

The first T.SPARK in China

Shane Hulbert in conversation
with Tammy Wong Hulbert



Shane Hulbert talks to Tammy Wong Hulbert about her experiences in China during the millennium and the beginning of China's economic transition. Tammy reflects on her work with contemporary Chinese artists and in particular her awareness of the shift in Chinese art from a community and underground focus through to the emergence of an international contemporary Chinese art market. Tammy moved to Beijing in 2000 to explore her heritage, and she discusses how these experiences have informed her art practice and interest in curating and research.

Shane Hulbert (SH) How quickly did you make contact with the Beijing art community when you first arrived in China, and was that something you set out to do?

Tammy Wong Hulbert (TH) I was a big fan of the website Chineseart.com, which at the time, was the only website publishing writing about contemporary Chinese art from within China. What I noticed from that website was a strong sense of there being a contemporary art community, but that it was something you had to seek rather than simply access. At the time there were very few commercial galleries and many exhibitions were artist run, which meant access was through your own network of friends. Unintentionally, I ended up working for the site as a marketing manager. Through this job, I met the many personalities of the Beijing art community and gained local awareness and experiences of the art community in Beijing at that time.

SH So artists were developing their own communities, and from this they began to form networks. How did that work?

TH The artists were essentially nomads in their own city. They were not accepted by the local authorities and quite misunderstood. The idea of a contemporary

art scene was not supported, which meant their activities had to be secretive or private events. At that time artists would frequently migrate to areas where there was space for them to make work; a friend's factory or warehouse; their own apartments or homes; anywhere with enough space to work. Contemporary art was essentially a private subcultural practice. The artists supported each other, to develop a local art culture. There were few commercial galleries to show work, public galleries were conservative about the type of work they could show, so the activities happened in private spaces. I would get a phone call asking me to come to a show on the outskirts of the city and it would be a show on a factory floor with artists all experimenting with different types of art; performances, shoe throwing, frozen semen piled on a table and interactive experiments, all by local artists; and much for the sake of making art, expressing their individual voice and exploring ideas.

SH This emergence of art communities has happened in other parts of the world, but China had a unique situation that was initially less about market responses (such as London and New York) and more about responding to a set of imposed conditions. What kind of art practices emerged from this?

TH Performance was really popular at that time; it appealed to artists because it was temporary, it could be presented anywhere, and was predominately about ideas rather than materials. There were many performance artists at the time. This was challenging for the government because they had very limited ideas about what contemporary art practice was, and a lot of the activities the artists were engaging in were considered illegal. As a form of rebellion it meant that a number of contemporary artists were even more attracted to performance based work.

So a lot of the performance art festivals had to happen in secret, in other cities. A small group of artists would hire a bus, travel to the country side, find an abandoned site and make it a contained festival site. Some of the artists I worked with were involved in one of the first secret performance art festivals, in Sichuan, south west China. In a documentary they made about their experience the police ended up intervening in the event. Of course this was all part of the process, and they were equally as inventive about how they responded to the police; it was simply a small group of people, on a holiday, having a party,

they weren't actually doing anything. There were so many layers of secretive behaviour that existed at that time due to the way the authorities viewed contemporary art and the lack of understanding between local authorities and the art community. Many artists at the time were often arrested. Once China started modernising and accepting more foreign influences, these artists started talking to the international press, telling their story about not being able to do their art in their own country. This ultimately led to the authorities warning people rather than arresting them, and contemporary art in China had a new legitimacy.

SH And in response to the international modernisation this all started to change in late 2000. The artists became more organised and able to develop cultural hubs or precincts. Can you tell me how this happened?

TH One of the best examples of this would be the now well known 798 precinct. Sometime in 2001 artists started moving into an area of Beijing called 798; a disused factory precinct in the Dashanzi area, in the northeast of Beijing. Some of the artists discovered that it was cheap to rent, and as the community grew, supporting organisations also moved in, including the company I worked for, Chineseart.com. Local artists were more accepted by the authorities, and this began when the commercial art scene in Beijing had begun to flourish. Performance art festivals also began to be more accepted. I remember seeing the artist Yang Jiechang who was at the time using his body as a platform, which involved some serious mental and physical abuse. I remember watching him perform at the festival, sitting at a table with a woman, not speaking, him smoking, her drinking. This went on for some 20 minutes, the audience patiently waiting for something to happen, when suddenly she just leaned over and stabbed him in the arm. He just sat there bleeding.

SH How did the artists react to the increased international interest in Chinese art? Did this make you an outsider, or did it increase your acceptance?

TH The art community was small, but at the time the foreign art market was significantly bigger than the local art market. The artists worked this out pretty quickly, so they were all conscious of having an international network. This is what really began the economic shift in Chinese art. Many of the artists wanted

to get to know me as they wanted to expand their contacts. I was at a dinner celebrating one of the first 798 festivals, and remember having a choice of who to sit next to – Zhu Yu, the famous baby foetus-eating performer, or Chen Jin, known for his nude sun baking performances where he imprints lucky numbers on his body. It was a great time to be in Beijing.

SH It seems that a lot of the art originated from a position of rebelliousness towards the state. As an outsider, did you get a sense that there was a shift in the early 2000 that was having an effect on the kind of work that the artists were making?

TH It was a really interesting time because China was changing – Beijing was about to massively modernise, the city was one big construction site. The new generation of artists were also changing, breaking away from more traditional types of art and really proactively trying to explore their own voice; the voice of a generation permitted more freedom and exposure to the beginning of a market driven society – one which they would be a part of. The transitional point in the politics of China meant that a new type of artist was emerging.

SH What did this look like from your perspective?

TH A good example would be the artist Zhao Bandi, best known for satirical works of himself and Panda having conversations about social issues in China, such as aids, littering and public behaviour, for example. One image, ‘Zhao Bandi and Panda fight SARS’ was used by a local Beijing newspaper without giving him credit. He then sued the paper and won, the first intellectual property case in China of its kind. His success increased to the point that he became quite wealthy, at least wealthy enough to import the first Alpha Romeo T.SPARK into China. So now you have a situation where Chinese artists are driving around in imported Italian sports cars. This represented a real turning point for Beijing artists – in 2002 we met in public spaces, coffee shops and tea houses; in 2007, just 5 years later, they wanted to invite me to their studios, and pick me up in their new cars.

SH It seems that when you first went there in 2000 there was no real endpoint or goal for the artist other than just ‘being an artist’, but by the time you left

there was a new culture emerging that they were responding to. Is this how you saw it?

TH When I first arrived the artists were there for themselves, for the community they built, and this became their art practice – expression and the purity of an art form. The modernisation of China changed that – suddenly there was a market for contemporary Chinese art, the artists were getting picked up by galleries and international curators, starting to engage with an international market. This changed the purpose and it changed the landscape. When I returned in 2007 I wanted to see my old friends again, but where once they would have loved to simply ‘hang out’ in a coffee shop and talk about ideas, they now had deadlines to meet and shows to produce. They almost never left their studios (except to drive their new cars), so the adhoc shows were no longer happening, the word of mouth invites had dried up, and the artists were individualising their careers. The nature of the networks had changed.

This was an observation rather than a judgment, because it also meant that through commercialisation, being an artist had become a serious profession, and that put contemporary Chinese art on the international stage like never before. It didn’t mean that the passion for making work had changed, it was just that now they had more opportunity to show their work. The factory and warehouse pop-up galleries had been replaced with commercial galleries and pavilions at biennales.

SH And an artist owned the first Alfa Romeo sports car in China.