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Centre for Contemporary Culture la Strozina (CCCS)

Palazzo Strozzi, Florence

21 March to 4 May 2008

CHINA CHINA CHINA!!!

CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART BEYOND THE GLOBAL MARKET

The exhibition will present the work of 18 contemporary Chinese artists from three different urban settings united in their search for an independent cultural identity free of the restrictive rules of the global market. The project will take three distinct but complementary forms: an exhibition, a publication and a series of lectures.

From **21 March to 4 May**, the CCCS – Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozina – Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi di Firenze, with the support of the Regione Toscana, Provincia di Firenze, Comune di Firenze, Camera di Commercio di Firenze and the Associazione Partners di Palazzo Strozzi, will present ***CHINA CHINA CHINA!!!***, the work of 18 contemporary Chinese artists from three cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou – who are all seeking to define a new cultural identity unfettered by the rules of the global market. A publication (Silvana Editoriale) and a series of lectures are planned to coincide with the exhibition. This event complements the exhibition ***China: at the Court of the Emperors. Unknown masterpieces from Han tradition to Tang elegance (25-907)***, on view from 7 March to 8 June on the first floor of Palazzo Strozzi, which is devoted to the Tang dynasty, universally recognised as a high point in Chinese civilisation and central to the Chinese renaissance.

The aim of the CCCS, under the direction of Franziska Nori, is to approach the much discussed 'China phenomenon' from a different viewpoint. For this reason the project is entrusted to three young Chinese curators: **Davide Quadrio**, founder and director of BizArt in Shanghai, the first and only self-supporting and non-profit cultural organisation in China, also active in The In-Between, a network of alternative art spaces in Europe and Asia; **Li Zhenhua**, founder of the independent Art Lab in Beijing, artist and promoter of the new media art in China; and **Zhang Wei**, director of Vitamin Creative Space Contemporary Art in Guangzhou. They are all based and operate in different parts of China but share a commitment to consolidating an independent critical platform to support artistic production in China. They want art that goes beyond the official confines and is not bound by the rules of the art market, art that represents the complex reality of a modern China in the process of change and cultural transformation.

This is a crucial moment in China's search for cultural identity as it strives to reconcile the weight of tradition, a troubled recent socio-political history and the rapid entry into the Western-style global economy. The most visionary contemporary art in China attempts to shape the future in the light of the past. In a very short space of time, China is experiencing a process that in Western culture evolved slowly over centuries. But just as the Florentine Renaissance of the fifteenth century led to the emergence of the city by its use of culture as a vital channel of communication, modern China is investing extensively in the development of a cultural infrastructure and in its promotion abroad.

The exhibition presents a lively interchange between the curators' three sections, representing three distinct but complementary attitudes and perceptions.

Zhang Wei, the curator from Guangzhou, in *Throwing Dice*, brings together artists of different backgrounds, training and modes of expression. Zhang Wei presents individual visions of human existence in a fragmented and constantly changing world. The videos of **Kan Xuan**, **Pak Sheung Chuen** and **Yang Fudong** (acclaimed in the most recent Venice Biennale), digital animations by **Cao Fei** (also present at the Biennale), technological installations by **Chu Yun**, and paintings by **Duan Jianyu** offer individual stories that engage the spectator in the exploration of a shared existential landscape and in the constant tension between the world of dreams and of reality.

The installation in the section by **Davide Quadrio**, a curator in Shanghai for the last 15 years, *Art is not enough, not enough!*, is produced by the CCCS where it will be given its world premiere. The multimedia installation draws on interviews made by the curator with forty artists in Shanghai, who consider questions about the role of the artist, their relationship with the external world, the social consequences of their work and the international market's effect on traditional modes of artistic production. This presentation offers a dynamic anthropological insight into the urban panorama of modern Shanghai.

Questions of geo-political identity and cultural relativism are the focus of *Multi-Archeology*, the section curated by **Li Zhenhua**. Installations by the Mongolian artists **Wu Ershan** and **Ren Qinga**, highlight the often conflicting relations between the different cultural groups in China today and pose questions about the undermining of the individual in the face of social upheaval. Both installations, created especially for this exhibition in Florence, take as their theme the human condition in the face of an uncertain future. The art video by **Zhao Liang** and **Shen Shaomin** documents the situation on the Chinese border with North Korea and Russia. An analysis of the consequences of the Mongolian invasion by Genghis Khan on Asiatic culture is compared to the impact of modern globalisation, in the constant cultural interchange between East and West.

Location: Centre for Contemporary Culture la Strozina (CCCS)
Palazzo Strozzi, Piazza Strozzi, 50123 Firenze (Florence), Italy

Information: Tel. +39 055 264 5155, www.palazzostrozzi.org and www.strozzina.it

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Closed Mondays

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Fact Sheet

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The Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozziina

James M. Bradburne

The mission of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is to revitalize the public spaces of the Palazzo, one of Florence's finest examples of Renaissance domestic architecture, and to establish it as an exciting, dynamic and international cultural destination for visitors of all ages and interests. Already the exhibitions held in the Palazzo's grand spaces on the first floor have attracted international attention. The Palazzo's courtyard now hosts a café and a permanent exhibition on the history of the Palazzo and the Strozzi family, as well as a varied programme of concerts and performances. From the outset, a key part of the Palazzo Strozzi project was to create a centre for contemporary culture at the very heart of Florence, and the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozziina (CCCS) was created as platform for the different approaches and practices that characterize the production of contemporary art and culture.

The centre is located in the recently restored spaces under the magnificent courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi—known as “La Strozziina”—which previously housed the cellars of this Renaissance monument, and which hosted Florence's most important international exhibitions in the years after the Second World War until the flood of 1966. The Centre comprises eleven rooms of different sizes, approx. 850 square metres. The absence of natural light enables individual curators to interpret the space in new ways and makes it possible to adapt and reshape the entire environment in accordance with the settings required by the various projects. The challenge posed by the Renaissance architecture of Palazzo Strozzi for contemporary art is taken as a stimulus to stage each new event and project as though in a theatre, constantly pursuing new possibilities of artistic communication and presentation.

The Palazzo Strozzi is visitor-centred. One of the things that make the Palazzo Strozzi experience special is its attention to “visible listening”—the recognition that culture is made of many voices—and the importance of making different voices visible. The art of the Tang dynasty will be presented in Florence at the exhibition *At the Court of the Emperors*, 7 March – 8 June 2008. The Tang dynasty was China's Renaissance, and was characterized by an exceptional openness to foreign influences, which were absorbed and then transformed into a uniquely Chinese visual language. Chinese art is currently experiencing another renaissance, and the exhibition *CinaCinaCina!!!* provides a platform for three Chinese curators to showcase some of the most important currents in Chinese contemporary art. Both exhibitions, new and old, demonstrate the Palazzo Strozzi's belief in the centrality of tolerance, respect and diversity in contemporary society—a message as important today as it was 1500 years ago, in the Tang dynasty.

CHINA CHINA CHINA!!!

Franziska Nori

Like an echo "China China China!!!" has been resonating for more than ten years throughout the international art world. That's why we have chosen it as the title for the exhibition in the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi in Palazzo Strozzi, Florence (21 March – 4 May 2008).

The last decades have witnessed countless events and shows dedicated to the explosive entrance of Chinese art into the global art system. In the 1990s, these exhibitions highlighted works belonging to the so-called "Cynical Realism" and "Political Pop" movements, while since 2000 they have focused on a vast new production whose artistic language is increasingly differentiated. Over the past years, contemporary Chinese art has been subject to aggressive financial speculation on the international market.

Targeted acquisitions by (mainly Western) institutions and private parties set off a spiral of rapidly increasing prices for works by Chinese artists who had been virtually unknown on the international scene only shortly before; within just a few years, this increase turned into a full-fledged boom in New York and London auctions. Meanwhile, many European galleries have opened branches in China in order to position themselves in what seemed a potential new market, given the country's expanding wealth, as well as fertile ground for recruiting new talent to catapult into the international circuit.

Some view the frenetic race for contemporary Chinese art as a bubble about to burst, claiming that international interest is already beginning to shift towards new regions. Now, although it is true that art is always a mirror of the society it emerges from and that our present day is unquestionably dominated by the economic principle and faith in the rightness of the free market, I still wonder if art can ever become a mere instrument for speculation and lose its function as a visionary act, so necessary for society, stimulating momentum, reflection and awareness.

Perhaps the "hype" factor currently associated with Chinese art, for no other reason than being Chinese, will soon fade, but nonetheless surely many artists producing valid, interesting works will survive this phase and find their natural place in the realm of art criticism and history, which, in the end, seems to be much more long-lasting than any mere logic of the market.

The heterogeneity of the contemporary Chinese art can be interpreted as the expression of two distinct impulses: as a response to the outside world, and thus to the growing demand of international markets for art work coming from the so-called "emerging markets", for now led by China and India, and secondly, as an investigation aimed within; that is, towards the cultural necessity of reflecting on their own identity. This investigation in fact can provide a critical new depth to understanding what it means to live today in a society like that of China, which finds itself in the midst of such immense, drastic changes.

For about the past twenty years, the Chinese People's Republic has made its debut among the industrialized nations, positioning itself in a very short time second only to the United States in economic production and GDP. Thanks to the introduction of economic reforms implemented beginning in the late 1970s, China has gradually opened up to international capitalist trade based

on private enterprise, abandoning the Communist-style centralized socioeconomic model. Since their introduction, these reforms have brought the Chinese population a new degree of well-being, putting an end to the dramatic conditions of poverty, especially in the rural areas. In effect, China discovered a way to make the present political system coexist with the need for international economic development, creating a mixed form that nonetheless involves direct State control of about one third of the economy, defined as "Chinese-style socialism".

Traditionally, the two major production sectors in China were agriculture and industry, which employed and thus defined the existence of 70% of the population. In recent years, however, China has rapidly shifted the focus of its production towards greater industrialization so that the income of those working in industry-related sectors has grown much faster than that of those working in agriculture. This situation is at the heart of one of contemporary China's most serious problems: the growing economic, social and cultural gap between the rural and urban areas.

It is not only the previously existing cities that are mushrooming uncontrollably; at the beginning of this century, the Chinese Minister of Public Affairs declared as a strategic objective the construction of 400 new cities within the year 2020, each designed for millions of inhabitants. This massive, rapid migration from the countryside into old and new urban centres creates gigantic social, infrastructural and urban planning problems, not to mention horrific ecological ones, which for the moment seem to have faded into the background, shadowed by the general positivist climate and the strong desire for progress and individual well-being.

All these changes are occurring in an extraordinarily brief time frame and in a country with many different ethnic, religious and cultural identities—a wide range of life experiences in completely distinct environmental contexts.

Today's China is shot through with countless discrepancies—the generational one, for example, which means that the old generations are often rooted in the world of tradition while the new ones, children of the reform era, experience progress as a “chance” to achieve individual well-being. It is a young generation, oriented towards international fashion and trends—as always happens everywhere—and which, in the search for its own identity, is seeking a response to the demands and possibilities of modern life, between personal ambition and social limitations, economic needs and constant innovation. Another glaring contrast is the discrepancy between the situations of the rural and urban populations. Millions of migrant workers leave the countryside and their families to work as low-cost labour in the many factories, producing the good that have conquered the international markets. Others work in the mega-cities in construction sites of the building boom yet still remain on the fringe of a rapidly rising and increasingly cosmopolitan society. This leads to the economic discrepancy between those with access to education and information who manage to find their role within the logic of global production, and those, on the other hand, who do not have such opportunities. But it is not only China that is changing. This reawakening of the ancient Empire is sending shock waves around the world, and we have yet to fully grasp the ecological and geo-political dimensions of its consequences. China's hunger for raw materials, the engine of its economic growth, has generated unexpected international coalitions and relations that are capable of changing the previous global balance of power quite quickly. One need merely observe the present economic policy, with Chinese oil companies present en masse in Sudan and economic agreements signed with Venezuela, Iran and Uzbekistan.

In fact, China is evolving from a fundamentally rural society to an industrial one, as all the Western nations did in the past; the difference is that this transformation is not progressing gradually over a century or two as happened in Europe and the United States, but is happening in a mere few decades and with the help of all the most advanced technologies in communications, manufacture and scientific research. But what effect do all these new radical changes and opportunities have on the individual? How are men and women actually experiencing this multi-faceted, complicated reality? How can they redefine their own identity between tradition and modernity? These are the questions that concerned us as we began developing the “China China China!!! Contemporary Chinese art beyond the global market” project. This will be the second exhibition to be held at the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi in Palazzo Strozzi, the first and inaugural one having been “Emotional Systems” in November 2007.

Rather than calling on Western curators, individual collectors or galleries operating in China as is often done by other institutions setting up exhibitions on China, we chose to invite three representatives of the new generation of Chinese cultural operators, all of whom live and work in China, are not associated with government institutions and have worked independently for years—and at times paid the price in the form of censorship. The three very different candidates chosen—Li Zhenhua, Davide Quadrio and Zhang Wei— were each invited by the CCCS to visit Florence in order to become familiar with the Renaissance context of Palazzo Strozzi and the city in general. CCCS's proposal was to give each of them the freedom to develop their own project to

be presented in a given area of the CCCS space. Months of intense work went into the realization of the three projects, which constitute an expression and synthesis of the intercultural collaboration between CCCS and the three curators.

Thus, the "China China China!!!" exhibition is divided into three distinct areas, each one expressing the personal vision of one curator, giving the audience of Palazzo Strozzi the chance to confront and explore three completely different approaches and viewpoints, which as a total experience nevertheless allow a critical reflection on the "China phenomenon", on current cultural production and on the impact it has on the international art system. Thirty-one-year-old Li Zhenhua is from Beijing. A multimedia artist himself, for years he has also worked as a curator and producer of projects reflecting on contemporary culture. His research has focused on national and trans-national identity, land and borders, art and science. A basic theme in his curatorial work is the search for common cultural roots between different populations, both between China and its neighbours and, at the more macroscopic level, between East and West. The figure of Genghis Khan, founder of the Mongol Empire and conqueror of a vast territory during the twelfth century, is invoked as a symbol of the pioneering spirit and communication between civilizations.

In Li Zhenhua's project for CCCS in Florence, Genghis Khan is the underlying source of inspiration; the exploration of this figure, however, is not concerned so much with the historical past but serves exclusively as a way for the curator to analyze the roots of possible visions of the future of humanity. In his section, entitled "Multi-Archaeology", the curator, along with his chosen artists—Ren Qinga, Wu Ershan, Shen Shaomin and Zhao Liang—offers site specific projects and video installations examining cultural identity, how individuals are moulded by the constant changes and by reciprocal cultural influences, and thus the relative value of concepts such as "nation" or "race". I wish to thank the Tang Contemporary Art Center of Beijing, co-producers of the installations by Ren Qinga and Wu Ershan, created specially for the Florence exhibition.

The second curator invited by CCCS is Davide Quadrio, who is also in his thirties. Quadrio is Italian but has lived and worked for fifteen years in China and for ten in Shanghai where he founded BizArt, an independent production and exhibition space. Here he proposes an installation produced by CCCS and created specially for this exhibition. Entitled "40 + 4 Art is not enough, not enough!", his project is a kind of anthropological mapping, almost an x-ray, of the complex reality of today's artistic scene in Shanghai. Along with the documentary filmmaker Lothar Spree and the young film director Zhu Xiawen, Davide Quadrio interviewed forty of the city's major artists, asking a series of pre-determined questions that had been grouped by theme on a sort of deck of cards. These thematic areas included the importance of the artist in Chinese society today, the artist's relationship with the public, and the influence of the international art market on artistic production. Davide Quadrio's work proposes a meta-reflection on the social relevance of contemporary art in an extremely complex society undergoing a process of profound transformation, as is the China of today.

Zhang Wei is the curator of an independent space for artistic production, "Vitamin Creative Space", which also serves as an exhibition area, gallery and platform for

cultural debate. Zhang Wei lives and works in Ghuangzhou, an industrial city with nine and a half million inhabitants living in its metropolitan area. "Throwing Dice", the section of the CCCS exhibition curated by Zhang Wei, comprises a large number of works chosen by the curator, to which she has attributed a compelling subjective narrative element, thereby giving the audience of Palazzo Strozzi an opportunity to experience her distinct, personal sensibility. Zhang Wei is always looking for individual artistic visions that express a new subjective and individualistic feeling in response to a rapidly changing social and cultural world. She interprets each of the works on display as a microcosm in and of itself, a world apart expressing the artist's inner life in the face of the increasingly difficult and complex world. Altogether, these individual positions provide a glimpse of the artistic sensibility in China today.

The work of the CCCS team is centred on its role as a mediator between contemporary art work and the audience. In this particular project it has not been easy to find a way to "translate" the language of both artists and curators, as it is the offspring of a quite different tradition, iconography and social reality. For this reason, we decided to leave the task of contextualizing the works on display to our Chinese curator colleagues, accepting the difficulties in understanding that might stem from our diverse cultural attributions in the interest of greater authenticity for the voices present in the exhibition and of greater autonomy of the original project.

Like all of CCCS's exhibitions and projects, "China China China!!!" will be accompanied by a parallel programme of weekly lectures and performances in the Strozzi. The lectures will feature Italian professors, academics and experts who will discuss a variety of subjects to help us, the European public, understand better and contextualize the Chinese art boom within the international art market.

I would like to thank Mario Cristiani of the Galleria Continua in San Gimignano for accepting to share his experience in the Beijing branch of his gallery and for making us consider the various faces of Chinese art collecting. I also thank Monica Demattè, art critic and expert in contemporary Chinese art, who will give us an overview of the art produced in China over the past twenty years. Annamaria Palermo, professor of modern and contemporary Chinese literature at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples, will discuss the languages of the avantgarde in Chinese art, especially in literature, over the past thirty years. Also speaking will be Filippo Salviati, professor of Far Eastern art history in the Oriental Studies Department of the Università La Sapienza di Roma, who will offer his observations on the social, political and cultural context of China today. Giacomo Bazzani of "Renshi.org" and Vittoria Ciolini of "Dryphoto", directors of these two associations working on mediation and cultural integration of the Chinese community in Prato (where the Chinese population strongly defines the life of the city), will offer a cross-section of issues involved in the cultural identities of first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants in Italy.

And finally, I thank the three curators of the exhibition, all the participating artists, the writers who contributed to the publication of this catalogue and the CCCS team for making this very complicated project possible.