

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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### ETHAN COHEN

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise

Date: 15 Oct 2009

Duration: about 2 hours

Location: Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York

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#### PART I: At Ethan Cohen Fine Art perusing through past shows' exhibition postcards

**Ethan Cohen (EC):** We have very early video footage of a show we did with Ai Weiwei. Gu Changwei was the cinematographer, and then there was Weiwei, myself, and Zhu Ceng was our producer. (Flipping through a binder) There's the "Rock Paper Garden" invitation to Xing Fei's exhibition at my gallery in 1988.

**Jane DeBevoise (JD):** That's cool, that's really great. Anyway, one of the things we could do is have Ali come in at some point and do some research; I'd be happy to help too. Obviously, this interview is for the 80's project, but I like pulling materials together because we've got an archive now that is, without a doubt, the best archive in the world. I'd love to have a copy of US materials as well as those from China.

**(EC):** At the time we had some photo documents up in our art storage, odds and ends. We never thought to document it all.

**(JD):** Of course, no one did. That's what's kind of fun about it. You know who's got some interesting stuff - Bob Lee at the Asian American Art Center. He's been doing a digitalization project, and he's organizing things, exhibition by exhibition, and sorting through what was going on at that time, how little people were paying any attention whatsoever. (Looking at an exhibition postcard of Ai Weiwei's) This was Ai Weiwei's show.

**(EC):** "Old Shoes—Safe Sex," and then "Rock Paper Garden." So I guess the gallery was Art Waves Ethan Cohen Gallery. That was what we called it.

**(JD):** There's Han Xin's exhibition postcard...

**(EC):** I also did a Wang Keping exhibition off-site at a cultural center "Blue Hill" just outside of New York City. Another early exhibition that I curated was titled "Signature of the Spirit". This exhibition brought together a high level group of international artists - Yuan Yunsheng, Ushio Shinohara. Qiu Deshu, Max Gimblett, Naoto Nakagawa, Toko Shinoda, and Jill Nathanson. In talking with the artist Jill Nathanson, I got the idea to create an exhibition that focused on American Modernism and Asian aesthetics.

**(JD):** That's cool. There's Kong Baiji. The portrait of your father at Joan's is by Kong Baiji?

**(EC):** Yes. He was originally a printmaker. He was one of the first artists I got involved with in the realm of Chinese art. At the time in Shanghai I couldn't buy art from him directly. I was a college student.

**(JD):** '80, '81?

**(EC):** Yes, '80, '81. He said he couldn't sell me any painting. I had to buy it through his painting association. So I sent him \$1000, and the painting association sent me ten paintings. (Laughter) And that's how I started collecting.

**(JD):** That's an early show, too.

**(EC):** Another show I had early on titled "Innovative Brush", involved artists Chen Jialing. Sheila Isham, Kong Baiji, Liu Tianwei, Ma Desheng, Jill Nathanson, and Xing Fei.

**(JD):** They're all great artists. Sheila Isham. Oh my goodness.

**(EC):** She was someone we knew years ago in Hong Kong.

**(JD):** I forgot, because her son was my sister's big heartthrob for a long, long time. You know - the true beginning of heartthrobs, in high school. Ralph. I still bump into him from time to time.

**(EC):** Asian aesthetics became an important part of her work. These are the later cards that we put together. Different projects.

**(JD):** What did you do with Peng Yu and Sun Yuan?

**(EC):** I curated their work for the Moscow Biennale exhibition "We Are Your Future" a special exhibition for the 2007 Biennale that focused on new areas of art – Chinese and Latin American Contemporary Art.

**(JD):** Right, I remember that.

**(EC):** And this is the piece: "I'm Here". We were a little bit nervous about showing this in Russia—showing a likeness of Osama Bin Laden—because we thought that Islamic radicals might come up and knife us or the artists. But we decided to go ahead and do it, and it was really a life replica of Bin Laden- he is 6'4" and the artists paid extraordinary detail to get everything correct –his facial expression, his facial hair, his hands, the skin complexion, his clothing, turban-scarves, his AK-47 and even his American Army boots! Peng Yu and Sun Yuan didn't state who this person was officially, but it really looked like him. The idea was to make a wall for the work and cut a small opening for one of Bin Laden's eyes to peer out at you! The viewer on seeing his eye, will wonder who is peering out at them! The viewer then must walk around the wall to discover an Islamic radical armed with an AK-47 on his back. It was really an impressive piece. I also showed this artwork during Art Basel at the Scope Art Fair in 2007. It was installed as the only piece that you saw as you entered the art fair- placed in front of a clear white wall of 80 feet long – it was stunning and powerful. The art press wrote it up and it received a lot of critical attention.

**(JD):** Do you stay in contact with them? I just think they're really interesting. They really push it, but they push it in smart ways, they don't push it in idiotic ways.

**(EC):** Yes, I stay in close contact with them. Another work, one of Peng Yu and Sun Yuan's best works, is " Only the Strongest Dragon Gets to Cross the River". This piece is made out of foam cubes and was originally installed in the beginning of an exhibition in 798. The visitor had to take their shoes off and wade through a sea of foam cubes 4 feet deep to get to the other side to see the exhibition. Walking through the work is like wading thru quick sand and you have to really love art to get to the other side. It is a terrific work that you must experience. I decided that I liked it so much that I bought it for my own collection. I first showed it in Miami for a special exhibition during Art Basel titled "The Chinese Art Invasion". More recently, I lent it for an exhibition on Chinese Art that was shown in a museum in Manila several years back.

**(JD):** Where in Manila?

**(EC):** The Metropolitan Museum.

**(JD):** They showed it or they're going to show it?

**(EC):** They showed it about 3 years ago, and that was exciting.

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**PART II: The interview**

**(JD):** When were you first getting introduced to contemporary artists in China, what was your experience, and how did you decide to start working and collaborating with them?

**(EC):** It happened very organically. We'll go back to 1979 when I was a freshman in college. I was very interested in Japanese contemporary art and Western contemporary art. Really, from my senior year in high school, I became involved in Japanese contemporary prints, and one of the dealers in Japan inspired me to begin to collect. I was living in Japan for several months during my junior and senior year of high school, and I was very much into Japanese art. I encountered Chinese art in '79 and '80 in Beijing during a visit to the Central Academy of Fine Arts— I remember going to a secret party where dancing was not normally practiced and all the students were dancing! – it was surreal to be able to dance in Beijing! I had never heard of dancing in China! This was completely under the radar of the Chinese Government. As the government relaxed its hold on Chinese Society, I remember one of my young hosts questioning me completely openly without reservation – “what it was like living in America? Did I have a girlfriend? Did I get an allowance? Could I grow my hair long?”. I remember visiting Yuan Yunsheng's art studio in 1980 when he was very upset about being suffocated artistically in China. He expressed his need to get out of China to be able to fulfill his artistic dream. It seemed like he imagined that everything in America was paved in gold! He held this idea that if he could just get out, and get to America, he would be able to produce the art that he was destined to create.

We were taken up in this big cause. My parents were trying to help artists come to America, and Yuan was one of the first. My parents helped organize a residency at Smith College and with the support and patronage of the Tufts' Dean of Students, Elizabeth Ahn Toupin, Yuan was able to spend a year at Tufts University. During my senior year at Harvard, I got involved because I applied to the East Asian Studies Department at Harvard for a special senior tutorial course that I would create with Yuan Yunsheng. The Department accepted my proposal and Adams House was gracious to give him room and board as well as a studio space in which we could work together. Yuan joined me during my last semester of senior year. I produced his first show in the United States; a solo show at Adams House And I got him to donate a brilliant painting, which was the first painting of Chinese Contemporary Art donated to Harvard to begin a collection for the University. The painting was of a bull. The bull had other powerful meanings; Yuan himself was born in the year of the bull and considered himself a bull. This bull's face had human characteristics and one could interpret that this bull portrait was actually a “self-portrait”. Just after I was graduated from Harvard, Yuan was asked to make a tapestry for Currier House [a Harvard residential college] . So- in this early period I was hooked to Chinese Contemporary Art - I was very turned on to these artists I met in Beijing. This is when I first met Han Xin, Li Quanwu, and Xing Fei. It was a dynamic and interesting period, and that's when I first met the Star-Stars art group members like Wang Keping, Ma Desheng, Yan li and others. I remember that meeting the Star-Stars was quite exciting when I was 18 years old. My Mother said, “If you want, come along.” I said, “I'd love to come and meet all these artists.” We went to a meeting place, waited for about 45 minutes and no one showed, and I remembering saying, “This is bizarre.” Then we got into our car, and just as we were about to take off —our window was down—someone walked up to the window and said, “Go to such-and-such address.” So we went to this other address, and there were all the Star-Stars waiting to meet us. It was bizarre. This particular trip had a profound impact on me. At that moment I realized, my god, it's incredibly difficult being an artist. It's difficult making a living as an artist anywhere, whether you're in Brooklyn, Beijing, Berlin, wherever. But when the government is against you and trying to hold you back, wow, this is interesting stuff! And I really wanted to help. I was impressed with some of the artists I saw.

At that time, I met Li Shan, Qiu Deshu, and Kong Baiji in Shanghai. When I left that first time I was really struck by Kong Baiji's Buddha images—very raw, and on very luminous paper. I really liked his work. I didn't have

that much money, but things were not that expensive. But I was aware that I was definitely a collector. And I think that it excited me so I asked Kong Baiji directly “May I buy some of your paintings? He answered me that he couldn’t sell directly to me. But if I contacted his work group or his unit, then I could approach them or go through a public gallery that the unit was associated with, and I could then send money. So when I went back to Harvard, I got \$1000 and sent it to the work unit in Shanghai, and lo and behold, about 3 or 4 weeks later, I got a package with his paintings that were rolled up, and I got 10 paintings. I said, “Wow, this is really cool.”

In 1981 - '82, I took my junior abroad to Japan, and at that time I wasn’t sure whether I should go to Japan or China. I was an East Asian Studies major. I loved China. I loved Japan. At that time we knew how tough it was in China, and Japan seemed more economically powerful. I consciously wanted to try to do something different from both my parents and do something on my own, to make my own path. Since my father spoke Chinese, I said, “Why don’t I do Japanese?” Also, when I was 10 years old, we lived in Kyoto for a year, so I wanted to go back. I decided to study Japanese in college. But over time, China just grew on me. The art that was being made by the Chinese was just much more significant and much more meaningful. I collected Chinese art. I was really pulled up in this crusade to open peoples’ eyes to what Chinese artists were making. So in '82, '83, when I came back from Japan, I tried to do more events. There was a Chinese artist, Xu Jianguo, who got me to organize a Chinese Art show for him in New York at a night club called “Freyja”; this must have been in 1984. The nightclub was very generous and gave me 7500 sq ft of space to exhibit Chinese Art! The club was literally on 43rd and Broadway. At that time, most galleries were not receptive to Chinese art at all. It was very tough get galleries to even look at Chinese artists’ works- frankly it was frustrating. I had grown up with the Matisse grandchildren and great grandchildren in Cambridge, Massachusetts and I knew that Pierre Matisse represented Zao Wuji, so I decided to try my luck with these new Chinese Artists and see whether Pierre Matisse might be willing to consider showing any of these new talents! So one day, I went to visit Pierre Matisse, and I spent a good hour and a half with him showing works by Liu Tianwei, Yuan Yunsheng, Qiu Deshu, Ma Desheng, Wang Keping, Kong Baiji, and others—I knew Zhao Wuji, too, as I visited him in France once. I thought he was an interesting and solid painter, but by no means did I feel Zhao Wuji had the fresh vision as someone like Yuan, or Tianwei, or early Qiu Deshu. Pierre was very polite and encouraging, but he explained that he really was not looking for any more talent. He said, “Keep trying, go out there and you will find a way to show these talents.” I tried to find people who were receptive, but it was difficult. I went to Danny Newberg, a friend of mine who had opened a trendy gallery in TriBeCa. Danny was an expert on German neo-Expressionism at the time, and he had a good gallery. He’s a few years older than I am. I went to him and said, “Would you like to take some of these artists on? They’re very interesting and looking for a gallery to represent them!” But they weren’t hip enough for him.

I sympathize with the artists trying to find a home. No one was taking on the cause of Chinese art at that time—there was one gallery showing realism, but I wasn’t attracted to photographic realism or pure academic realism. I felt it was too done; again, and again, and again. And it wasn’t innovative. That gallery was doing stuff like that. I remember I had met Yan Li and Ma Desheng—I knew them from the Star-Stars—and we were walking in SoHo – must’ve been in '86 or so. At that time I was making a living as a designer for Diane Von Furstenberg, doing private promoting, collecting, and trying to get people interested in Chinese art. We were walking slowly up the street, and we saw a sign that said “For Rent” on Greene St. I went in to see the ground floor – there was a guy doing metalwork, so the place was all dust and fires.

You could smell the odor. I said to him, “I see you have space for rent, would you consider renting it? And what is the price?” And the guy said, “\$1000”. So we went upstairs to check out the space. I looked at Yan Li and Ma Desheng, considered the price and said, “I can handle this.” I had some money put away and with my salary as a designer I decided to go for it and open a space dedicated to promoting Chinese Contemporary Art. I liked the idea of a space where things could just happen...I didn’t think of things in terms of for-profit or non-profit at the time. So I came up with the name Art Waves, because art waves represented something new and

different. I guess it evolved to Art Waves Ethan Cohen Gallery. Wild idea!

I first met my colleague Zhu Ceng through Yan Li. Yan Li knew Zhu Ceng through the music-artist-poet circle—Zhu Ceng had been a cellist in the Beijing Opera, but on coming to the USA he needed to make money to support his family. He learned construction work and Yan Li knew that I needed some help to renovate my new gallery space. What's interesting is that Zhu Ceng had come to America because his father was a very famous opera singer who suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution. Upon Mao's death, he was reinstated and chose to leave China and come to America. America received him, gave him a nice apartment, and he then brought his family out as well. His son was a musician in the Beijing Opera, and during the Cultural Revolution he had been a chef, and thank god he was because that's how the family survived and was able to eat. When he arrived to America he spoke no English, but had to get a job, and ended up with one in construction.

Within a year he was the head of construction of a huge construction company. I needed help to construct my gallery. I had no clue how to build a wall, paint, or put lighting in.

Because he loved art and was a friend of Yan Li's, Zhu Ceng and I struck up this really funny relationship because I was working by day as a designer but at 5 o'clock I would leave my office and head to SoHo to work again on creating the gallery. We would open it in the evenings or on the weekends. So literally, for 2 or 3 months Zhu Ceng worked for free. I guess I worked for free too; we were just trying to do this thing together.

Our first show was for Han Xin. It was funny because I didn't use typesetting; I used handwriting because I thought that would be a little sexier. And I remember Han Xin saying, "Are you sure we should do it?" But things were more relaxed then, and we really just wanted to show talented artists from China. We had a review too—Connoisseur Magazine did a feature in their "Up and Coming" section. The reviewer called me an "Occidental-Orientalist." It was really cute. When we had our first show, Mary Boone visited. She signed our book, and we were definitely on the map. People were curious, but the really hard work lay ahead. The people who were buying art were just people who liked SoHo and the art scene. They weren't necessarily searching for Chinese artists. They were just coming in, liking the image, and buying art. But it was difficult trying to find buyers, though some of the ex-patriots who had been living in Hong Kong of course bought. You really had to... through your connections, friends, and friends of friends...it was really the grassroots.

When I was in the subway today, there was some guy preaching about the gospel and Jesus. There were about 100 people in the car, and about 98% didn't want to listen to this guy. I felt a little like trying to promote Chinese Contemporary Art. We had a show for Xing Fei, which was just beautiful. It was a conceptual show called "Rock, Paper, Garden," where Xing Fei had spent time in the gallery creating this huge rock in the middle of the gallery made out of paper mâché, puddy, wire, and wood. She created the seasons all around the rock: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. We did a solo show with Yuan Yunsheng, his first solo show in New York. I remember at that time, I had just come to New York. Yuan had high expectations. He wanted to sell all his paintings for \$6000 and not a penny less. There were very few people who were buying his art, but it looked great. At that time I remember I couldn't afford to frame the work. Yuan insisted that everything be framed. Zhu Ceng and I did not sleep the night before his exhibition; we were framing his work to make Yuan happy so that everything looked good. It turned out to be quite a fantastic show. They were canvas pieces and we had made a wooden frame to fit around each piece. Zhu Ceng was a great craftsman, and we delivered a great show. I remember Yuan did not even say thank you. It was interesting. Maybe I could understand a little bit about where he was coming from. But one of the things he didn't understand about America was how to be gracious so people would feel good about having just donated so much time to their artistic career! Maybe in China that's how things were handled, but I think he always had trouble.

Funny story about Chinese art at that time: when I first started the gallery, Yuan Yunsheng's wife, Daihua, worked with designing textiles in the same company I was working as a designer. During the day Daihua and

I were living this double life – during the day we designed for Diane von Furstenburg and at 5 o'clock, maybe Daihua might meet me downtown. It was funny. And that's how things started organically.

Yuan Yusheng is interesting and I'll tell you why. His line is very powerful. It reminded me of Picasso. It also reminded me a little bit of deKooning's power, but maybe more realist than abstract. Yuan met deKooning during Yuan's stay in America. I think he had a great experience at Smith College and at Harvard College. I personally had an amazing life experience with Yuan Yusheng. During my tutorial with him when we worked from late December through June, living at Adam's House, he did different peoples' portraits. He did this incredible Polish musician's portrait, and I watched him do ink portraits in front of my eyes. The ink brush doesn't lie. You make a mistake and it's right in front of you. And he just knew how to control the ink brush and what he produced was truly fantastic. Yuan agreed to do my portrait as a thank you to me. I watched him in a mirror create my face by just putting globs of oil patches together. It was fascinating; I'd never seen anything like it.

The portrait is okay. Who likes their own portrait? Rare to find one. But it was a great experience to see how Yuan sculpted the oil strokes into this portrait. My one-man exhibition that I produced for Yuan proved to be quite popular. We had a young modern dancer who performed at the opening of our exhibition. We showed a lot of the ink paintings that he had been working on. In addition, Yuan and I collaborated in making an etching in the Adams House Press because I couldn't afford my own poster, so I made our own poster. I bought a plate—I still have it today, as well as those posters. I photographed Yuan and created a photographic etching on a plate, and then Yuan etched into the plate. I printed it on the Adams House press. It was really cool.

We came to New York to have his first exhibition. I knew Yuan's work pretty well. It was primarily black and white. It was powerful in stroke; sometimes he was trying to find the true Chinese painting style. What was that? Was it a merging of Western and Chinese academic painting? He's always somewhat abstract with a layer of academic realism hidden in the work.

I remember one of the paintings he loved and in fact forced me to buy as a collector. It was an old woman who had put a huge shroud over her body. It was almost abstract. Black. But it had a structure underneath it. And he loved this painting. Anyway, I have this. I don't know why I bought it. But I think a painting that really captures the essence of the 80's and Yuan Yusheng is a piece that Joan owns. It's a landscape that has a man and a woman lying on each other. So it's Mother Earth and Father Earth lying together, and it has the complex black and white brushstrokes. So it looks Western in one sense, but it also looks very Chinese. I felt it really was in my book what Yuan was trying to attempt to make in the 1980s. There's another layer. At the time the Rothschilds—whom I had been friends with were interested in looking at Chinese art. They came to visit me one afternoon in my soho gallery. We were looking at art, and they asked me as the art dealer, "Do you like Schnabel?" And I said, "Well, I think certain pieces of Schnabel's are okay." They were really looking at buying Schnabels, spending \$150,000 a pop. They came to our exhibition of Yuan Yunsheng and weren't so keen: "I don't know, we've seen too much of this stuff, it's not so fresh." So then I showed them my front gallery space where I had a small group show with interesting pieces by Qiu Deshu's early 80's work. They were very much taken by this work. So they actually ended up buying some pieces from me of Qiu Deshu's. I was excited for Chinese art because their eye mattered. I think Qiu Deshu's early work really had legitimacy, and even though we sometimes coin him as the Shanghai Miró, he was using Chinese aesthetic and Chinese sources on paper. I was really taken by his development from 1980, where he was using experimental color to black and white. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he knew innovation was occurring. I remember Qiu started scratching at the surface to make constellations, cosmos-like space, and then he started ripping paper. He found himself in this whole 'cracks' period.

It was original and Chinese. You could clearly see in his paintings all his development from 1979-1984. It was very Chinese, and I felt in the 1980's he was the most original, non-derivative, Chinese artist. During the first

part of my career as an art dealer promoting contemporary Chinese art, I was just totally taken by his work. We brought him to Tufts University for a year. I helped get him invited. He made huge murals for Tufts during his year stay. Sadly, I was in Japan my junior year abroad so I didn't see him a lot during that year. Then later on I got Wang Keping to agree to make two huge sculptures in honor of Elizabeth Ahn Toupin (she was just retiring as Dean of Students), someone AAA should interview. Elizabeth Ahn Toupin, and my mother, Joan Lebold Cohen were the two—I call them—mothers of Chinese art of the '80s. I think you Jane, are one of the great mothers of Chinese Art too—

**(JD):** I'm too young to be a mother of Chinese art.

**(EC):** Of course, but now you're a serious mother. But I think that Elizabeth Ahn Toupin was interesting because she was the Dean of Students at Tufts, and Joan made the presentation to Liz [Elizabeth Ahn Toupin] to open her doors to Chinese art. So Yuan Yunsheng spent a year at Tufts living at Liz's house. Qiu Deshu spent another year.

When she retired I thought it was very appropriate to get Wang Keping do some sculpture in honor of her gift to and in support of Chinese art. Keping agreed, and Tufts now has these two sculptures. Sadly, they have not taken the best care of these sculptures because they left them outside; they're not destroyed, but they really need to be kept indoors. Anyway, Liz Toupin is a very important player. She was very open to helping promote Chinese art.

I did a show with Liu Tianwei called 'Nirvana and Crucifixion'. Must have been in 1987. I officially opened the gallery in 1987. Tianwei was an artist I met through Joan in Boston at the Museum School of Fine Arts. He was a younger artist trained academically in China in Chinese landscape and went through 4 years of academic western art training at the Museum School of Fine Arts. He created a really interesting painting in Joan's early show of Chinese Art at Boston City Hall, which I liked a lot. It was a landscape, but the colors were all askew. We became friends; he was about my age, maybe a bit older, and we started to hang out. During my Harvard years, we created a poster together. I was a member of this club called the Spee Club, and we wanted to create an event for the Spee, and they were very into bears. Tianwei was a great drawer, so together he and I drew this fun poster that's now hanging in the Spee Club. Little does Spee Club know that they have a piece by an important Chinese artist, even today! At the time, I was really on the line between art and fashion. I myself felt I wanted to make my own art. Right out of college I went to design school in New York. I was collecting and promoting art, and never had the idea that I would become an art dealer. We did a fashion show when I graduated from FIT after Harvard; must've been the summer of '85. Tianwei agreed to collaborate with me on creating this fashion show. The concept was bringing fashion from the West to America; pilgrims coming to America via windsurfer, meeting Indians on Corn Hill Beach in Cape Cod where the pilgrims actually put their feet down on their second day in America. They first went to Provincetown, came across to Truro. At the time the Pilgrims were starving and found corn buried in the sand! So Tianwei and I created these pop art corn pieces— huge pieces made out of industrial tubing. It looked like corn on the beach, and then I bought these wide Chinese farmers' hats and clipped shower curtains around the hats. They were all placed in the dunes in between the grass so that the eye could just see them as sculptures with a grayish sky as a backdrop. Tianwei used spray paint in many colors- blue, green, yellow, white, red and black and created abstract calligraphic forms on the shower curtains -they were beautiful. So the concept was to create a fashion awareness between Pilgrims and American Indians in which the American Indian would teach the Pilgrims how to be fashionably aware! I called it "Fashio 101". So the set-up was the following- Indians were hiding in the bluff, which were young students—friends of mine from all walks of life, hiding in the dunes. They wore the actual pieces that Tianwei and I put together. The Indians came down and introduced themselves to the pilgrims who had arrived in America via windsurfer and wearing just bathing suits, and took them behind the dunes. Then together the Indians and Pilgrims created this whole Fashion 101 awareness of clothing and cat-walked down thru the dune grass onto Corn Hill Beach where we had several hundred Truro-fashion groupies waiting to get

the new fashion trends. Joel Meyerowitz, the well-known photographer, is based in Truro and photographed the entire fashion event. He must have some very interesting photos in his archive. I have photos of this event too, and I can show you. We still have some of those pop art corn pieces in the basement of our house in Cape Cod, and maybe one or two leftover pieces that Tianwei painted, but the paint is peeling off the plastic. It was a truly a cool experience. That was a collaborative project with Tianwei. When I opened the gallery I wanted to do a one-man show with him. I loved his abstract compositions. He had learned from the best in Western art history—Kandinsky to Rauschenberg. He was able to take garbage or string or paper or whatever and put it together and make a fantastic composition. Pretty amazing. I collected a bunch of his early work. I remember a piece in my Harvard dorm room that I acquired; I think the amount I paid was equal to what I had to pay for the framing cost of the work. It was a 28-panel piece of color, line, drawing, paper and rope. I brought that piece to New York when I first started art dealing. I lent the piece to Joan's exhibition at Smith College on Chinese Art. In New York I wanted to show something newer, so Tianwei created a series of works that he titled 'Nirvana and Crucifixion', where he broke glass. It was his first time to smash glass and use it as ink and line. He created these compositions that were heavy and had the Chinese aesthetic intermingled with Western showmanship. It was a step beyond even what Yuan Yunsheng was contemplating. Tianwei went back to China, and in the '90s he was working with his father. In the late '90s when Chinese art started becoming very hot again, I tried to get him to do a big show, saying, "You don't want to be forgotten as a major player." He is sort of an introvert. He just wanted to stay to himself.

**(JD):** Does he still create work?

**(EC):** He does, but more calligraphy. It's sad because I think he was a real powerhouse. When I think of the '80s: I have fantastic works of his that are really museum-quality, significant, original, and maybe even more powerful than Qiu Deshu's work. He is another artist I would single out. But he really became a recluse and may have given up his own career to help his father, who was a quite well known painter. I tried bringing our friends from Asia Society to meet him. And at the time I remember he said very clearly, "I'm too busy." Incredible! It's funny, I must say; Chinese artists have their own mind and their own thing going. But I really felt bad because he was a talent.

**(JD):** He's a friend of yours also.

**(EC):** It's also very interesting. He was a very close friend of mine, and someone I really helped and for whom I would do anything. I remember in the '90s, he said to me, "Well, if you want to have a solo show in New York, absolutely, you just have to buy the whole show, and make me a catalogue." So I said to him, "Are you kidding me? I don't have that type of money to put up front, to buy all your works. I'll help you, I'll pay for half the catalogue, but I can't just put all that up." So it didn't happen. But when I think back, the expectations of some Chinese artists are extreme. As the art field became much more complicated, we realized years ago in the '80s—no contracts, just word of mouth, a handshake—that you now need a complicated contract.

We were doing it out of love. We love the arts; we were trying to help each other. I think one of the beauties of the '80's was that things were not that complicated. You were there trying to help. Buying a piece of art for any collector isn't easy. But if the price is really reasonable, it's easier. Then again, you could choose to buy something else with that money. We all know this. But I remember being frustrated: why didn't the world open their eyes to Chinese art? There are very talented artists. I felt academically that in the 1980s, people like Li Quanwu, Han Xin, and all these people were fantastically talented, and trained as artists. Even Hou Hanru is an excellent drawer. He realized his talent was more in curatorship and in writing, rather than in making art. I think it gives him great insight though. I think art dealers who are artistic have an edge over art dealers who aren't. Even art curators who can make art know things a little bit more. I think that's interesting. But back to the 80's—we had Qiu Deshu's shows. We also tried to merge Asian and Western aesthetics, showing a common understanding of Western aesthetics.

Trying to get Americans to buy into Chinese art, it had to be a special type of realism. I thought Han Xin's realism was a little edgier, a little more original. We did a series of exhibitions in the 80's—'86 to '88—at the Harvard Fairbank Center. Every three or four months I would take a group of Chinese artists up and we'd do an exhibition, lecture, and a discussion at Harvard. I brought the Star-Stars (this is when Ai Weiwei came with me) and Han Xin. It was really fun; we had a great time.

**(JD):** How many of them came?

**(EC):** Well, not so many. At the time I didn't even realize that Ai Weiwei was part of the Star-Stars. He was the youngest and on the fringe. He wasn't the central focus at that time, even though people thought he was later. He wasn't. It was really Wang Keping, Ma Desheng, Yan Li, Li Shuang and others. But Weiwei came with us to represent the Star Stars—and maybe we can get Zhu Ceng to come join us and talk about them. Remember when we took the road trip up to Harvard? Did Ma Desheng join us?

**Zhu Ceng (ZC):** No, Xing Fei did though.

**(EC):** And who else? Was it Wang Keping?

**(ZC):** No, he didn't come.

**(EC):** So I guess, in many ways Weiwei was the only representative officially. But we had works by Ma Desheng, Wang Keping, Li Shuang, Yan Li, and Huang Rui. What was exciting was that Harvard took us seriously. They not only invited us to have the exhibition there, but also housed us at the Faculty Club. I remember Weiwei was so smitten because the room that we stayed in was the same room that the Dalai Lama had stayed in, and that really impressed him. He was as happy as a clam, and it was exiting to see him and the others so excited. We had funny experiences. It was a real road trip. I rented a van, we took the artwork up, drove up, installed it, and had the exhibition. I was mentioning also about the Yuan Yunsheng exhibition. Remember when we did "All Nighter"?

**(ZC):** Yes, we also negotiated the pricing for that.

**(EC):** Oh yes, the pricing.

**(ZC):** (Laughter) From morning through night.

**(EC):** Because he was so tough.

**(ZC):** He thought he was wise. Chen Yifei selling this...Chen Yifei, Ding Shaoguang... they're supposed to be his students.

**(EC):** And he was selling at \$10,000, and so he figured his painting should be just as expensive. I guess the compromise of \$6000.

**(ZC):** Well, he didn't care if it sold, but wanted the price to stay where it was.

**(EC):** So even if the gallery lost lots of money, he didn't care. It was difficult.

**(JD):** It was a face issue. He wanted it to be a 'high enough' price.

**(EC):** Yes, but it was difficult. We were at the edge; "\$6000" and they'd just walk away. It was a lot of money at that time. We did sell Yunsheng paintings for \$3000.

**(JD):** Outside the family of friends?

**(EC):** Yes, we did. A lot of friends. Friends of friends, and they became family friends, our friends. My collectors who bought from me became my friends; they were supporters.

**(JD):** At that time it wasn't mom and dad, uncles and aunts. It was a real outside sale.

**(EC):** That's right, and early on I had some savings, and all my savings went into Chinese art, for good and for bad. But I remember now - when my savings were depleted, we had to raise money to keep the gallery going. And I remember when I bought a lot of Wang Keping pieces, I tried to see if some of my friends would buy them off me, and some did.

So a lot of people have those works, and that's exciting. Those were early collectors, supporters, and that's how we built the enterprise; how we got here. When you think of the 1980's and what's happened today in Chinese art, the world has turned upside down. I was writing an email yesterday to a person in the art world about

Chinese art and how the market has shifted. We were complete outsiders. People would laugh at us when we tried to promote Chinese art. The most common response I would hear about Chinese Art "It's so derivative!". Every reaction from an auction house to curator to big collector: it's a derivative of this, it looks like this, it looks like that. I remember I went to Sotheby's early on when they had some of their experts. Even in the 90's or late 80's, evaluation of certain Chinese artists, of good ones were considered 'no value'. I felt like a complete idiot. Even someone like Han Xin, where I know there was a market that we were selling for \$10,000—of course there was a market. But according to the official auction houses, there was no market!

It was funny, we also have the experience of when the auction house came to us 5 years ago and said, "We want to start a market. give us artwork, whatever you have, give it to us." Within three months, there were blue-chip artists, non blue-chip artists, artists on the fringe, and artists that weren't even on the radar.

Anyway, going back to the 80's to today, people talk about the bubble—the Chinese art now, the devaluation—and I chuckle to myself, because now there are at least 20,000 more collectors of Chinese art today than we had ten years ago. Not to mention all the new collectors of Indian art, Pakistani art, Iranian art, Indonesian art, Thai art, Korean art, or Japanese art. Maybe there was a bubble, but the reality is, as a dealer, promoter, or curator, there's so much room to make a living now if you are involved in Asian Art. We were scratching our heads as to how to make a living on art in the 80's. It was incredibly difficult. So actually today, the market is very tough. People are not buying. That's the reality. But I feel like I've been around the block; this feels like the late 80's. To make a sale is challenging. It's always been difficult, but the difference is thousands and thousands of new people know about it and they're supporting this, and there are thousands and thousands of new Chinese artists who can make a living, and they know there is potential and support for them. One of the reasons we're here today is the Archive. The Archive is doing this important documentation of the 80's because Chinese art and Asian art matters. This is what we've been working for 25 years. It's exciting. I'm very happy you're here because it's been a long road. This could not have happened 20 years ago. It could have, but people wouldn't have taken it so seriously.

**(JD):** Tell us about Ai Weiwei.

**(EC):** Zhu Ceng, you were buddies with Ai Weiwei. I'm trying to remember how I first met Weiwei. We did a show with Yan Li and the Star-Stars, and that's when we met Weiwei. You used to hang out with Weiwei in the East Village, late night, with Zhang Wei and Zhao Gang.

**(ZC):** He [Weiwei] did portraits on West 4th street.

**(EC):** I met a lot of the artists on the street on West 4th because they used to do portraits. This is how they made a living. This is how they paid their rent. Weiwei was also a gambler; he used to pay his rent by gambling.

**(ZC):** At that time his girlfriend was a violist and played on the street with another Chinese conductor.

**(EC):** Also, why you [Zhu Ceng] would know Weiwei and his girlfriend is because Zhu Ceng was very plugged into the music clique because of his father. All the opera singers of China would come through your house. Zhu Ceng was a cellist in the Beijing Opera.

(JD): And that that time what were you doing?

(ZC): I was doing construction. A lot of Chinese artists hung out there on West 4th.

(EC): And we met through Yan Li. What did you think of me? A crazy American trying to show these guys art? You definitely didn't. If I was that crazy you wouldn't have worked with me every night for months on end, not being paid.

(ZC): (Laughter) So far I know that all your money has just been thrown away. I remember all the Chinese artists in the 80s carried around their portfolios door-to-door in SoHo. No one took it. The other dealers would just say "get out!"

(EC): I remember being visited by a Chinese artist: it wasn't like you would just come and give a CD. Sometimes a Chinese artist would arrive on your doorstep and say, "would you like to see my painting?" And we would say, "Maybe we could make an appointment." They would say, "hold on a second," and then go downstairs and bring in 30 of their huge canvases into the gallery. It was wild.

(JD): So what was Weiwei doing at that time if you remember?

(ZC): He suggested that night we go to West 4th street to the party, and sometimes we went to Atlantic City.

(EC): I'm trying to remember back. Weiwei used to work part time in a framer's studio with his Buddy was a framer. What was his name?

(ZC): Wang Jing. Taiwanese.

(EC): Yes, Taiwanese framer. Weiwei would go there to just hang out and would occasionally bring me artwork. He brought me his shoes—

(JD): Wait, orient me. So, your gallery was at what address?

(EC): It was at 52 Greene street.

(JD): And you all hung out doing portraits on West 4th street?

(EC): Yes.

(JD): And this framer was where?

(EC): His name was Keene [?]. He was a Taiwanese artist, framer, and friend of Weiwei's. I think his space was in the 30s and later he moved down closer to me on Broome, a couple blocks away from me. Weiwei would make different pieces there.

(JD): Keene was Taiwanese? There were advertisements in magazines like Art News at that time. He did some shows.

(EC): not sure.

(JD): He didn't advertise though.

(EC): Not 100% sure.

(ZC): I don't know. He hasn't passed away. He was a Taiwanese artist. There were three of them: Yao Qingzhang, Wang Jing, and Weiwei. They hung out a lot.

(EC): It must have been '86 when I started to hang out with Weiwei, and we did numerous projects together. In fact, when Weiwei was bringing me different art pieces, I realized over time that we could maybe do a show. He said, "maybe." I said, "I will do a show if you make me enough artworks for me to show." So in fact we finally came up with a title, "Old Shoes - Safe Sex", and I remember the first time I actually saw a picture of Weiwei was a nude picture of him in the East Village. A picture with Yan Li, stark naked.

(JD): A photograph?

(EC): A photograph, right. Yan Li showed me that. Then Weiwei had shown me this idea of a raincoat, and I said, “let’s do it; let’s make an edition of this.” So in fact, we originally made an edition of that army raincoat with a condom, and it was 1987—

(ZC): ’88.

(EC): Yes. But he’d been thinking about that for a while. We’d all been growing up with AIDS awareness. We weren’t sure what AIDS was. In ’85 we knew about it, but not exactly. Weiwei was aware of it. I guess his show was in ’88?

(ZC): Yes.

(EC): Must have been in the early months of ’88, February. To make all those pieces took a while. So he’s making them over a yearlong period where he cut shoes—he could never afford to buy leather shoes in China. So he finally got leather shoes in America, cut them and put them on a wooden chassis and covered it with leather. He had a cobbler sew them together, and the cobbler got pissed at him saying, “You’re ruining these nice shoes.” He said, “Wait until I’m finished.” Finally, he did get the respect of the cobbler when he showed a finished product called “One Man Shoe.” He also made a piece I remember I really disliked. It was called “Braille.” It was a tube-attire and had a fish attached to the tube. The idea was that you could close your eyes and go up to it, take a whiff, and you would know what you’re touching. It was a piece that demanded reaction. It was a great piece, and I like it; it’s a piece I remember.

(JD): It was a real fish?

(EC): Yes, a real dried fish.

(JD): I remember seeing it stuck on the wall. It was in a photograph.

(ZC): Yes, it was a bicycle tire.

(JD): And the inner piece was—

(EC): It was a salted fish. It had two metal gasket pieces holding it onto the tire. One of the pieces I was really proud of—which we showed in our first show—was the five Chinese army raincoats on my gallery floor. It really mimicked a lotus. And I specifically bought the copper piping to make the five pieces to make it look like a star. I still have the copper piping. It was a great show; it was really interesting. I think we sold almost nothing. I convinced a few friends of mine to buy some actual Marcel Duchamp hanger pieces that Weiwei created. We were originally going to do an edition of 20, but in fact, I think Weiwei only made about 6—he couldn’t find the right hanger, and then he would cut out of matt board. Joan bought one. A few other collectors—friends of mine—bought them for \$500. After Weiwei’s exhibition we did that fashion show. At the time, we were making some money from the gallery, but I also was involved in the fashion business, and Weiwei liked fashion a lot.

(JD): Did he ever go to fashion school for a while? Pratt or?

(EC): He went to Parsons. We wanted to do events, and created a very interesting event together, must have been in ’88. It was at The World. Weiwei’s concept was he wanted to make a huge painting of Mao and a huge painting of the Mona Lisa. As Weiwei always said when he wakes up in the morning he sees the sun, and on his right he would see the Mona Lisa, on the left he would see Mao. That was his world. So we wanted to make things happen in New York. One of my friends Steve Lewis was the big promoter of nightclub scene in New York, and he ran the Palladium and also a club called The World. He offered to give me stage space, and he would give us a little budget and free drinks. We made enough money to have cards, so we actually created The Last Chinese Supper. It must have been spring of 1988.

**(JD):** This is before or after his solo show?

**(EC):** After his solo show. I went out and bought white painting outfits. I guess Weiwei and I figured out how we were going to do this, but it was Weiwei who was the main guy. We went and bought Chinese food and chopsticks, and we set up a whole table in The World staged as though we were having the last supper, but it was all-Chinese. I think most of us were Chinese except maybe for me.

**(JD):** Did you go to this, Zhu Ceng?

**(ZC):** I didn't go.

**(EC):** But you were definitely involved in the preparations. It was funny because in my recollection Weiwei had painted the huge image of Mao and the huge image of the Mona Lisa. Weiwei can draw quite well. In fact, he taught me to draw. It was very interesting because I had studied a little drawing in university, but he helped me really look and open my eyes to how to really draw things. He knew how to draw well. Weiwei needed help in painting these paintings, and it was Han Xin who reminded me—Han Xin helped us paint those paintings. So it was Han Xin and Weiwei. I bought these huge canvases and laid one at a time on my gallery floor...They were huge, must have been at least 18 feet by 7 feet wide. They filled the entire gallery floor. We painted a huge portrait of Mao and a huge portrait of the Mona Lisa—Weiwei and Han Xin. We brought these two large paintings to the World and installed them on either side of the stage- so we had one painting at each end of the- the last supper, and we started around 11:30pm at night.

I bought Chinese take out and we layed it out on the table on stage in the World. We ate our food, we videoed—someone has a video of that. Weiwei I assume has photographs of that somewhere. We ended at what must have been 2 or 3 in the morning. They used to actually have people frisked on entering the World because they were worried about handguns. Later I remember there was a handgun incident. Late '80s in New York City—it was pretty crazy.

**(JD):** So the people who came to this event were outsiders?

**(EC):** They were New York club people, completely club people. And we did the last Chinese supper in New York. What was wild was we left the club at round 2:30 or 3 in the morning. The next morning I got up really early, must have been 8:30 or 9 o'clock, and went right over to the club to pick up the paintings because I didn't want to take them at night—but they had been stolen!

**(JD):** Stolen? Someone's got them and carted them away!

**(EC):** Who knows. They were not signed, but if they ever appear we'll know whose they were. I never formally made a claim with the police or registered with one of those organizations that keep an eye on stolen artworks, but we should. Those two paintings are lurking around somewhere out there. It was still a lot of fun.

Another thing we did must have been after my first fashion show. For my first fashion show Weiwei agreed to collaborate, and I needed accessories. So I asked him to do some special handbags for me, and he said, "sure." So I paid him some money for getting all the things, and he created a whole series of really amazing handbags.

**(JD):** Do you have photographs of this?

**(EC):** Yes, we have these handbags. He created the quintessential New York handbag: a white handbag with a hammer. Then he created the quintessential umbrella bag where he had a black handbag that he cut out and put an umbrella in. He created the communist handbag with a communist sign on it: hammer and sickle. In fact, we have one here. Patrick, why don't you bring it out if we have it? Weiwei also created this toilet paper bag where it was a big white bag with polka dotted paper with soap. He created a duck bag: a white bag with a white duck with a black line around it. It was really a whole series of exciting accessories. He enjoyed that. Actually, after this fashion experience, we wanted to create an art video. So Weiwei and Gu Changwei, who was

visiting from China—a friend of Weiwei’s from the cinema. Did you know him too?

**(ZC):** At that time, yes.

**(EC):** Your parents were...

**(ZC):** No, not my parents. Dong Lei’s parents are from Peking Film Studio.

**(EC):** Peking Film Studios, right. Wang Keping was also in the—

**(ZC):** No, he was at Central Broadcasting making TV series. Yes, he was working over there.

**(EC):** So a group of us came together: Zhu Ceng, Gu Changwei, Ai Weiwei and me. Weiwei was the main thrust. But we had to come up with a scenario, and we knew we wanted to do something between art and fashion. It was aesthetic. Weiwei came up with this idea to save a fish’s life. So we would go to Chinatown and buy a fish, and we would take it and throw it into the river to save its life. So one of the models who worked for us during the fashion show was this famous Eurasian model, Ariane. Weiwei was in love. He thought she was the best. So we asked Ariane, “We have no budget, but would you work with us, graciously?” And she said, “Sure.” So, in my loft with my ex-wife, Ariane, Zhu Ceng, Gu Changwei, and others—we created this video. It was really interesting. [Patrick brings over the umbrella handbag] Here’s one of them.

**(JD):** So that’s an original, early Ai Weiwei. I love it. That’s fantastic. He really has a knack for putting things together. Unpredictable juxtapositions.

**(EC):** We have photographs of the other piece we can give you. Weiwei had real fun. He was experimenting, cutting up violins. Very influenced by Warhol and Merit Oppenheim—the idea of fur. He liked fur to make a landscape. He was also very into the idea of making multiples. Warhol was definitely working on him. I remember just before he left America to go back to China he was making prints on manhole covers in New York City, just getting a real sense of the street.

So Gu Changwei and Weiwei in our film *Life of the Story of Fish*—we have to bring out the video. What was fun was when we went to Chinatown in the middle of the Bowery there were Chinese gang members who recognized Ariane because she’d just made a film called *Chinatown*. They were whistling and coming up to her while we were filming. But it was the story of these 2 women trying to save the life of the fish and you saw them walking and going over to the Hudson River and throwing it in. And music. It was very interesting. Weiwei in that film used a hammer bag and smashed a mirror, showing the image and smashing it similarly to the way Song Dong would do 15 years later. It was out there—not to say that maybe they knew about it, but that same idea Weiwei had done. He was very into the pop. I guess we’ll have to revisit that video.

**(JD):** Where is it?

**(EC):** We have it in our archives. We can actually bring it out. Weiwei and I spent many hours editing in this expensive editing studio in the 30’s late at night—2 or 3 in the morning. It was the cheapest time we could get the space. Everything was really fun. Even the fish’s mother was credited in the titles. It was just so crazy. Mrs. Ai-Mom or something. It was fun.

**(JD):** He’s obviously someone who is very socially aware.

**(EC):** He was a young rascal growing up in the East Village living on 6th street. You couldn’t avoid not being part of that whole thing. Thompson Square Park—when there was a major protest, he was just up the street from it. And Ai Weiwei was very into cameras and documenting, and he would just photograph a lot. I don’t remember him photographing as much as he photographs now. Now he photographs all the time with his digital camera. Digital made it much easier. Film was more expensive.

But he did photograph a fair amount. I’ve seen a body of those works. I don’t think he realized at that time that

it would become such an important archive. I have some very early works that he's given me of photographs of his self-portrait, of him in different fun positions. Actually I have a really cute, fun portrait of him and me. We jumped in one of those photo-matron machines—it's a little frame thing.

Weiwei would come by and visit me. I remember he made a really cool profile of Marcel Duchamp out of a key. He presented this to me. Weiwei realized I appreciated and helped him. I was trying to support him. When he couldn't sell his art and I didn't have money to buy more of his artwork, I gave him a job in helping design things for me. One of my clients who bought Han Xin's work had a T-shirt company. I said to this gentleman, "do you need help, and could one of my artists make things for you"? And he said, "sure." So for a while Weiwei made different ideas for T-shirts: downtown scary skulls, and this and that. We gave them to this guy. I think I still have some in the archives.

I have another artist, Pan Xinglei, who was an illustrator. Whatever means it took, we tried to find people who would help support these guys' artistic lives. In the 80's it was tough, and today, where people aren't buying so much art and being so careful with their money, it feels a little bit like the late 80's. Interesting.

**(JD):** So in '88 you did Weiwei's show, and then when did you decide to—

**(EC):** Well, we were all shocked. In fact, we had a major event in support of the Tiananmen Massacre. Ma Desheng was visiting us, and he read poetry here. We were really grassroots-based for the Avant-Garde. People would come together through poetry or Yan Li's journal or Weiwei's journal. Weiwei was very involved. He did always have an interest academically in documenting, and that grew. His relationship with the New York scene—he didn't get as much out into the club scene. He didn't hang out at the Mudd Club or Area—that was a little bit earlier. But we tried to get out. He didn't feel comfortable. He wasn't a disco guy, not at all.

**(JD):** So he's not that kind of guy.

**(EC):** No, but he was definitely the East Village type of guy. They hang out and look cool with his buddies. They'd hang out at each others' houses late at night, drink and play cards. There was a whole group of Chinese artists you used to hang out with all the time.

**(ZC):** But he only hung out with a few of them. I think he spent most of his time with Yao Qingzhang, and Wang Jing, and later on with Shen, Jack Yeh's former partner.

**(EC):** So Weiwei was also interested in technology. He was definitely very smart in business. He always said he was very lazy. Maybe there are aspects of truth to that, but I wouldn't say Weiwei is lazy. He does it in his own time. You can see how lazy he's been recently. He's very efficient and determined to achieve. And I think out of all the Chinese art that was going on after the 80's, he was important. He was a real patron to many artists; in the 90's, a little bit more. And finally when he went back to Beijing, he wasn't getting so much acclaim. However, he helped a lot of people. People like Zhang Huan was a nobody. Zhang Huan asked Weiwei, "How do I become famous?" Weiwei gave him some ideas. The truth of how much he gave hasn't totally come out. But he really helped a lot with those early things Zhang Huan was involved in. He has all the photographs. He was a real orchestrator. Just how he came in to do our film—he wanted to do things. His art definitely reflected the times. When you ask me how involved he was with what was going on in society at that time, "Old Shoes—Safe Sex"—the theme was dealing with the AIDS hysteria. It was scary. How do you protect yourself? How do you understand this disease? He wasn't afraid to put on this army raincoat and have an erection, and put the condom on his own penis and photograph himself. He was definitely a rascal.

The expectations—I touched a little bit on that when I talked about Yunsheng. The idea was to get out of China in the early 80's, come to America, be free and just let your creative energies go. One artist who clearly demonstrates that is Zhang Hongtu because when he came to America he felt he'd lost twenty years of his life because of the Cultural Revolution. He came to America to make up for lost time. He was just a workaholic.

His early work was difficult. Hongtu also shared Weiwei's love for conceptual pop. Some of his early works we thought were early Weiwei—the Quaker oats piece—a lot of people think that's Weiwei's because it could have been his early work. So when Weiwei went back to China it helped Hongtu open up. Hongtu's most important early work was when he starting to do soy sauce portraits. That was really when he broke through on his own. His early work was more complicated, but he saw where he should go. Weiwei himself was also searching. Going back to your question of how the Chinese integrated into the Western art world, they did; they circulated. But the Western art world was not embracing them at all. If I went to an opening in Soho—you didn't see very many Asian artists—today, in any major gallery you do see some Asian artist. The number of Asian artists in the art world was very few.

**(JD):** Were they going to museums? Where they going to the openings? Were they strolling around the art galleries at that time? Were they out seeing art?

**(EC):** I think of Chen Danqing, another artist we worked with early on who would get permission to go to the Metropolitan to do copies of portraits. That was one type. He would make his own mix of realism. He was going to other galleries that were showing.

The Marlboroughs, the Wally Findlays... I think at that time Chen Yifei was the star; he had made a commercial success. Zhu Ceng mentions Ding Shaoguang; he also was successful. In that early period, a lot of those artists were thinking about survival.

They didn't have the pause to be able to fully develop their own artistic ideas. Someone like Lin Tianmiao—I didn't realize at the time in the 80's—was making Ding Shaoguang. Stylized painting in the Yunnan School mode. Why were they doing that? Because they needed to pay bills. It wasn't because they loved it. Maybe their partners needed to... someone of them needed to make money, either the male or the female, seeing who's most industrious.

When Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin decided to move back to China, they had a huge storage problem. They asked me to help them. I said I'd be happy to help them. I had paintings and this and that, so I saw all their early work. That's when I realized Lin Tianmiao had made these works.

**(JD):** When did they come?

**(ZC):** They came in the late 80's. They also made textiles.

**(EC):** She was very talented in textiles.

**(JD):** She did textile design, or worked in—

**(ZC):** Actually, Zhang Hongtu's wife. then Bai Jingzhou's wife—they brought Lin Tianmiao, all the Chinese artists. They used to make portraits on the streets, and then they decided to give that up and do textiles.

**(EC):** I think textile design was more consistent.

**(JD):** Yuan Yunshen's wife—

**(EC):** Yuan Yunshen's wife was excellent. Zhang Hongtu's wife was in textiles. Lin Tianmiao and Gong Xiao, they had their own studio.

**(ZC):** They first looked around and found Williamsburg.

**(EC):** First Chinese artist to go out to Williamsburg.

**(ZC):** Yes, with another Chinese artist named Shi Cun. They decided to take a huge space, divided and rented it out to artists.

**(EC):** So they would have cheap rent.

(JD): And Shi Cun's the other artist.

(ZC): Shi Cun. Then later on other artists found Williamsburg. Also, Lin Tianmiao later created a studio for textile design called the Black Sun.

(EC): Interesting. But going back to your question about the 80's, I think that in the early 80's, the Internet didn't really exist. Even someone like Yuan Yunsheng—when he was here he did not get out and go to major openings. He did not integrate himself into the art scene. He assumed the art scene would come to him. When he went back to the Central Academy in Beijing, people criticized him for missing a great opportunity: you don't really know what's going on in America, you weren't really out there. Maybe in his defense, a lot of the dealers weren't receptive, so why should he patronize them or have to kiss their rear ends? However, I think there were realism-type people. They were getting out there. I don't think a lot of those dealers, other than the Hammers or the Wally Findlays. . . that wasn't so interesting, honestly.

Some of these artists became very commercial. Someone like Chen Yifei—when he really enjoyed painting, he was a good painter, consciously. The Chinese artist community supported and hung out with each other. There used to be group meetings.

I introduced you to Li Quanwu. Quanwu was involved in one of the intellectual think tanks where they would talk about philosophy, literature, art and aesthetics. I think Yunsheng was also very interested in that. They had their cliques. But were the Westerners willing to open their doors? I think language barrier was a problem. It was difficult forging their own way. In the 80's, most of the reaction across the board was that Asian art was derivative.

It was still developing. It was not easy. I was beginning to tell you about the Harvard program. One of the people we took to the Fairbank Center was Han Xin. When the graduate students in Art History looked at Han Xin's early paintings in 1988, they said, "What's Chinese about it?" They were expecting water lilies, or lotuses, or ink. We Westerners were limited by our own education, and I think a lot of people in the West didn't realize that oil painting had been taught in China since the 20's. So by the 70's or 80's, oil painting was as much mother's milk as anyone else. Oil painting was just very developed in China at that time. So Han Xin really was coming from a social-realist background. But he was very attracted to graffiti. He was very excited by the subway. He knew things to pick. That, for him, was very inspirational. But the problem is, the

Westerners probably didn't want to see that. They wanted to see things about China. They wanted chopsticks or Chinese rice bowls, or Chinese faces, and I think a bunch of the Chinese artists who came out were trying not to look at themselves or their own experiences. That was a process all artists go through. You have to find out your true calling, your own honesty in your artwork. As a dealer, I'm looking for art that's truthful, honest, powerful, and gutsy.

I want to see those artists put it right out there. Some of the artists who left China in the 80's and landed in the West and miss China—a lot of them evolved and found themselves much clearer, or found themselves looking back to Asian aesthetics, their schooling, and thinking. Someone like, Xu Bing, for example. Maybe even Weiwei or Huang Yongping, who became so Asian-focused when he left China, whereas before he was really, Western idea-focused. So it's interesting.

Integration was difficult. There were some major collectors who bought Chinese art at that time. One of the Rockefeller daughters bought some Qiu Deshu in the 80's. The Rothschilds bought some Qiu Deshu. I think it's interesting how Michael Goedhuis got involved in Chinese contemporary art. He was a dealer in antiquities, and realizing that things were getting difficult in antiquities, he came to me. It was the first time he'd ever opened his eyes to a lot of these Chinese artists—people like Qiu Deshu, Ma Desheng, and others. He actually did acquire a lot of artwork from me, and then he got involved directly. He's been very helpful. Some things that he could sell, I couldn't sell.

Sometimes his aesthetic is totally different from my aesthetic. It's a big ocean. We as a field needed much more than one or two art dealers. We needed a whole grouping of them. So early on, Johnson Chang and I, and later Lorenz at Shanghart, Alice King, and Alisan Gallery—the world was still very small, and I think we all did our own little thing. Later on in the 90's, Uli Sigg got involved . . . there are some interesting stories there. I think Gu Wenda came later.

**(JD):** He came in '87, '88, but he went to San Francisco first, and then he came to New York.

**(EC):** So when he landed in New York it was...

**(JD):** '88.

**(EC):** So that's when I first met Gu Wenda. I remember meeting him: he had the shaven head and long hair...who is this guy? We actually showed Gu Wenda's work at the Fairbank Center at Harvard. Must have been '88, '89, before Tiananmen.

**(JD):** Chen Yifei came in with a reputation; he was already a star back where he was. Yuan Yunsheng was a star or at least famous where he was—

**(EC):** Infamous star.

**(JD):** Infamous star. Some of these people came in with big reputations, and so it was a bit of a let down. Some of these people like Ai Weiwei didn't come in with reputations. He was much younger...

**(EC):** He learned English. The expectations were normally fairly high because the Chinese artists didn't expect to have culture shock when they came in the 80's. They thought they were just going to live happily ever after: got out of China, I'll be okay in America. They never thought about the economic side too much. The reality was, in China they didn't have to worry about paying rent where it was so minimal. Where they were free intellectually they were slaves economically, and I think that was a very significant problem because out of a lot of the Chinese artists that did come over, some of them went back because they realized they were freer actually in China. They could have a nice studio. They could speak the language. But people who were a little younger like Weiwei, who did speak English and could get along more easily—they were surviving like any other New Yorker, trying to get by. By hook or by crook, they did it. It was a shock. Economic barrier was a major, major factor. Some of the Chinese artists did go back, and not until much later when artists realized oh my god we better go back because what's happening is the really hot stuff is in China. That was really 10, 12, 14 years later. Weiwei went back a little late, almost. I think Tianmiao and Gongxin went back, and when they went back the apartment art started happening. But it got hotter as it progressed.

The 80's were tough; it was not easy. Trying to find a gallery today for any artist is challenging. I think it's less challenging as an Asian artist today. You really have an opportunity. We made our headway. We've really broken down the barriers where I feel proud of people like Vishakha Desai, Jane DeBevoise, Joan Lebold Cohen, Melissa Chiu and others. We have all helped break down the walls of exclusion and have gotten the art world to judge Asian art on its own merit. If it's original and powerful, and if it's good art, people will recognize it. Before, if happened to be Asian, you wouldn't necessarily get a fair shake, unless you were really an exception. I think someone like Yayoi Kusama in the 60's broke through. On Kawara broke through. But really it was the rare exception, and even until 5-6 years ago—2001, 2002, 2003—there were still Western artists who said there was only room for 3 or 4 maximum, maybe 2 or 3 Chinese artists in the art world! And every year they have been proven wrong.

These are big deal artists in the West. It's fascinating because in 2001, if you think of the top hundred sellers, maybe very little may have been Japanese, maybe On Kawara or Kusama. But now 30% or 40% of the top hundred sellers are Asian. It's Fang Lijun behind me, or Zhang Xiaogang, or Wang Guangyi, or Yue Minjun, or Huang Yongping and Ai Weiwei. What's exciting now is you're no longer a poster child. If you're an Asian artist

you have an opportunity. If you're original and powerful, there will be people who will look at your art, and you have just as much opportunity as a German artist or a British artist or an American artist, and that is very, very exciting.

How I became an art dealer? There were no dealers who were willing to take up the lead for Chinese Contemporary Art or Avant-Garde art in the late 1980's. It was frustrating because I thought it was definitely worthy and it needed a voice, a platform.

Did I really want to be an art dealer? One of the real serious questions that faced me was: how can I be creative and go through life and leave some imprint on society? I thought that as an artist, longevity is through your artworks. You will leave a lifetime of artwork, which is very exciting. I wasn't sure about art dealing. Did people appreciate art dealing?

I wasn't so sure, just being a negotiator and selling art. The late 80's, when there was the bubble, I realized it was not easy to do anything in any profession. But you really had to choose: either you were going to be a creative or you were going to represent the creatives. I didn't like sitting around waiting for people to come buy things from me; I didn't want to sit on my feet. I wanted to get out there and do things, and I think it took a period for me to realize the realities of life. Anything you choose is going to be challenging, and I wanted also to try my own creative stuff when I was a designer. I actually made some very early 1980's collaborations with other artists, some in fashion— not just Weiwei. I collaborated with Qiu Deshu to design buttons and Chinese character details in bullion that we did in India—our dear friend gave us a special deal; in fact it was probably five times more expensive than we thought. What's our expression?

**(ZC):** "Xia Shou".

**(EC):** Xia Shou, yes (Laughter). I tried to give whatever I could to the Chinese artists and help them keep afloat and alive, and same with me. It was '96 when I re-opened as a private dealer. I showed Xu Bing and Cai Jin. Xu Bing and I curated the Cai Jing show. It was really cool. We weren't sure if we could make it as a dealer just on Asian art. When I was in Paris I tried to find clients to buy Chinese art. Going back to '86 in France—getting Hubert de Givenchy interested in Qiu Deshu's work, and almost getting him to agree to do an actual fashion show just using Qiu Deshu's colored cracks series of paintings rolled up like lanterns. Unfortunately, he decided not to use them. It's funny. After he left fashion he became very involved in art, working for Christie's.

**(JD):** When you came back in the 90's—

**(EC):** By '96 I realized I either had to choose fashion or art, and I felt I couldn't do both. Now there's enough interest that maybe. . . It was a higher level—I was married, I had a child—I wasn't just by myself. Myself was easier as a dealer to make a living and get by. But as a family it was more complicated and I had to be careful. But '96 I decided to try to do it again. I had to make a very conscious decision. I couldn't do everything; I had to really focus. So I decided to deal, and it's been interesting. I love art, and I felt proud to be a dealer. In other words, I think that I had to make my own realization that maybe having a little more life experience . . . if you were going to build a house, instead of going to the contractor and saving a few bucks, you don't hire an architect—you're going to make mistakes. I'd rather pay and get the architect and do it right. Spend a little more, but long-term you're going to win. The same thing with art. If you're going to buy a piece of art, get as educated as you can about a certain artwork, artist, or field. Get the advice from the dealer who knows the inside track. You're paying a little bit of a premium, but you'll win long-term for sure. I felt proud about that and that's when I came back to art dealing. I really believe that solidly.

People say don't buy art unless you have the excess money because you'll never be able to sell it again. But actually, recently, with the fall of Lehman Brothers—there have been seminars now by UBS—people have realized that art could potentially be another asset class, even though it's not like stocks and bonds. And I know Jane that you disagree, but what's interesting is art for me is always something tangible, something

you can enjoy, put on your wall. It's not liquid. It's really been an incredible education. I've seen a lot of big collectors come through these doors and seen how they work. If you know art well you could. Obviously most peoples' incentive is they love collecting. But there are a lot of players who do play with it as an investment vehicle, and I've seen a lot of them. The magic of Chinese art has reborn itself in my brain, in my personal life. It has not been easy. Dealing with complicated personalities in the 80's— Zhu Ceng and I were talking about spending a whole day trying to negotiate over the pricing of Chen Yifei and Yuan Yunsheng—oh my god. But there are beautiful moments.

I saw myself being pulled out of my seat in the Asia Society—must have been 7 years ago when there was a certain curator in New York who publicly said he was shocked when he went to China. He thought there was a cash register in every Chinese artist's studio, and he was shocked. I just felt that was an embarrassing statement, and I got up and said, "you got it wrong, maybe you had a bad experience." All the artists I've known were not so concerned with commerciality. They were interested in art, and that's why I got involved.

Later on, I understand that comment more. Because yes, I think this whole reproduction—the same idea over and over again. . .sometimes artists are caught in that because they have to make money, and why not? At the same time, you lose something.

In recent years I think Chinese art has lost a lot of its original spirit for economic benefit. At the same time, art comes and goes, and maybe it's going to come back. Maybe this harsh reality of today is a good sign. Maybe artists are going to think clearly. Some of the big boys and girls today who've been very successful, who have money—life is beyond just money. You have to think about longevity: how are you going to leave your imprint on society?

So those are difficult questions, and that's the challenge now for all these artists—how can they make impressions, or leave something for posterity and have their 15 minutes of fame? In the 80's, artists were just looking for recognition, fair play. The issues were very different. They were not being evenly played. I think your exhibition at the Guggenheim, Jane, was really important because that was one of the first really big times that Chinese art got serious play. But then it took the P.S.1. exhibition, the Asia Society, and Vishakha Desai...all of us...it's a whole field that's just grown. That's exciting.

Last December, November, or October, we were creating this Asia art fair in Miami. Ten years ago, 7 years ago, 6 years ago, you could never even dream of having your own Asian contemporary art fair in Miami. Impossible! The market just wasn't there. Artists were so scattered; there wasn't communication. Today, with the Internet, it's a totally different thing. In the 80's, sharing of information—it just wasn't there... catalogues, magazines, everything sped up so fast. But it was slow, as you remember Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1980, '81. Artform, or ARTnews. . .getting a good reproduction of a Picasso was difficult. So it's fascinating to think how we have evolved and how things have sped up so much. It's so funny when you think of artists today like Feng Zhengjie, or Zeng Fanzhi who's made it. These guys epitomize the rags to riches story. I have hope for contemporary Chinese art. It's always been interesting to see who's the new generation. We'll see what happens.

**Mathieu Borysevicz (MB):** So there's a lot of information going back . . .

**(EC):** During the 80's I went to China fairly often, I think at least once a year. It wasn't so easy to see art so easily. I'll give you an example. Early 80's: going to a Wang Keping solo exhibition at a middle school. We were invited 5 hours before it opened. We went there, saw the show, left, and before the show was officially open they closed it.

I remember visiting the studios of Li Shan, Kong Baiji, Qiu Deshu, and Chen Jialing in Shanghai. Then visiting the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. It wasn't so easy to go to someone's home. You were monitored. I

remember going to someone's house for dinner was a big deal. I remember in the earlier 80's things loosened up. I have to go back to my notes to refresh but I remember in the early 80's going to someone's house for dinner. As soon as you left that house, they would be visited by the local "watch-person," and get interviewed—shakedown—what really went down, who you saw, and what they talked about. Jane, you know better than I. Even in the 90's, I had artist meetings later that were still police supervised, watching over you. I remember because in the 80's police were watching. Every time Wang Keping would come to the Beijing Hotel he had a hard time getting in. Yes, I did go to China often, but I think most of the art—people like Ma Desheng and Wang Keping—had left. That helped. We were involved with a lot of those artists who finally got out, who wanted to show right then and there. But it was harder to bring. In the 80's the artist would normally bring his own artwork out. I didn't import it, except for maybe Kong Baiji and Ma Desheng. And there were questions—how do you get the artwork out? Most of the time I didn't want to get involved. The artists would have to do it themselves. Once it was here they would present it to me. We were definitely a showcase for Chinese art. It wasn't like today, where you give a jpg and say 'here's my newest work, send it to me'.

**(MB):** The artists here, did they get in touch with you?

**(EC):** Sure. There may have been a little incommunicado with some of them who didn't go back too often. But through their friends or grouping, there was a beginning...I guess of the Internet. There was some communication—telephone, fax. But it wasn't easy. Sharing information wasn't so simple. But now you know immediately. Now, if something goes on, people talk, and there's the sharing of information.

**(MB):** Yes.

**(EC):** So were you at the '89 show in Beijing? You'd heard about it?

**(ZC):** I heard about it; people talk.

**(MB):** There was nothing in the Chinese local paper?

**(ZC):** No, the local Chinese paper, they don't care.

**(EC):** But the local Chinese newspaper used to give us reviews. They would come to our shows; we would absolutely invite them. They did actually cover most of the shows. It was nice; it was good.

**(JD):** People like the Taiwanese artists who were working here—there were some actually very Avant-Garde artists like Xie Dejing and Tseng Kwong-chi, and people like that. Not necessarily Taiwanese, but also from Hong Kong. They were overseas Chinese who were doing some very interesting things here. How involved were they with the Mainland Chinese who recently arrived?

**(EC):** Some of them embraced the new arrivals, but there were cliques. Chinese from China necessarily didn't always mix with the Taiwanese. I think Weiwei certainly befriended some of the Taiwanese, and maybe it was economically interesting, or they had the same vision. There were cliques; it was like little tight groups. In your group were most of the Chinese from the Mainland?

**(ZC):** Yes, mostly Mainland. At that time Weiwei was very friendly with all the Taiwanese artists. The Taiwanese came in the 60's, 70's.

**(JD):** So they'd been there for a while, established their ways—

**(EC):** Quite established, but not necessarily successful. They might have had a little bit of money. They were the early immigrants who already may have had an apartment in SoHo. Now when you go back and see, they were pretty well fixed-up. They got early rents, and as SoHo became grown up, they still had their lofts, so they were in a good position. They were the elite. But did they help out those young? No, not all of them did.

As the Chinese artists from China were more successful, people like Bob Lee and others felt belittled. They

were angry because they were not given their fair shake. I viewed it as: you have to start somewhere. It's good for all of us. It's good for Bob. It's good if you're Asian Cultural Center. It's good for the Asian American. If someone like Huang Yongping or Ai Weiwei or whomever it is that gets some notoriety, it's helpful for us because it helps all people who are Asian, or Asian aesthetics. So you have to start somewhere. But there was definitely competition, rivalry. Later on, you saw even Taiwanese moving to Beijing because they were perceived as "Chinese." If you weren't in Beijing, you were going to miss out. So that's ironic. It was really Zhang Huan and others who helped forge this.

**(JD):** It was post-Tiananmen when Chinese artists hit the ceiling. Let's face it— Tiananmen helped a lot, in some ways.

**(EC):** Yes.

**(JD):** Gave visibility to a lot of the issues.

**(EC):** That's right.

**(JD):** And perhaps projected a lot of issues on others. . . that you weren't there for.

**(EC):** Also it helped humanize the Chinese student. Sort of like the 60's in a sense, we were all in the same [gestures in a circle]. . . And the beginning of the internet. Sharing.

**(JD):** TV. The image is beginning to be shared globally from then on. The media played a very big part of it.

**(EC):** Absolutely. And the media still today, they don't quite get it all. There's always an article in the media that has some political ramification. That's where the media gets it. But for art's sake, they still think, is it really newsworthy? It's a hard one.

**(JD):** Zhang Hongtu—I think he's right but recently, it's maybe not happening. His art has been picked up as journalism and news, not via art magazines and art critics.

**(EC):** So there maybe an elite in the news area that it's hard to break. There are artists like Cai Guoqiang who have broken down the doors. I think he's got it. Xu Bing – yes, but it's not so easy. It's hard to penetrate.

**(JD):** Still, yes, there is a space. There is definitely much more space. But it's still difficult for these artists to be accepted on their own terms.

**(EC):** I think that's right. Through education, through more art critics who understand Asian aesthetics or know what's going on, that will be helpful in the generation of you, Mathieu, and Phil Tinari, Chaos Chen, and Karen Smith. As more and more—

**(JD):** There's just more and more information out there. Just getting it out. And the market obviously put things into a different stratosphere for some of the wrong reasons.

**(EC):** Yes, but you know what? It gave it visibility, for good or for bad. But the bottom line is: it was good for our field, that people will support the Asia Art Archive. They're willing to put Asian art on their walls.

**(JD):** It created a legitimacy that hadn't been there before.

**(EC):** Exactly. There's a record now at auctions. Also, we're evolving. The whole art world is evolving, and we have to go with the flow. The Asian market didn't exactly follow the Western market. The Asian market has carved its own path, and I recognize that. You can't fight that. You have to go with it. You have to move with the times. You have to keep your eyes open.