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In this context, “crossing the river by feeling the stones” was used to characterize reform as a careful, step-by-step process that is grounded, tentative, and considered—an approach that takes into account the river to be crossed as something material, present and unpredictable, and which requires careful movements, not to mention patience, so that one might cross safely from one place to another based on every step taken and its results, repercussions, and reverberations. It’s a phrase that works as much for navigating this accelerated moment in Saudi Arabia’s history, as it did for walking through the Diriyah Biennale exhibition, whose thematic framework created space in an increasingly post-Western and post-unipolar era to consider the histories and politics of development in China and Saudi Arabia, and the speed and scale with which they have been enacted.

Taking these shared conditions into account in *Feeling the Stones* were works like Simon Denny’s video installation *Real Mass Entrepreneurship* (2017–21), which centres on a film tracking the accelerationist rise of the city of Shenzhen, once an industrial backwater and now China’s Silicon Valley. Denny’s film, produced in 2017, departs from a call made by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang for “mass entrepreneurship and innovation,” which “was first put forward by the Premier during the annual meeting of the New Champions 2014 in Tianjin.”<sup>35</sup> These ambitions—one of the many plans for accelerated development that has characterized China’s rise, and which are echoed in Vision 2030’s grand plans—were encapsulated by Shenzhen, which China’s State Council and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China identified “as a model ‘socialist’ city” in 2019, after unveiling plans “for wide-ranging reforms” intended “to make the city a leader in terms of innovation, public service and environmental protection by 2025.”<sup>36</sup>

Against this backdrop, Denny’s footage centres around the Huaqiangbei electronics market, “an important segment of Shenzhen’s hi-tech industry, which accounted for twenty percent of the city’s GDP in 2020.”<sup>37</sup> Members of Shenzhen’s tech community interviewed for the film, some of them new arrivals, express a profound optimism for their future prospects and the dynamism of the city: in one case, someone describes the potential of the technological work they are doing as giving people back time and space. Tempering this buoyancy, however, is one interview regarding the creation of a makers platform that effectively produces nothing, but “gets the dreamers together to make profits from them,” pointing to an extractive model of platform capitalism that essentially exploits the idea of entrepreneurship, or indeed, talent and ingenuity, for gain—a description that bears some resemblance to a state-backed soft power machine like the Diriyah Biennale, and its instrumentalization of art and artists to ultimately serve (and wash) the state’s interests.

With that, the connection that Tinari made between China then with Saudi now carried subtle warnings, when it comes to riding a state-mandated wave of economic, political, and social

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<sup>35</sup> Xu Wei, ‘China to further promote innovation and entrepreneurship’, The State Council, People’s Republic of China, 20 July 2017; [english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2017/07/12/content\\_281475723086902.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2017/07/12/content_281475723086902.htm)

<sup>36</sup> Eleanor Albert, ‘China’s Grand Plans for Shenzhen’, *The Diplomat*, 21 August 2019; <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/chinas-grand-plans-for-shenzhen/> and Phoebe Zhang, ‘Beijing unveils detailed reform plan to make Shenzhen model city for China and the world’, *South China Morning Post*, 18 August 2019; <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3023330/beijing-unveils-detailed-reform-plan-make-shenzhen-model-city?module=inline&pgtype=article>

<sup>37</sup> Iris Deng, ‘Coronavirus: Huaqiangbei, world’s biggest electronics wholesale market, remains closed as hi-tech hub Shenzhen steps up battle against Omicron’, *South China Morning Post*, 8 March 2022; <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3169702/coronavirus-huaqiangbei-worlds-biggest-electronics-wholesale-market>

## Crossing the river by feeling the stones

change. Tiananmen Square notwithstanding, Shenzhen offers a more recent example of what can happen when the state reneges on its loosening grip. Recently described by *Xinhua* as “China’s Reform and Opening Up paragon” on the fortieth anniversary of its designation as a special economic zone, this Pearl River Delta city hosts homegrown tech powerhouses like Tencent, which Xi Jinping praised for making “historic leaps” and “achieving miracles” in 2018 before spectacularly clamping down on it and other tech firms in 2021. That move signalled an increase in regulation and state management over one of China’s key industries; an abrupt Closing Up that was apparently triggered in part by the increasing confidence of China’s private tech sector. In 2020, for example, the Chinese government suddenly suspended the planned IPO of Alibaba’s fintech spinoff Ant Group, after a conference in Shanghai where Alibaba’s formerly outspoken founder, Jack Ma, criticized state regulation, with Ma promptly disappearing from public view — “a three-month absence that sent chills through the business community.”<sup>38</sup>

The tentacles of an authoritarian state run deep, and its whims can be fickle — and in a context like China, everything becomes blurred as a result. In the case of *Real Mass Entrepreneurship* Denny points this out in the context of funding. “It’s hard to draw a line between public and private money in the current landscape. Museums and biennials routinely fold private support into their systems in many forms at many levels,” Denny says in one interview. “And what of the Chinese context — can one say a state enterprise umbrella that funds real estate development, tourism, tech hardware production, and contemporary art at the same time is legible in terms of dividing public and private money?”<sup>39</sup> It’s a question that could easily be posed in Saudi Arabia, where Vision 2030 is so broad and extensive, that private projects not officially integrated into the public plan are subsumed into an authoritarian framework so all-encompassing that its official projects include the creation of an entire self-sustaining, tech-forward green city in the desert that is larger than Kuwait or Israel — the kind that Lawrence Lek seemed to reference in *Nötel (Red Sea Edition)* (2021), an open-world video game included in *Feeling the Stones* that centres around an ominous, panopticon-like automated hotel designed with every need in mind.

Beyond proclaiming a city that will be a model for future living — the name of this Vision 2030 giga-project is a portmanteau of “new” in Greek and “future” in Arabic — the developers for Neom say it will “exist entirely outside the confines of the current Saudi judicial system, governed by an autonomous legal system that will be drafted up by investors.”<sup>40</sup> Baked into such ambitions, in which a freezone is effectively created to attract an international elite, is another China connection, with its own legacy of large-scale development projects that have forcibly displaced entire communities, which in the case of Neom includes the al-Huwaitat tribe, who in 2020 called for the United Nations to investigate allegations of forced displacement and abuse by Saudi authorities.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vincent Ni, ‘The party’s over: China clamps down on its tech billionaires’, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/aug/21/the-partys-over-china-clamps-down-on-its-tech-billionaires>

<sup>39</sup> ‘A Conversation with Simon Denny’, Culture™, published by LEAP and Paloma Powers; <https://us15.campaign-archive.com/?u=599a68340b0286af889dd8b06&id=be68fc813d>

<sup>40</sup> Merlyn Thomas and Vibeke Venema, ‘Neom: What’s the green truth behind a planned eco-city in the Saudi desert?’, *BBC News*, 22 February 2022; <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-59601335>

<sup>41</sup> Ewan Morgan, ‘Al-Huwaitat tribe seeks UN help to stop Saudi forced displacement’, *Al Jazeera*, 9 October 2020; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/9/al-huwaitat-tribe-seeks-un-help-to-stop-saudi-forced-displacement>

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Such is the double-edged sword of development's death-drive—the kind that some international leftists choose to defend when it comes to assessing the politics of development in the non-Western world, even if those politics replicate the very Western imperialist tendencies they critique—where visions for a better future come not only at the cost of present and past, but at the cost of life and liberty, which once again recalls Wang Luyan's works at the Diriyah Biennale, and the way they diagram progress as an ambiguous walk backwards and forwards—something that is expressed in the site of the Diriyah Biennale itself.

Staged in a transformed industrial area known as the JAX District, whose warehouses are being converted into art spaces, studios, and the administrative home of the Diriyah Biennale foundation, the Diriyah Biennale site is located in Ad-Diriyah, a town on the north-west edge of Riyadh that was once the capital of the First Saudi State. Today, Ad-Diriyah is home to the UNESCO world heritage site of At-Turaif, a historic eighteenth century adobe mud city built in the Najdi style. The largest standing structure in the citadel, Salwa Palace, was the original seat of the Saud dynasty, and it was on this structure that an image of the G20 leaders was projected in 2020, the year the kingdom hosted the meeting virtually.

It is effectively from Diriyah that the Saudi state is rewriting its national narrative to reflect Vision 2030's radical re-mapping of the kingdom's past, present and future all at once. In 2022, the town became the point of departure for a royal decree that announced the establishment of Founding Day, a new celebration held annually to commemorate the year 1727, when Imam Mohammed ibn Saud ascended to the throne, during which time he embarked on a quest to unify the Arabian Peninsula. The announcement was momentous—as one commentator put it, “the equivalent of the United States deciding independence did not occur in 1776.”<sup>42</sup> It effectively re-wrote Saudi Arabia's former foundation story, anchored to the year 1744 when ibn Saud provided sanctuary to the Islamic preacher Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, after he was chased out of nearby villages for preaching a brand of ultra-conservative Islamic orthodoxy, Wahhabism, which the Saud dynasty embraced in what was ultimately a political union.

This establishment of a new founding story could not have been a stronger signal of change that is already being reflected on the ground in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the once-feared religious police, who enacted the Wahhabi doctrine on the Saudi population, have effectively been neutered, as freedoms for the public at large—but more notably, women—expand. The inaugural Founding Day took place in Diriyah in February 2022. Celebrations were organized by the Diriyah Gate Development Authority, which is leading a SAR 64 billion development project to restore the former capital and transform it into a mixed-use historic, culture and lifestyle destination. The DGDA's target of 27 million local and international visitors by 2030 sits within Vision 2030's broader aims to host 100 million worldwide tourists in the kingdom by 2030. The Diriyah Biennale, of course, is located within this framework, in which art and culture are playing a central role, and its inaugural show could not have done a better job of both showcasing the transformation taking place in the country and expanding this context into a global picture.

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<sup>42</sup> Simon Henderson, 'Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 February 2022; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism>

## Crossing the river by feeling the stones

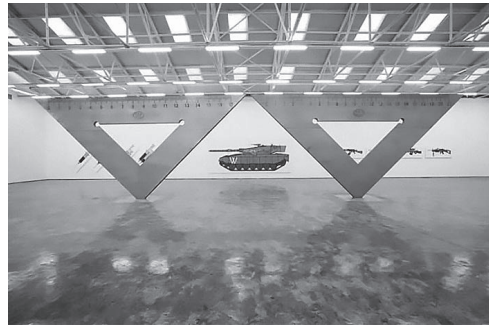


China was an apt point of reference, with the two contexts sharing much in common. Both countries have technically never been colonized by the West, and both forged their own paths through the Cold War split, without aligning completely with the Third World liberation movements of the time. They did not meet the same fate as so many of the newly independent nation-states, monarchies, or communist blocs that ultimately collapsed in the post-war twentieth century, nor were they destabilized by military coups that would all too often open the doors for liberalization on Washington's terms. Both are also twenty-first century regional and world powers in their own right, enacting their own violence on peoples both within their sphere of influence, and beyond it – as with other nation-states of the world, the United States being one obvious example.

Both Saudi Arabia and China have also operated to varying degrees like hermit kingdoms, developing unique and hybrid forms of statecraft in order to navigate the liberal world economy without submitting to its politics, thus insulating peoples within their borders while conditionally integrating them with the world outside; a process that Ayman Zedani's fascinating installation *Between Desert Seas* (2021) touched on in *Feeling the Stones* by amplifying the realities and specificities of context. A salt mound is framed by a maze of free-standing walls that host speakers emitting



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interviews and field recordings related to the Arabian Sea's humpback whale, which developed its own unique culture due to its separation from other humpbacks around 70,000 years ago. It's a simple work that makes a clear point: living beings evolve differently depending on the ground from which they develop—a point that relates not simply to nation-states and their borders, but to human and non-human individuals and communities on the ground that live within, across, and beyond them.

As artist Manal AlDowayan noted recently in conversation during a tour of AIUla, home to the biennial Desert X sculpture exhibition and where the ambitious Wadi AlFann sculpture park is currently being developed with plans for site-specific monumental works by James Turrell, Agnes Denes, Michael Heizer, AlDowayan and Ahmed Mater, now is not only a time when Saudi Arabia is opening up to the world, but a moment when Saudis themselves are discovering their own country and all of its histories and cultural legacies.

A case in point is the UNESCO world heritage site of Hegra in AIUla, home to the ancient tombs of the Nabateans, which is now being developed into a tourist destination along with the ancient oasis city of Dadan—but another node in Vision 2030's vast plans. Up until recently, locals apparently believed Hegra to be cursed and avoided the place. On a recent press tour, however, a local couple visiting the site asked to take a photograph with us, so that they could show their family and friends that people from Hong Kong, Singapore, and India had come there. It was a moment that recalled memories of China in the 1990s, when locals would ask to take photos with tourists—an

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experience of people encountering one another with curiosity that stands in stark contrast to the posturing and actions that occur at state level, where populations are reduced to pawns in dangerous, deadly, and dehumanizing war games, which explains why some working in the spheres of art and culture see the potential of engaging in such projects as Wadi AlFann, despite Saudi Arabia's human rights record. People change when they encounter one another, after all, and it is the people who change states in the end – or at least, it is the people who try.

All of these factors feed into Ahmed Mater's installation *Desert Meeting* (2021), one of the opening works of the Diriyah Biennale. Five cathode ray television monitors positioned in a line each host an animated image that tracks Saudi Arabia's rise to oil producing powerhouse. One photo shows Aramco's annual board of directors holding a meeting in front of Dammam Well No. 7, the first to produce commercial yields in 1938. It is 1962, "two years after OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) was established, which excluded America and Russia, and six before OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) was founded in 1968" – "a harbinger of the 1973 oil crisis, an embargo initiated by OAPEC in retaliation against the Arab-Israeli War," which would spark the so-called oil shock that would destabilize the world economy, leading to "Aramco's full nationalization in 1980."<sup>43</sup>

The catalogue for Mater's first solo exhibition in Riyadh, which inaugurated Lakum Artspace in 2022, reveals what prompted Mater to create *Desert Meeting* – "the remnants of local and global histories" that continue to act in the present, including "historical moments such as the Cold War and the Soviet-Afghan conflict (1979–89), which was a proxy war in Afghanistan that pitted Islam and Communism against each other, while further masking Western interests."<sup>44</sup> As I have written previously, Naeem Mohaiemen's 2017 film *Two Meetings and a Funeral* tracks this fork in an already forked Cold War road by charting the moment the Organization of Islamic Cooperation – established in a 1969 summit held in Morocco and whose first meeting was held in Jeddah in 1970<sup>45</sup> – diverged from the Non-Aligned Movement, with Saudi Arabia, buoyed by petrodollars, emerging as a key US ally in the Cold War and beyond. (It was from Saudi Arabia that the United States launched fighter jets to enact Operation Desert Storm in 1991.)

Placed within this longer history, the relevance of a phrase like "crossing the river by feeling the stones" for Saudi Arabia reaches back to the twentieth century, when the post-war international order was being shaped, and speaks directly to one of the works that opened *Feeling the Stones*. Maha Malluh's *World Map* (2021) is a monumental assemblage of 3,840 coloured cassette tapes arranged in bread-baking trays, each containing recordings of conservative Islamic sermons. These cassettes were sourced from the 1970s and 1980s, when Saudi Arabia pulled back on the period of modernization and liberalization that ensued as the country's fortunes rose amid the oil boom – a direct effect of the devastating armed takeover of the Grand Mosque of Mecca in November 1979 by men of the Islamic association al-Jamaa al-Salafiya al-Muhtasiba, led by preacher Juhayman

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<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Bailey, 'At Diriyah Biennale, Chinese History Meets a Saudi Future', *Ocula Magazine*, 12 January 2022; <https://ocula.com/magazine/features/diriyah-biennale/>

<sup>44</sup> See the catalogue for *Ahmed Mater: Prognosis 1979–2019*, curated by Sara Raza at Lakum Artspace, 8 December 2021–8 February 2022, published by Lakum Artspace, Riyadh, 2022

<sup>45</sup> See 'History', Organisation of Islamic Cooperation; [https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p\\_id=52&p\\_ref=26&lan=en](https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p_id=52&p_ref=26&lan=en)

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al-Utaybi. “Juhayman’s actions stopped all modernization,” said one close follower in a BBC report looking back on those events, pointing out that one of his demands to remove women presenters from Saudi TV was met in the aftermath. Indeed, in one 2018 interview, Mohammed Bin Salman (known as MBS) noted that before 1979, “We were living a normal life like the rest of the Gulf countries, women were driving cars, there were movie theatres.”<sup>46</sup>

All of which puts Vision 2030 into perspective, while drawing attention to just how radical (and effectively risky) the reforms being implemented in the country are—without, of course, denying the complexities and contradictions that exist in a context like Saudi Arabia. Only recently was it reported that rainbow products, deemed to encourage homosexuality in children, were being pulled from Saudi shelves, where homosexuality remains a crime, just as a new Buzz Lightyear movie was banned in the UAE for showing a same-sex kiss; once again recalling Wang Luyan’s figurative diagrams that show people moving backwards and forwards at the same time. Nor does this exploration of Vision 2030 through the lens created by *Feeling the Stones* justify the assassination of a certain journalist whom a certain crown prince allegedly ordered, though the fact that it was the CIA that concluded who was behind the murder does muddy the waters, not so much in terms of whether or not the conclusion is correct, but more so given the American intelligence agency’s own track record of backing assassinations and coups across the world that would trigger devastating chains of events that continue to have repercussions today.

To emphasize: none of this is a justification for anything more than learning to engage with a multipolar world and all of its unfolding contradictions and complexities through the networks created by contemporary art and culture, as the age of American hegemony shatters into a fragmented global terrain where no country looks better than any other. (Because while some places are freer than others, that freedom does not necessarily extend to every inhabitant within a given jurisdiction.) Take the fact that, while Saudi women who fought for the now existing right to drive in the country remain in jail, so Black men are still incarcerated in America for the possession or sale of marijuana, in states where that drug is now legal. Or the fact that the rhetoric of Putin’s advisors Aleksandr Dugin and Vladislav Surkov, which speaks of a decolonized multipolar world founded on the concept of sovereign democracy, invoking the language of non-alignment and the era of Third World liberation, holds as much weight as the American promise to deliver democracy to the world using bombs and asymmetric liberal free-market capitalism—a form of imperialist violence that, as evidenced in the last decades, has returned to roost at its point of origin.

With all that in mind, the Diriyah Biennale’s focus on connecting China and Saudi Arabia through a historic and contemporary narrative of development opens up un/familiar territory when it comes to how one deals with the geopolitical realities that manifest both as macro-narratives expressed via state actions, development programs, and media reports, and as lived experiences on the ground. In Saudi Arabia today, for example, there seems to be an overwhelming sense of support for the internationally notorious MBS, given the changes already implemented in a country where sixty to seventy percent of the population are apparently under the age of thirty—at least in the case of the young people I spoke to there, who all expressed a feeling of hope and excitement.

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Mecca 1979: The mosque siege that changed the course of Saudi history’, *BBC News*, 27 December 2019; <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-50852379>

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One young man described going to a dance party for the first time, and not being sure what to do when a woman asked him for a lighter; while another talked about his own fears of the religious police while growing up, acknowledging how much harder it was for girls. At the opening of the Diriyah Biennale, a young woman artist bounded up to a friend with whom I was speaking and proclaimed how lucky she felt to be a woman in Saudi Arabia right now.

Of course, while this does not discount the harsh realities that remain on the ground, anecdotes like this do speak to the real-world intricacies that arise once you go beyond the headlines, and indeed, beyond the reductive narratives of national politics when expressed in macro-geopolitical terms. With that in mind, perhaps some perspective is due when it comes to how people from one place look at people from another, particularly in the context of art and culture, especially given the violence of imperialism and its spawn, the nation-state, to which the world remains embroiled, and whose form all too often reduces people to extensions of their states, thus erasing their humanity, individuality, and in some contexts creativity, and foreclosing any possibility of encounter, which is a shame given how transformative encounters can be, especially when art is concerned.

What this all means is hard to say, but what it reveals is telling. Of course, culture plays its role in washing the various crimes that governments commit in the name of their people. In the history of the biennale format, this has been the case since the establishment of the World's Fairs by Western imperialists back in the nineteenth century, which used culture and industry as a means of exerting and defining their power on a world stage. In that sense, a line can be drawn from the Venice Biennale at the turn of the twentieth century to the Diriyah Biennale in 2022—but by that same token, connections can also be made between the people who engage with these frameworks, who come together to encounter one another, often against many odds and in the face of real-world conflicts and contradictions, wherein clean divisions give way to an overwhelming blend of transparency and opacity.

To cite Wang's sculptures once again, these are ultimately ambiguous spaces in which, much like the world at large, all directions are in play even if they are not always visible, no matter how hard one tries to control the narrative. People will be people after all. And not all people can be completely reduced to the neat distinctions projected upon them by political nationalism, particularly in the realm of international contemporary art and culture, where operating just under the radar of the state—and in turn learning to recognize the signs of that operation—has become a craft unto itself.

And herein lies a final connection that might be drawn between China then and Saudi Arabia now, and what 'Reform and Opening Up' might mean from the perspective of contemporary art, especially when thinking about the rise of authoritarian world powers on a rapidly shifting geopolitical stage. As artists of China's Stars era learned, art can only do so much depending on the context in which you live. Sure, it can reflect the world, edge change along, and troll power into revealing its weaknesses, but it's also a long game when the conditions of freedom are not a given—a space where people can and do learn to swim with and against ever-changing tides.