

# The Loss of Centre

For anyone who has worked in or even visited China within the past several years, it is no secret that the centre of gravity has shifted away from Beijing. Long the undisputed focal point of the Chinese art world by virtue of its critical mass of artists, curators and galleries, its scene and system coalesced around the orbit of Wangjing-Dashanzi before and after the year 2000, with the relocation of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the gradual entry of studios and other actors into the 798 art zone. This axis was heightened in 2007 with the opening of Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA), the only institution in China managed and programmed with a vision, calibre and rhetoric that could be called global—or, at the time, international. Such terminologies define a number of actualities: separate from the intimacy and potential corruption, real or perceived, of the existing institutional system but still connected to a selection of its artists and players, and engaged with a network of like-minded spaces distributed across a certain portion of the globe, held to a certain standard of presentation and promotion that must be linked still to the scale and production expected of art in China. In short order, the UCCA became the only institution in China where it mattered for an artist on the rise to have an exhibition.

Under UCCA's founding team, the inaugural exhibition *'85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art* was one of the most scholarly attempts at a rigorous historical survey of the early moments of contemporary art in China. In 2008, *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* established the institution as a worthy recipient of exhibition loans from institutions like the Walker Art Centre in the USA. In 2009, *Breaking Forecast* codified the generation of artists including Cao Fei, Liu Wei, Yang Fudong and Zheng Guogu, while the *Curated By* series created a career pathway for their students, disciples and assistants. The groundbreaking collaborative exhibition *Olafur Eliasson & Ma Yansong: Feelings are Facts* developed the mould for both architectural exhibitions in Chinese museums and the kind of experiential spectacle that dominates today. Massive and immersive commissioned exhibitions by Yan Pei Ming, Zhang Huan and Zhan Wang defined the tenor of the (director) Jérôme Sans era, whereas for Philip Tinari it was retrospectives of Gu Dexin, Wang Xingwei, Xu Zhen and David Diao. In 2013 there was *ON|OFF*, which brought together a generation of then emerging artists, while 2015 saw the birth of both the *New Directions* series, a platform for solo exhibitions by young Chinese artists, and the *Secret Timezones* trilogy. For nearly ten years, it meant something to be included in the project space program, and everything to be a part of a Great Hall exhibition. This was no small feat: there are many organisations that call themselves museums in Beijing, but UCCA was the only one worthy of the designation. Under the leadership of Sans, Xue Mei and Tinari, it gave Beijing a centre, and made Beijing a centre.





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Naturally, this primacy did not go unchallenged. The same time that UCCA opened also saw the launch of the art fair *SH Contemporary* in Shanghai, an occasion that felt like the first global moment for the Chinese art world. In its first few years it was important, drawing significant attention to Shanghai in a way that would presage the order of things to come. This also marked the high-water point of the expansion of the art fair system, which Beijing, with its surplus of powerful galleries, gallery-proof artists and publicity-averse collectors could never enter. Months later, the art fair *ArtHK* debuted and quickly claimed for Hong Kong the role of leading market event across greater China, largely due to its beneficial taxation and customs regulations. For the better part of a decade, the role of Beijing as an art centre consolidated around UCCA in contrast to the market: if Hong Kong and Shanghai were about buying and selling, Beijing was about making and showing; if Hong Kong and Shanghai appeared on the art radar two or three times a year, Beijing maintained a consistent presence. This distinction came with a certain righteousness, a logic by which the artists and gallerists of Beijing descended temporarily onto the stages of the fairs and auctions before returning to their Olympus on the Fifth Ring, the dusty highway that arguably marks the current (if ever-shifting) transitional zone between the city and its margins.

A decade later, Shanghai appears to be a mature, multi-faceted art scene with a rich ecology, while Beijing seems to have been hollowed out. Hong Kong may remain the undisputed centre of storage and trading through turnover, but Shanghai has surged with two new art fairs, a half-dozen private collections with major public venues, multiple freeports for bonded storage, and a generation of new galleries and curators. Whereas in Beijing, the profusion of satellite neighbourhoods surrounding 798 that fed off its energy have been excised like unhealthy growths: Caochangdi, Jiuchang and Heiqiao have seen spaces migrate inwards to 798 or closed entirely, leaving it the undisputed core—albeit one that seems to be ever-weakening with a drastic drop in the average quality of programming. Perhaps the hardest felt loss has been that of Heiqiao, the sprawling studio district a short ride away from 798 that marked the artistic home of a generation of artists; most tenants have now been evicted and moved on to make way for new development. This dynamic is not unfamiliar, but Heiqiao seems to be the last centralised studio agglomeration of any notable density. Artists now feel pressured to move further out into the suburbs, often into larger and more formalised—and therefore less affordable—developments, and often further from their peers.

There is a tendency for some to move to Shanghai rather than the warehouse districts around the Beijing airport. In Songjiang, the studio zone forty kilometres from downtown Shanghai, contract law at least seems more tenable than in Beijing, and artists may be more comfortable buying or leasing for the long term. Of course, this is not the only attraction to Shanghai, even for artists now; a complex interrelated system of public institutions—Power Station of Art, private institutions such as Rockbund Art Museum, Yuz Museum and Long Museum, the major exhibitions of *Shanghai Biennial* and *Shanghai Project*, the galleries ShangArt, DonGallery, Bank, Antenna Space, Capsule Shanghai and Leo Xu Projects, artist-run spaces AM Space and Radical Space—is tempting to join, in spite of, or perhaps because of, there being no centre, no keystone institution to consolidate the circuit.

Beijing currently is defined by the euphemism ‘uncertain future’ for both the city and an arts sector circulating around the UCCA. An art city without a centre is not an art centre. Imagine New York without its Museum of Modern Art, London without the Tate. The past year since the Ullens family’s announcement that it was seeking a buyer (the second such release made after an earlier deal with Minsheng Bank collapsed) has been dominated by rumours in the guise of strategies and complex business plays. Such whispers have not been received lightly; their shapes and contours have much to

say about how art functions in elite Beijing society and where this art world is headed. For example, rumour number one, actively spread by core allies of the UCCA, is an admired and vast corporate art collection would take over the Centre, presumably injecting its own values into the exhibition program and perhaps commissioning on the basis of existing holdings. Rumour number two, perhaps the most short-lived, a wealthy and powerful artist, long understood to be opening his own private museum, would assume the management, integrating personal historical interests and collections with his own network. Rumour number three, a high-flying entertainment executive turned painter would do the same. And lastly rumour number four, the UCCA staff and patrons would band together to perpetuate the status quo. These are all wonderful thought experiments highly relevant to the very idea of what it would mean for Beijing to continue having an important museum.

Another perspective on what the UCCA means to Beijing, and Beijing to China, is through the most ambitious exhibitions that it and rival institutions have mounted during the time in which these rumours circulated. For the former, this mostly means *The New Normal: China, Art, and 2017*, a group exhibition of young artists that refers to the situation of the institution itself as much as to the shifting global political landscape and Chinese macroeconomics. Designed by Li Hu, the architect who perhaps best captures the state of Beijing with his work on Steven Holl's Linked Hybrid complex—a self-contained climatic loop that is permeable on all sides and oscillates between shared media ecologies or spectator positions and isolated miniature natural environments—where the Second Ring road meets the highway to the airport, the exhibition feels something like an inverted art fair, a series of discrete booths for individual artist presentations distributed across a dark space that feels simultaneously commodity-centric and yet commercially unattractive. This speaks to the conceptual framework of the exhibition, in which China's nominally globalisation-friendly approach to economic contraction is taken more or less at face value, a context for how international art is increasingly accepted within Chinese institutions. As such, this exhibition contains contributions from artists from China, of Chinese ancestry living abroad, and from elsewhere. While its linear layout offers a particular narrative, certain themes and aesthetic categories seem to be addressed by dispersed groupings of works. Beginning with architecture, which seems logical given the design of the exhibition, there are several artists (mostly women) who present a masculine, brutal imaginary of collective space, a reflection on the status of the commons under the state of exception. One of those artists is Zhang Ruyi, whose sculptures of facades and minor architectural details, some at scale and others in miniature, may have once felt quaint; here they are barren and imposing, forceful and raw, tense with an energy that, if not explosive, certainly seems to have corralled much of the erotic friction of everyday hassle and harassment that makes up the Chinese city. Another, Cui Jie, enacts a parallel transformation in turning from the architectural paintings for which she is known to delicate and bold sculpture dealing with the same material. She collects moments in the urban landscape at which the future of some particular past intrudes into the smooth functioning of the present, obsessed with buildings and planning elements that seem to indicate an optimistic retro-futurism in which the future seemed closer then than now. And Max Hooper Schneider, who turns toward a more ecological vision of shared cultural space with *Accidental Menagerie* (2015), an installation that remixes several of the master vocabularies of the current moment: the grid and the core sample, filled here with everything from t-shirts and cigarettes to dog bones—a stenography of someone's present.

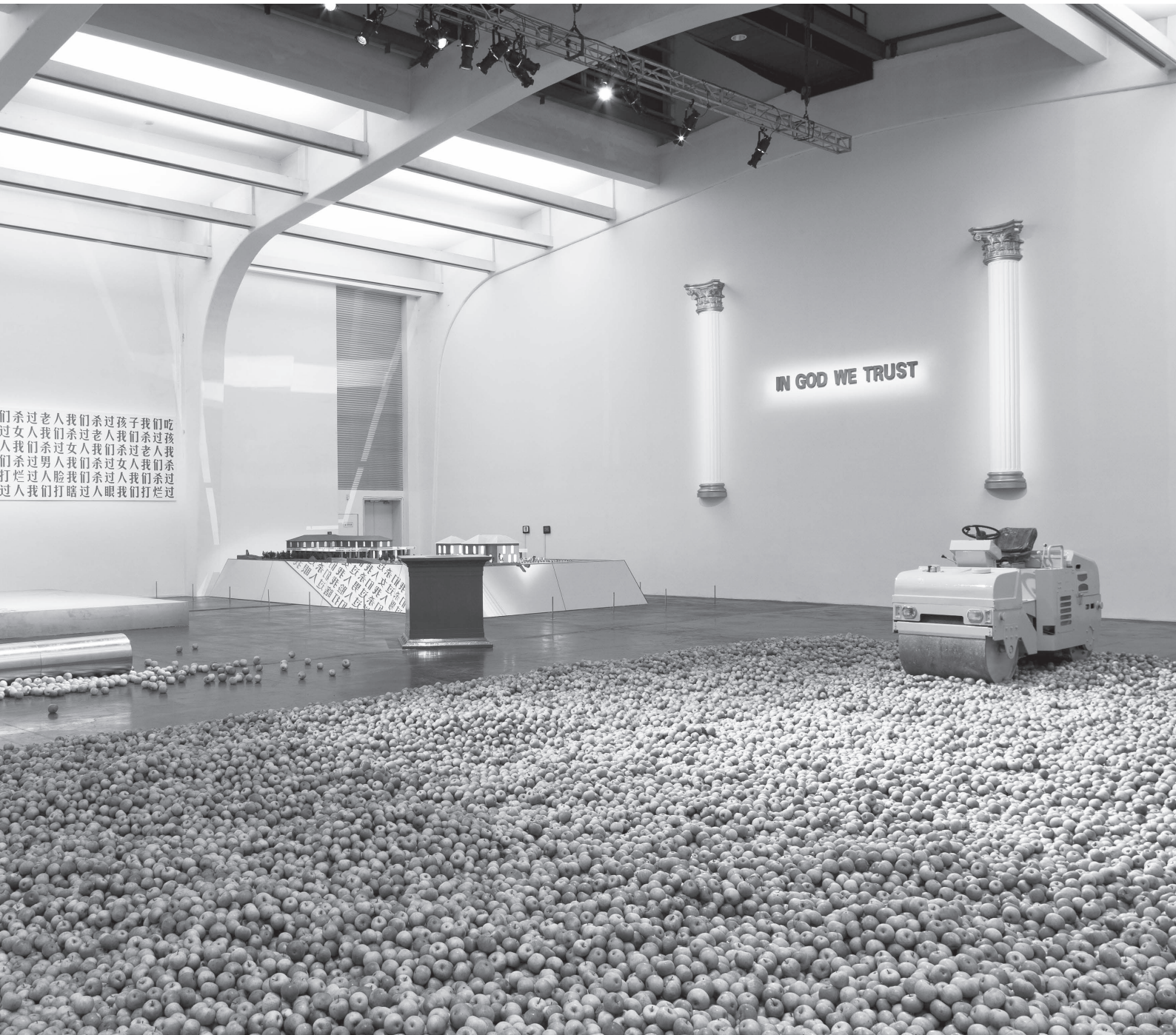
The question of whose present is at stake, and what it means for artistic globalism to be enunciated alongside economic globalisation, is resumed in a set of works that speak more directly to identity as a marker of place, and vice versa. Shen Xin's *Provocation of the Nightingale* (2017) is a maddeningly pretentious video installation that instigates a dialogue about religious doctrine between two women,

whose screen presences constantly slip sideways between the status of actors and acquaintances; Shen has now strung together a series of short films that circulate around similar dialogues that amble along the edges of personal background and metaphysical aspirations. The same could be said of Wu Tsang's videos, which collectively track the artist's evolution over the past ten years from a performative monologue to a dialogue with scholar Fred Moten. In both of these bodies of work the dialogue between two figures is key, a process in which no term can be left untested. Another thread concerns materiality in several senses. For artists like Li Jingxiong, the process of becoming an artist is one of discovering and working through material. Like Cui Jie and Zhang Ruyi, he understands public space as brutal and unfinished projects, his intervention is in its texture rather than its meaning, its real rather than its symbolism. The ambiguity of his dripping, dragging, accumulating, scratching and puncturing surfaces is overwhelming, an antidote to the slickness of the technological imagery that composes the majority of artwork touching upon material being in the current context. *Black Friday* (2016) by Sophia Al-Maria, falls into this category, a high-production visual exploration of the cultural artefact of the shopping mall through her language of Gulf Futurism; the strength of the work lies in the fact that it never touches the ground, that it feels like a film trailer all the way through, in applying a high-definition filter to its world, forcing a sardonic vision of the neutral globalism that Chinese discourse can only aspire to. This is somewhat complicated by the understanding that the UCCA has introduced this exhibition as the third entry in a previously unrealised series: a survey of young art (recast as "recent developments") taking place every four years, beginning with *Breaking Forecast* in 2009, and encompassing *ON|OFF*, the sprawling 2013 exhibition that ran to some fifty artists born after 1975. The first codified the standout representatives of a generation already comfortable in that role; the second was comprehensive, pointing to just about everyone worth showing who was active at that moment, while the third takes a more piecemeal, more realistic approach—a recognition perhaps, that the UCCA is no longer a site for grand, sweeping statements. A centre no longer at the centre, and a centre that is no less important for its marginalised position, with a 'new normal' that does not preclude the production of pressing content.

Of the signature exhibitions that took place in Shanghai between 2016 and 2017, exactly the opposite must be said. The *11th Shanghai Biennale: Why Not Ask Again? Maneuvers, Disputations, and Stories*, curated by the artist group Raqs Media Collective, embraced an urgent format, novel frameworks and media, creating real and lasting interventions into the shape of curatorial discourse in Asia, not least of which by inverting the normal gender ratios and geographical backgrounds of participating artists. But it did not make a claim to speak fluently within the art world, unable to cite what is meaningful and what is not. Rather, it belonged to the context of international curatorial discourse and not enough to its place. The success of the UCCA's program has relied on its simultaneous alignment with both circuits, with the content of one and the context of the other. In the instance of the *Shanghai Biennale*, much of this can be written off to the viewing habits of the Chinese art world, which is easily frustrated by exhibitions that contain more international artists than not. But sensitivity to such problems is not a strong characteristic of Shanghai institutions; it is a common criticism that even those that produce exhibitions and public programming at the top level often feel like they have little to do with the production of art in Shanghai. *Why Not Ask Again?* will be remembered for its insistence that its curators begin their work in China, in the region, and in Asia, and that the exhibition contribute something, at least conceptually, to how this geopolitical positioning works in relation to the global art world. And yet, beautiful juxtapositions and moments of coincidence and transcendence aside, its overall artistic structure diverged too far from the shape of the art world as it is understood in Shanghai.



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The *Shanghai Project* on the other hand, is an ongoing, nebulous construct led by Yongwoo Lee and Hans Ulrich Obrist that is genuinely invested in reinventing the public museum for a new historical moment, one in which audiences shaping the attention economy gather not to peruse visual artefacts but rather in order to engage actively in discourses from the scientific to the aesthetic. The first chapter of this non-biennial consisted of a conference and a pavilion that became a base for an ongoing program of talks, performances, happenings and assorted events. It began with ‘Nihao, Shanghai!’, a conference that set the framework and boundaries of the inquiry with architects, artists, curators and scholars. It then moved to the opening of Sou Fujimoto’s Envision Pavilion, a new temporary structure outside Pudong’s Himalayas Museum dotted with plants and places for conversation—ecology and dialogue, apparently the twin pillars of current museum practice. The highlight of this phase was Otobong Nkanga’s *Landversation*, an ongoing set of performative dialogues around purpose-built furniture focused on crises of land and society. Nkanga is one of the *Shanghai Project’s* Root Researchers, meaning that her projects mark a persistent backbone from which other researchers and their work are expected to riff and expand. Chapter Two takes the form of the exhibition *Seeds of Time*, which sets out from the imagery of the Svalbard Seed Vault, an ecological doomsday bank in which the *Shanghai Project* sees its own image—a repository of emergency ideas for the future. (The symbol and temporality of the seed is key throughout, as the Chinese version of the Project may be more literally translated as “Shanghai seeds.”) Participating artists are called Researchers, with many of their works resonantly to-the-point, even if, again, the exhibition seems to speak directly to a public, real or imagined, without taking into account how other institutions and artists in Shanghai might respond. By engaging with an urgent global discourse and cherry-picking from Chinese art, new organisations like these drive home just how much the UCCA was a place of and for the Chinese art world—a castle for the kingdom.

In the *Shanghai Biennale* and the *Shanghai Project*, and art fairs and other institutions that warrant somewhat less critical writing, this new emergent phenomenon constitutes a system spanning China, relatively integrated across the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, if not further; it is engaged with local realities and global discourses, and reads as more or less evenly distributed over dozens of galleries and museums, hundreds of artists and curators, and many sources of public and private capital. Most importantly, it is no longer subservient to Beijing—no longer the centre and the authority, much less any one of its individual institutions. Strategic documents released by the central government have begun to consider Shanghai a cultural centre, a position formerly held exclusively by Beijing. (The old stereotype, both for visitors from abroad and for local residents, proposes Beijing is all soul and Shanghai all gloss; Beijing is culture and Shanghai is commerce. That this might be a stretch of the imagination at best should not even be debated. That officials see the need to fight such a stereotype with real policy designations and funding says much about the current situation.) This is exactly what politics requires: a merging of capital and aesthetics at a safe remove from real power. Geographic distance is not everything, but in the imagination of contemporary culture artists in Guangzhou often see themselves as aloof from government, while in Beijing artists see themselves as speaking directly to, or past power. This is why the weakening and potential disappearance of UCCA is serious, and why it marks the transition from one system of cultural production and circulation to the next: it is a part of the intentional evacuation of a circuit which a centre might occupy. In order to function as a smooth centre of political gravity, Beijing must be centre-less in every other capacity. If UCCA was, at its prime, something of an embassy for global contemporary culture in Beijing, its future iteration, whatever that may be, seems destined to function as a parallel processing component of a much broader system: a centre no more.