

Injection versus Extraction: Contemporary Chinese SEA in Context Transformations

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Socially Engaged Art (SEA) is a conventional yet emerging phenomenon at the broadest level. On one hand, art practices stimulated by and generated from social issues have taken a vital role along the development of modern and contemporary art, as we can now hardly indicate a single artwork that stands by its pure aesthetics; such situation only intensifies in the era of globalization, urbanization and information-explosion. On the other hand, while clusters of art practices appropriating and rebinding the social reality, a much longer list of analogous terminologies including public art, community art, participatory art, and activism art, are still enriching and complicating the concept SEA in the realm of interdisciplinary scholarship.

SEA and site-specificity are usually tied together in both theory and practice. In her impactful article “One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity,” Miwon Kwon addresses crucial facets of site-oriented art practices, which are still valued in today’s academic debates on SEA. In Kwon’s spectrum, site-oriented practices are “not separated but open to social, economic, and political pressures”; this claim presents one of the core values of SEA, which in general weights process over products.

The connection between space and social events might be more easily detected given that site and space are sometimes exchangeable. Immersed by today’s globally intertwined social-political realities, artists tend to cast their energies to more concrete sites instead of working between the ceiling and floor of an alienated studio. Each working site serves as a unique locale with its own history and ecology, providing the art practitioners with distinct resources as well as constraints. Complexity fabricated by natural environment (historical and geographical), local politics (governmental and consuetudinary), and public encounters (planned and spontaneous) will demonstrate their bidirectional potentials depending on differently-triggered scenarios, for which reason artists are always seeking a mechanism to work outwards and inwards simultaneously: while intervening the “elsewhere” to experience situational shifts, they also explore more of themselves—personal ways of feeling the changing environment, creative strategies to react to the changes, and professional visions revealed by those reactions.

Because of the aesthetic and presentable qualities rooted in their practices, artists will often return to the institutional contexts with their on-site experience. That said, artists working with social materials usually perform within two sets of

apparatuses: the primary locales and the institutional spaces. Art then becomes the intervening medium and switching points during the transforming process, while the concept of site-specificity also needs an expansion: referring to both physical environment and relational nodes, it now involves entangled social forces as well as the artists’ own strategic shifts. Similarly, critiques on SEA will better be unfolded through multiple dimensions with a more cautious stance.

Under the SEA genre, the Bishan Commune Project (2011-2016) and Qiuzhuang Project (2012-2015) are two concurrent practices in China that copiously demonstrated the multiple transformations mentioned above.

Initiated by Chinese curators and culture activists Ou Ning and Zuo Jing, Bishan Commune Project was an art-driven rural reconstruction plan implemented in Bishan village, which used to be a part of the ancient Huizhou area of Anhui Province. Once very wealthy in the 11th century thanks to the frequent trading of salt, agricultural goods and handicrafts, Bishan is nowadays left behind by the nation’s unceasing economy leap and the rapid urbanization pace (Figure 1). Aiming to explore the local-oriented strategy for public life revival in the rural-hollowing era, the curators designed a conceptual system featuring agriculture & handcrafts resurgence and mutual-aid spirit construction amidst the rural community, and invited professionals working in art, design, architecture, literature and film to facilitate this project with their own expertise.

Ruminating the entire plan the year before they literally settled down in Bishan, Ou Ning had filled out an entire Moleskin notebook with his inspirations, reading notes and design illustrations, some of which eventually formed a visual system for Bishan, consisting the commune logo and member’s uniform. Combining two capital letters R and A standing for “Ruralism” and “Anarchism” respectively, the logo looks neat and concise, leaning close to the socialism/collectivism aesthetics with green and magenta background colors (Figure 2). Heavily illustrated, this journal bundled excerpts of renowned manifestations and scholarly works in fields of agriculture, residential and public space design, political studies, as well as the local history and cultural traditions of Bishan village for future reference. Entitling the notebook “How to Start Your Own Utopia,” Ou Ning seemed to be confident of the project’s feasibility and promising results at the first place.

In 2011, the curators and their colleagues planned Bishan Harvestival (碧山丰年祭) to stimulate the “previously declining public cultural life” in Bishan. “Harvestival” by term combined “harvest” and “festival,” conveying the curators’ intention to reactivate the agricultural civilization and reestablish the moral-emotional connections among the local community by cultural means. The first Bishan Harvestival featured a rural-themed documentary screening, the traditional Anhui drama (摊戏) performances, and open-air concert led by the local youth (Figure 3). Panel discussions were also organized for visiting artists, musicians, and scholars.

The first Harvestival was considered a recognizable success. Local people were attracted to comprehensive activities and out-of-town attentions aroused. Such achievement could have continued only if the next year’s political ambience was not that conservative; in 2012 when the National Election was around the corner, the local government had to cancel a planned photo festival the 7th Yi County International Photo Festival as some proposed works contained “politically sensitive subjects.” Under great pressure, the second Harvestival was also turned off as a concurrent event, dimming the future of Bishan Project as a whole. However, according to reminiscence articles from the attendees, we know that some planned programs were not totally suspended but instead went underground, with a few passionate participants staying throughout the process.

Adjacent to the entrance of Bishan village, Bishan Bookstore (碧山书局) served as a prominent part of Bishan Project and keeps contributing to its cultural significance. Its original version was a forsaken memorial temple in typical Hui architectural style. In 2015, Ou Ning’s friend Qian Xiaohua bought the entire building and decided to open the 14th sub-branch of Librairie Avant-garde (南京先锋书店) here. According to Ou Ning’s design, Bishan Bookstore was refitted to a multi-functional space, containing a reading room, a café, and open storage spaces (Figure 4). During the following two years, reading salons, guest lectures and film screenings were frequently organized in this space, while invited professionals engaging the local community and sharing their knowledge. The ideal scenery in Ou Ning’s prospect seemed to come along—although it was not yet a solid commune, the cultural activities had at least broken the ice.

Another intensive program, “Investigation on One Hundred Craftsmen of Yi County” (黟县百工), was moderated by Zuo Jing, the chief editor of Bishan Mook by that time. To learn about the traditional handicraft industry of the Huizhou area on one hand, and to bridge the urban-based designers and the folk artists for potential collaborations on another, the investigation took nearly three years to complete and ended up with a cognominal book (Figure 5). Cataloguing craftsmanship with elaborative texts and photographs, the report allowed the readers to approach the past living textures in Yi County historically and aesthetically.

As Bishan project arousing broader attention and taking more headlines, some critics began to throw opposing opinions. The most noticeable dispute between Ou Ning and

Zhou Yun, who was then a Ph.D. candidate of sociology at Harvard University, showed several intriguing points and provoked further debates. After attending a field trip to Bishan village in 2014, Zhou Yun criticized almost vehemently on several social media platforms that Bishan Project not only excluded the local society but also turned it to an enclave of high-profile culture, a garden planted with bourgeois aesthetics. In this sense, Bishan was culturally colonialized by the intellectuals like Ou Ning and Zuo Jing, who, as Zhou Yun assessed, “seek for their own Arcadia using the cultural capital, and address status symbols throughout the process.” As more cultural critics and social activists joined their debate, the perplexing situation seemed to put the curators to severe ethical predicaments.

In late 2016, Bishan Project was shut down by the government indefinitely. No one could explain affirmatively how and why the project was sentenced to permanent cease; the villagers I consulted either kept themselves outside this issue or were reluctant to mention it anymore, yet the project’s outcome and their attitudes per se should be comprehended from critical aspects.

First of all, there was no stable financial resources to sustain such a comprehensive project. Even if the curators had raised the popularity of Bishan, it was difficult to build a long-lasting effect upon the one-off visits. The conceptual system of Bishan project was also flawed, since in China it is never politically tolerated to refer to anarchism in a leading slogan—Ou Ning crossed the line here. Considering it took time to embrace the value of the intellectuals, the local people was also not satisfyingly motivated to participate the project. Besides, increasing public critiques gave far too much moral crisis to the project and brought great pressure for the local government; the sudden public concentration somehow added to the complexity of local administration, which is distasteful for the authorities.

Although there is still much to battle on the ethical level, we cannot neglect the support from the intellectuals’s side. Since Bishan Project was launched, the curators have been bringing the project to different cities for exhibitions, panels, and lectures. Under the summarizing title “Bishan Project,” archival materials including working journals, on-site photographs and documentaries were grouped in various formats for different situations, and in some ways more specific sites.

In 2014, Bishan Project was named “Street of Utopia” in the curated show “Cloud of Unknowing: A City with Seven Streets” at Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Re-staging the realistic structure of Bishan village as a U-shaped sloping land (Figure 6), the exhibition showcased archives including Ou Ning’s notebook (replica), a documentary reflecting Bishan’s local life, and publications of the craftsmanship survey. To encourage the audience’s interactions, the curators issued 1000 sets of “Bishan Hours,” a temporary currency for objects exchange in the exhibition venue. They also designed a special passport on which the audience can collect 16 stamps, each with a different pattern inspired by the Bishan agricultural goods.

Interestingly, even after Bishan Project was shut down for three years, it was incorporated to the exhibition “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2018, in the form of a knowledge map listing the leading concepts and events (Figure 7). The exhibition also more recently travelled to SFMoMA. Such presences marked a continuation of Bishan Project’s public read in the clan of Chinese art history, and promoted its participation in the global art ecology as a representative of Chinese SEA practices of the recent decade.

Qiuzhuang Project was devised and implemented by Chinese artist Li Mu (b. 1974) since late 2012. The core idea is that the artist inserting replicas made after renowned artworks selected from the Van Abbemuseum’s (Netherland, Eindhoven) collection into different living scenarios of his hometown Qiuzhuang, an undeveloped village located in Jiangsu Province, given the environmental accessibility and compatibility.

After rounds of negotiation with Van Abbemuseum, Li Mu launched the project at the end of 2012, with his cameraman and assistant Zhong Ming documenting the whole working process. He first set out to establish a public reading room called “A Library” (Figure 8), with the expectation that the local people could enjoy some leisure time besides doing farming and manufacturing works. Li Mu had his own book collections distributed to the library, and asked a villager to look after routines within this space. It turned out that “A Library” became a nice space for public gathering; although people came here for chatting more than reading, the continuing conversations helped Li Mu to anchor and dive into the village’s normal status.

In March 2013, Li Mu started the reproducing work with his fellow villagers and local workshops. According to Li Mu’s plan, the replicas should be placed at different spots through the village, so that people could meet the works as frequent and as casual as possible.

One of fifteen copies of *Untitled, Wall Structure* (Sol LeWitt, 1972) was installed onto a wall facing the main road, while the remaining fourteen were given to local families for free. It turned out that the villagers dealt with these pieces rather creatively: Fan Jingsi put a collection of crafts into each “unit” of the “twisted ladder,” since he thought an artwork should be juxtaposed with beautiful things (Figure 9). Li Mu’s father had the ladder fixed horizontally to suspend his birdcages, while Li Mu’s sister kept another one unmodified, installing it on her stair wall. Li Mu was rather happy to see all these alternations, and considered choices made by the villagers to be important components of his project—an artistically devised and practically reshaped one. “People have their own way to digest, interpret and utilize the artworks. There is no right or wrong.” said Li Mu. No matter how aesthetics and practicality combined, each of the options came from someone’s fundamental needs or was grounded on personal interests. The villagers’ perception of Western art somehow verified Li Mu’s principles of selecting the original artworks: they should not have too much precise contents to be incorporated into people’s ordinary life with plasticity.

Several videos featuring performances by Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramovic and her partner Ulay (Uwe Lay-siepen), including *AAA-AAA* (1977), *Imponderabilia* (1977), *Light/Dark* (1977), and *Rest Energy* (1980), were put to loop screening in a local grocery store run by villager Wang Gaoqi (Figure 10). Li Mu and his assistant also made some flyers to advertise this section, which were in the similar style of other preexisting posters. Local people coming to buy groceries would usually stay for minutes to watch the videos, leaving comments according to their own understanding.

Appreciating art in a professional institution is thought to be more respectful, yet art penetrating into mundane life sometimes brings serendipity with unorthodox interpretations, which also reveal the perspectives of non-regular observers. Li Mu even felt that the dim-lighted grocery store was the best place to show the videos, in which sense his practice has already involved curatorial strategies in representing performance art and its afterlives.

Li Mu was seeking appropriate conditions to reproduce British artist Richard Long’s *Wood Circle* (1976-1977, various locations), together with his parents and friends. In the winter of 2013 he finally chose the riverbank for it. Made by tree branches which usually served as firewood, the reproduced version resembled Long’s original piece to a great degree: each unit of the circle spread evenly and the whole pattern looked random organized. This trial strikingly noted Richard Long’s intention of using natural objects and local materials to (re)forge the artwork, each time “serves as a constant form, always with new content.” Li Mu’s practice, therefore, continued to introduce new dimensions to the original work, with creation as a tool to unite the local people.

The finished installation was conspicuous due to the color contrast of wood and the snow-covered riverbank, and as time passing the whole piece was incorporated into the land, demonstrating the nature’s shaping effects (Figure 11). The completion of *Wood Circle* also marked the epilogue of all reproducing work, yet Li Mu had obviously gone further than that. At every stage of the project implementation, the artist learned more about the village and its people through different stories told by his local collaborators. The artworks, therefore, became hubs and links between them, without which some valuable conversations would not have opened.

During the execution of Qiuzhuang Project, many friends of Li Mu also paid visits to Qiuzhuang and brought participatory events for the local people as companions (Figure 12). While adding to more vigorousness, it seemed that Li Mu’s project had stirred up the status quo of the village and put himself into much controversy. Li Mu’s sister complained that her younger brother had taken advantage of their ignorance to make art; Li Mu’s parents still have no faith in professional artist as a decent occupation with stable income. Li Mu’s mother said that all “trifles” brought up by the project had added to her workload which was already very heavy, making it almost unbearable.

Working in mezzanines of multiple misunderstandings and micro-politics was, however, an unavoidable part of SEA practices universally. In every subsection of Qiuzhuang

Project, it was never a mere goal to complete reproducing and installing artworks or to coordinate a public event. A more valuable part was the artist examining his working strategies through all the discussions and unplanned episodes, while enriching his recognition of “art” and adjusting the subsequent tactics. Art itself seems to resign a little from his original intention, while communication and reactions upon uncertainty took a more important role. Li Mu only understood the processual quality of his project after starting to work on-site for quite a while, realizing that the project was not more pedagogical than exploring.

At a later stage, Li Mu set out to make some watercolors to record his working results (Figure 13). Each completed part was depicted by simple lines and transparently bright colors, making the living fragments of the village appear very poetic and inviting. The scenarios became slightly romanticized, greatly contradicting Li Mu’s previous recognition of his hometown—brutal, dirty, and frustrating. Footages filming the village’s daily activities and the reproducing work were made into a five-hour documentary; Li Mu also neatly filed his diary and correspondences where most reflections of the project were illuminated. These representations interwoven with one another, delineated a typical Chinese village with contemporary art’s intervention in flesh and blood.

Through exhibitions, public speeches and panels, those archival materials endowed new appearances to the project and gained it much attention from the domestic and international art world.

In a group exhibition “Reality or –ism” (Xianshi huozhe Zhuyi) in Nanjing, 2013, Li Mu showed ten photographs representing Qiuzhuang’s environment with the reproduced artworks installed. Each photograph was covered by a piece of textile, on which the image of selected original work was printed (Figure 14). If interested in a particular work, the audience can uncover the textile and see how its reproduction(s) was displayed in Qiuzhuang. The relationship between the original and the reproduced was also implied by this gesture, and even what is “original” might require a deliberate consideration here.

In September 2015, as the prominent sponsor and long-term cooperator, the Van Abbemuseum released a solo exhibition for the project. The documentary “Qiuzhuang Log” was organized in time order, while the exhibition space was arranged in accordance of this reel: four large screens were organized as rectangular with projectors fixed in different directions above the fenced-up space, each playing the documentary of different seasons (Figures 15a and 15b). In this way, the audience would find themselves “wrapped” by the living scenes of Qiuzhuang. Besides, twelve selected watercolor paintings, and the publication *A Man, A Village, A Museum* (Onomatopoe, 2016), were put into a showcase as references. Two speakers playing recorded soundtracks from Qiuzhaung were installed on the outside wall of the exhibition space, reenacting the ambiance of Li Mu’s primary working site.

Performance was another pattern to represent Qiuzhuang project. Based on Qiuzhuang project, impressive per-

formance “A Continuous Speech” was presented at Goethe Institute Shanghai (Open Space) in 2016. Two volunteer speakers were employed by this program and got paid for telling the audience about Qiuzhuang Project; each day during the program, the speech contents varied depending on the screening schedule of the documentary and the questions from the audience. It seems that Li Mu kept extending the project, and with every step moved further, he redefined the original work and its representations. A progressive construction of communication was then achieved.

In 2016, local buildings along the main road in Qiuzhuang have been demolished because of the construction plan of a new national road, resulting in the dismantlement of most of the artworks. However, situating itself in an expanded system of contemporary art practice, Qiuzhuang Project demonstrated a strong interest in problem solving, relationship developing, and context transforming/reframing. The reward for the artist will be the reactions from his co-practitioners under each circumstance, be they the professional artists and curators, or the villagers and his family members.

Juxtaposing the two projects which happened at a parallel time with comparable transformations, we could further stage the primary tensions they have negotiated: contextually from the village to institutions, materially from action to archive, and characteristically from the artist identity to some broader social roles. These transformations are tightly integrated, and the reconfigurations and interpretations of “art-work” in different contexts are all the way interactive. Conflicts between the artists’ intentions and the external restrictions are unavoidable, but we need to think over in what sense and under what circumstances the collaboration is feasible, concession is acceptable, and sacrifice is desirable. Looking at the comprehensive components of each project, such art-intervened, site/situation-oriented and collaboration-wanted practices have definitely challenged the meaning of “art-work,” which no longer pertains to an artificial spectacle appropriating institutional aesthetics, but an organic process casting new lights to the artists’ thoughts and labor.

Here is how the injection-extraction dialectics works. When the artists performed the on-site work, they were injecting into the uninformed village with their knowledge and visions, such as the western artworks and theories of rural construction. Simultaneously, entering the real scenes and absorbing another set of living and thinking mode have pushed the artists to explore the social realities at a very specific place, and often through a historical perspective. In their later work at off-site venues, the previous experience was actually extracted from its original context and became the artists’ primary materials to build up a new project, which revealed how the artists expected to construct the dialogue between the past and the present, the urban and the rural, and furtherly the east and the west. Represented by multiple exhibitions, the villages are also participating the global mobility with their own characteristics through the artists’ endeavors. In this sense, the artists have contributed

to the production of a communicating space, which bridges the local specialty and the outside world.

What bonds the injection and extraction together is the willingness of getting to know, and caring about, the semi-invisible parts of our social ecology. The significance of SEA practices therefore becomes the awareness to the site and the faith in action. And only by paying attention to the exact moment, the very chance where all the potential conditions come in service, could we understand the context under which a strategic choice is made. On another aspect, the emphasis on “entering the scene, approaching the living realities” indicates that we should first learn about the indigenous social complex instead of being so eager to “improve the current condition.” While the intention for improvement is good in general, it has fixed the local site onto a linear axis and assumed its backwardness, which indirectly denies the local site’s capacity of constructing dialogues with the outside world and promoting an inclusive path for development. This calls for a more cautious standpoint and a fair perspective for scholars and critics to review and sometimes assess the artists’ working strategies and “achievements,” without missing or isolating any backstage units. To some degree, it might be a more efficient way to approach an alternative understanding of social engagement and site-specificity, and maybe a more responsible phrase could be, situation-specificity.

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Figure 1. Bishan Village, 2019. Photo credit: Yue Ren.

Figure 2. Logo for the “Bishan Commune” in Ou Ning’s notebook, 2014. Photo credit: Yue Ren.

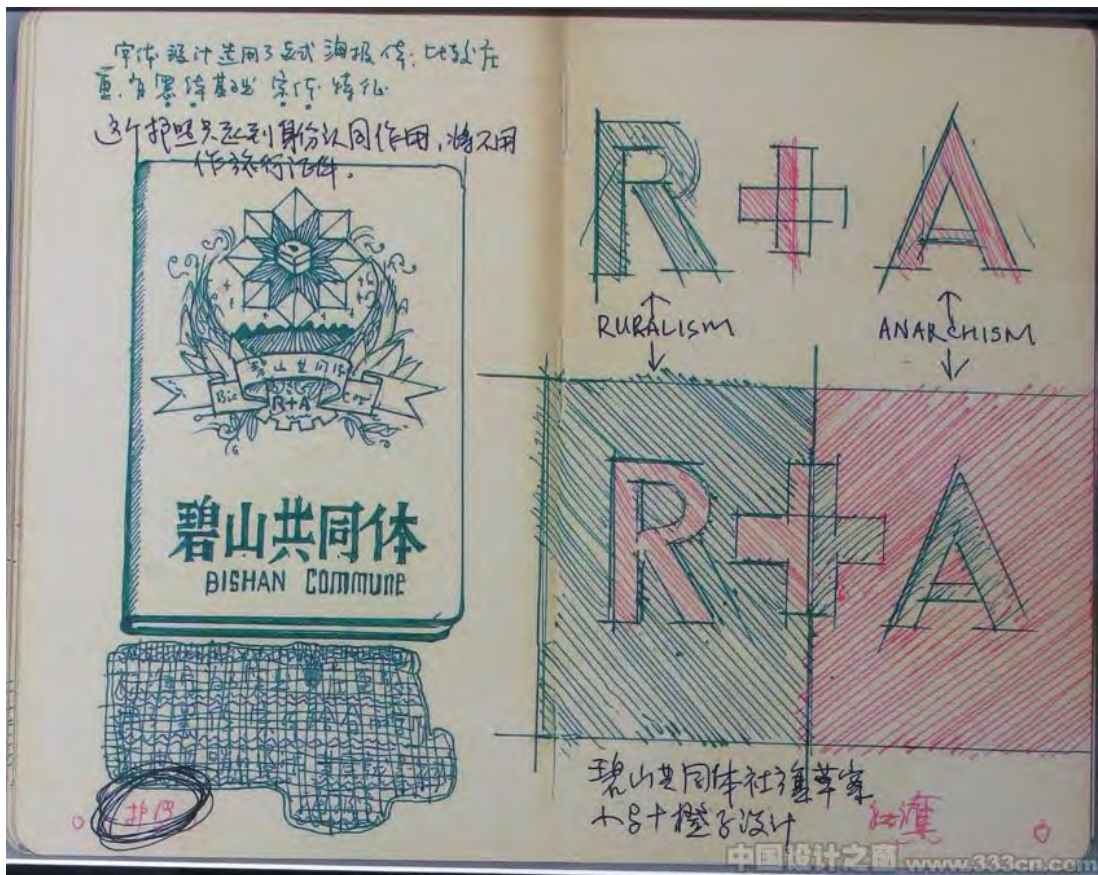




Figure 3. Performance at the first Bishan Harvestival. Photo credit: Ou Ning and LEAP. Photo credit: Yue Ren.

Figure 4. Bishan Bookstore café, 2019. Photo credit: Yue Ren.





Figure 5. Book cover for *Investigation on One Hundred craftsmen of Yi County*, 2014. Photo credit: Yue Ren.

Figure 6. Bishan Project in the exhibition "Cloud of Unknowing: A City with Seven Streets," Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2014. Photo credit: Yue Ren.



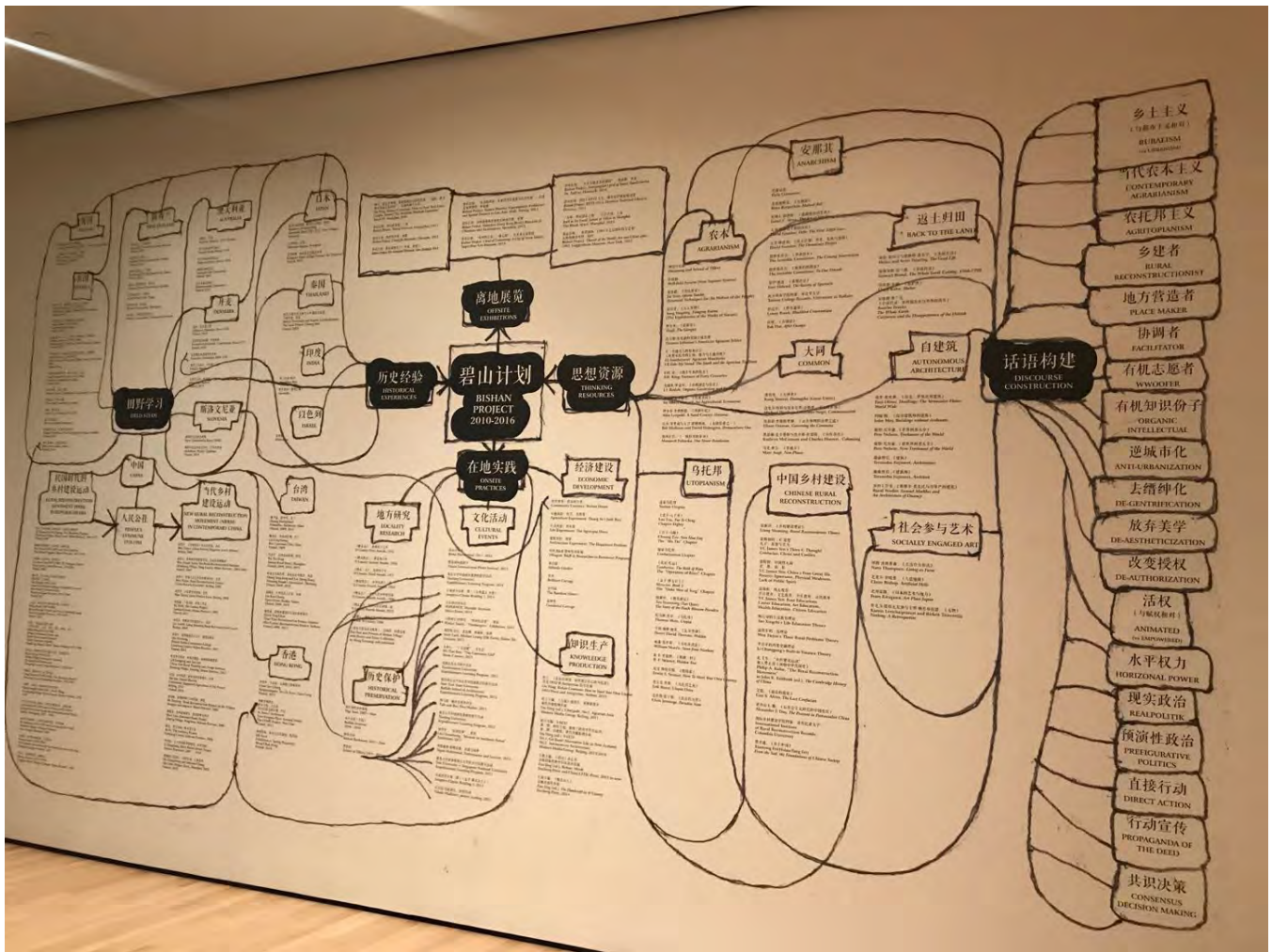


Figure 7. Bishan Project in the exhibition “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,” Guggenheim Museum, New York. 2018. Photo credit: Yue Ren.



Figure 8. *A Library* in Qiu Zhuang. Photo credit: Li Mu.

Figure 9 [facing page, top]. Fan Jingsi and his crafts collection with *Wall Structure*. Photo credit: Li Mu.

Figure 10 [facing page, bottom]. *Rest Energy* in a grocery store. Photo credit: Li Mu





Figure 11. Reproducing Richard Long's *Wood Circle* with villagers. Photo credit: Li Mu.



Figure 12. Children having a picnic with the visiting artist. Photo credit: Li Mu.

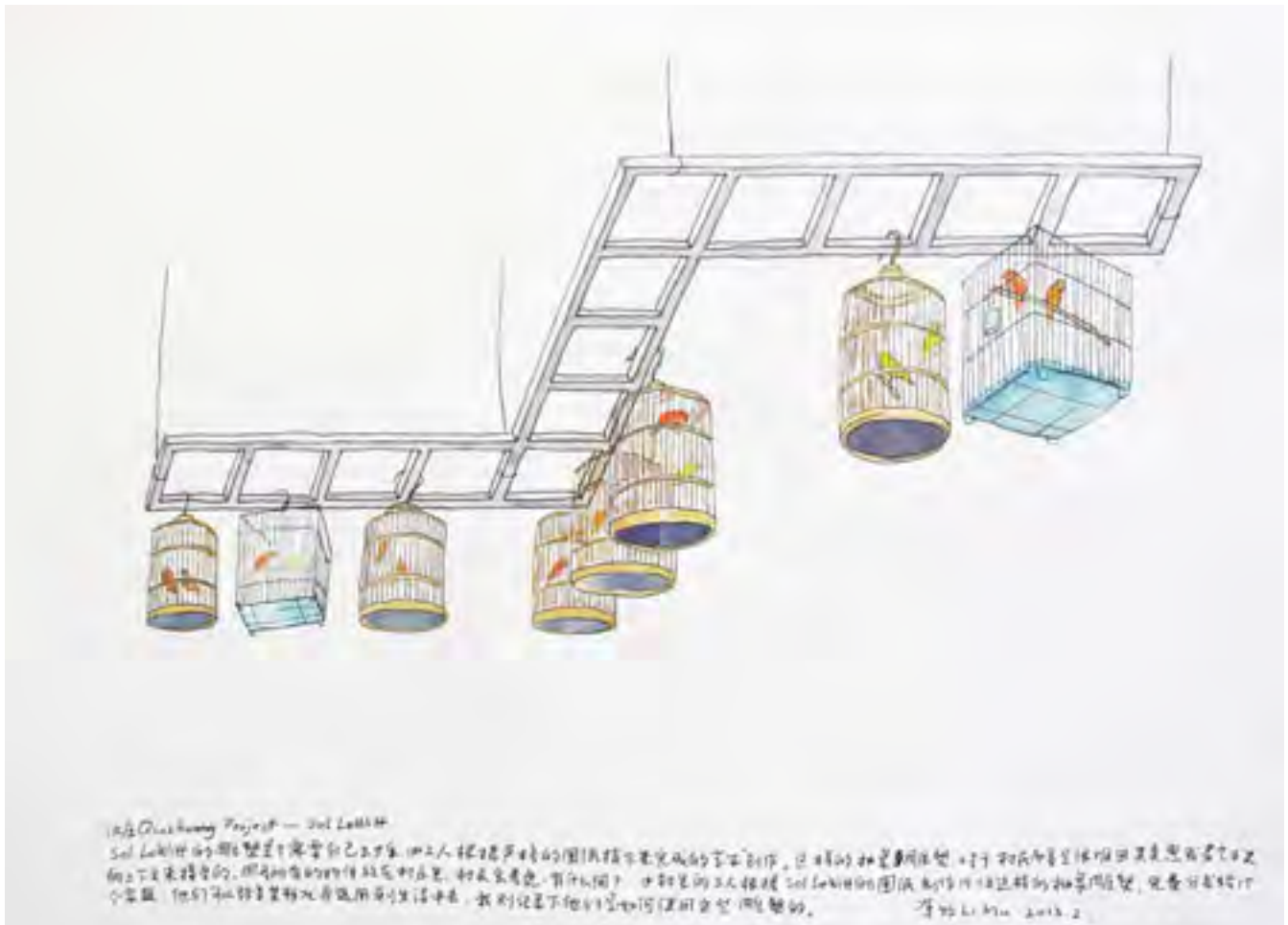


Figure 13. *Qiuzhuang Project*, watercolor on paper, 54 x 39 cm, 2013. Photo credit: Li Mu.

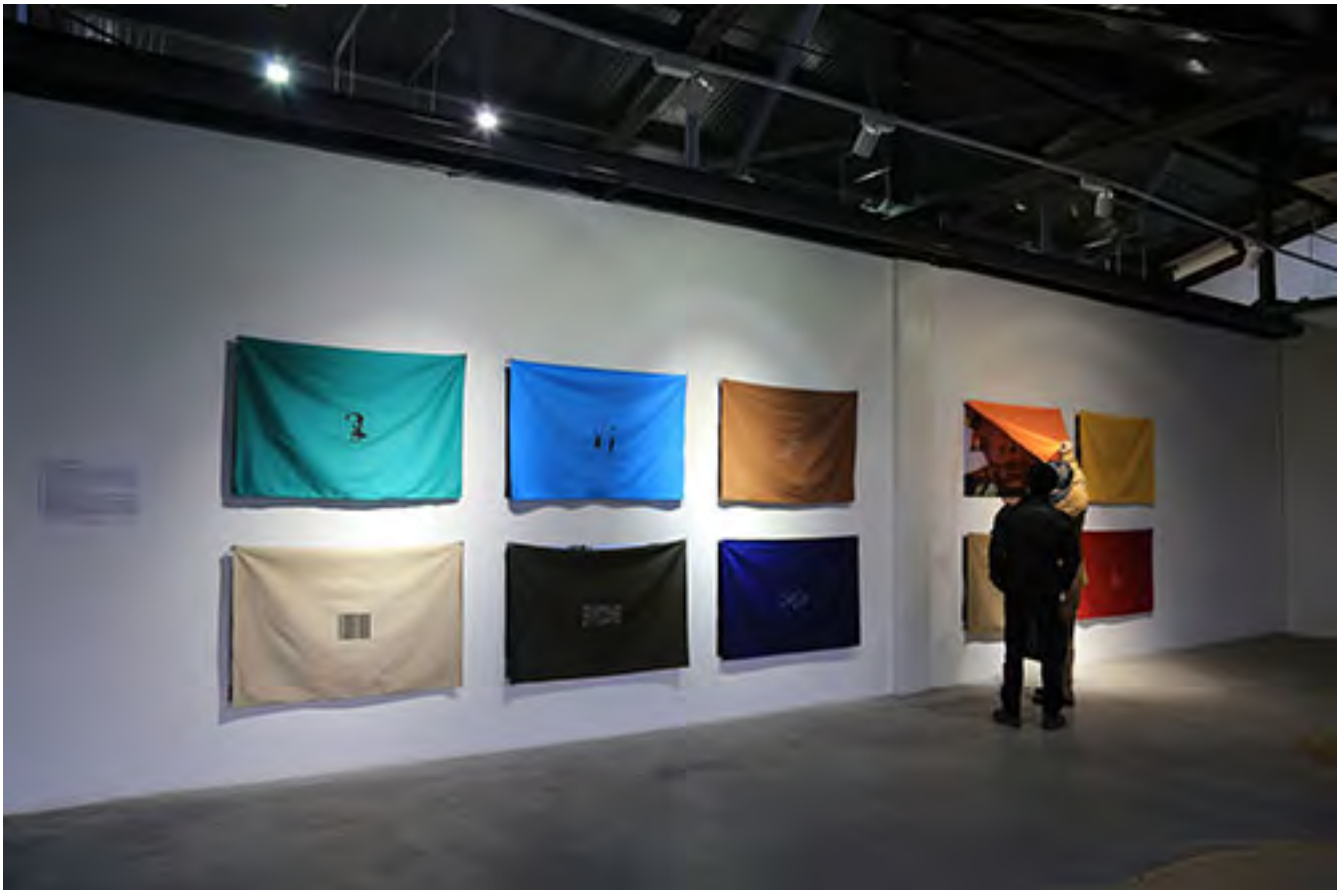
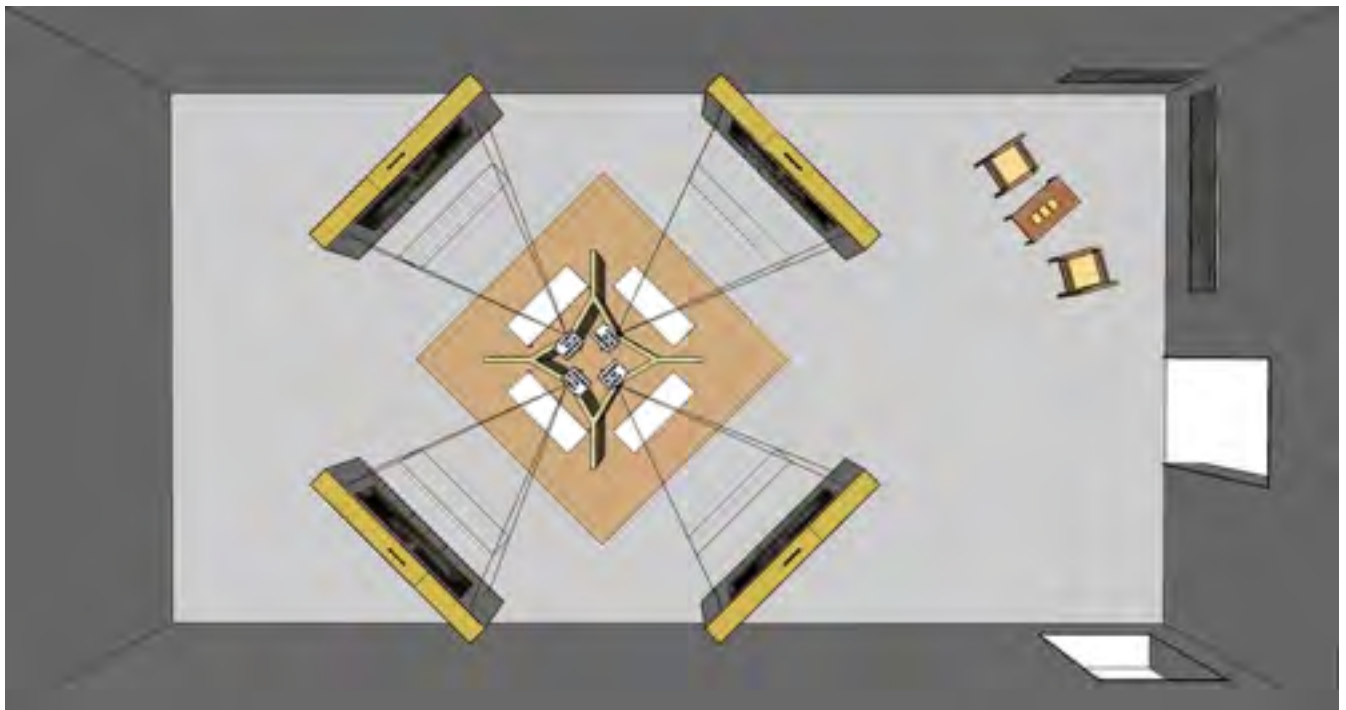


Figure 14. Qiu Zhuang Project exhibited in “Reality or –ism,” Nanjing Jin-Ying Art Centre, 2013. Photo credit: Yue Ren.





Figures 15a [above] and 15b [facing page, bottom]. The first spatial design and exhibition scene of *A Man, A Village, A Museum*.
Photo courtesy of the Van Abbemuseum.

