

# 高氏兄弟 GAO BROTHERS

**GAO QIANG**  
1962 JINAN, CHINA  
**GAO ZHEN**  
1956 JINAN, CHINA



# **BIOGRAPHY**

The Gao brothers are two Beijing-based artist brothers. Over the past 20 years and since their internationally prominent participation in the exhibition « China / Avant-Garde » in 1989 (National Gallery of Beijing), their art has reached into various mediums including photography, video, painting, sculpture, performance, with them working also as critical writers and even as exhibition curators. In their work can be seen a questioning of humanity and fraternity remaining in contemporary reality. Marked by the death of their father under the Maoist regime, engaged in demonstrations at Tiananmen square (which cost them their passports for several years), the two brothers share a critical attitude towards Chinese society.

Their works form part of the collections of the most important contemporary art museums, including: the China National Museum, the MoMA New York, the Guggenheim Foundation, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Centre Pompidou and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and the Princetown University Art Museum; as well as large private collections including Steven Cohen, Uli Sigg, Charles Saatchi...

## PERSONAL EXHIBITIONS

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| <b>2015</b> | <u>"BETWEEN THE WALLS OF UTOPIA", IFA GALLERY, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM</u>   |
| <b>2014</b> | "THE UTOPIA OF CONSTRUCTION", MUSEUM OF NEW ART, DETROIT, USA  |
| <b>2014</b> | "THE UTOPIA OF 20 MINUTES EMBRACE", RH CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK, USA   |
| <b>2014</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS - DISSIDENTS ABROAD", MONA MUSEUM, DETROIT, USA  |
| <b>2013</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS: THE EXECUTION OF CHRIST ", ALBERT BENAMOU GALLERY, PARIS, FRANCE                                      |
| <b>2013</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS", VUE PRIVÉE GALLERY, ART STAGE SINGAPORE, SINGAPORE   |
| <b>2013</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS", GALERIE POST + GARCÍA, MAASTRICHT, THE NETHERLANDS   |
| <b>2013</b> | "BETWEEN SPIRITUAL AND MATERIAL SPACES: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORLD OF THE GAO BROTHERS", HUA GALLERY, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM |
| <b>2012</b> | "THE UTOPIA OF 20 MINUTES EMBRACE", PIAZZA DEL POPOLO, ROME, ITALY   |
| <b>2011</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS, GRANDEUR AND CATHARSIS", WALSH GALLERY, CHICAGO, USA  |
| <b>2010</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS: GRANDEUR AND CATHARSIS", KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, KANSAS CITY, USA                          |
| <b>2010</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS", GALLERY ADRIAN DAVID, KNOCKE-ZOUTE (KUSTLAAN 335), BELGIUM   |
| <b>2010</b> | "THE GAO BROTHERS", DUNCAN MILLER GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, USA  |
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<b>2010</b>	"GAO BROTHERS' PORTRAITS", CHINA ART ARCHIVES AND WAREHOUSE, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2008</b>	<u>"SOME SPACE FOR HUMANITY", IFA GALLERY, SHANGHAI, CHINA</u>
<b>2008</b>	"THE UTOPIA OF CONSTRUCTION", GAO BROTHERS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2008</b>	"THE GAO BROTHERS", VALLOIS GALLERY, PARIS, FRANCE
<b>2007</b>	"THE UTOPIA OF 20 MINUTES EMBRACE", BRANDENBURG GATE, BERLIN, GERMANY
<b>2007</b>	"THE MISERABLE PROSTITUTES: GAO BROTHERS' PAINTING AND SCULPTURE EXHIBITION", GAO BROTHERS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2007</b>	"THE HIGH PLACE: GAO BROTHERS PHOTOGRAPHY AND SCULPTURE EXHIBITION", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2007</b>	"THE GAO BROTHERS", LIMN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO, USA
<b>2007</b>	"THE GAO BROTHERS", ALBERT BENAMOU GALLERY, PARIS, FRANCE
<b>2007</b>	"THE GAO BROTHERS", BALLERY, OX ART G, VERONA, ITALY
<b>2007</b>	"FROM CHINA WITH LOVE: GAO BROTHERS PHOTOGRAPHY AND SCULPTURE EXHIBITION", WALSH GALLERY, USA
<b>2007</b>	"ANOTHER WORLD: GAO BROTHERS PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION", ARLES PHOTO FESTIVAL, FRANCE
<b>2006</b>	"TROPE OF BODY: GAO BROTHERS' PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"THE PASSAGE OF TIME: GAO BROTHERS PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION", LA GALERIE GUISLAIN ETATS D' ART, PARIS, FRANCE
<b>2006</b>	"THE UTOPIA OF HUGGING",,, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM
<b>2006</b>	"THE UTOPIA OF HUGGING", LONDON,, NOTTINGHAM, UNITED KINGDOM

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<b>2006</b>	"THE UTOPIA OF HUGGING",, MARSEILLE, FRANCE
<b>2006</b>	"ONE AND TOGETHER: GAO BROTHERS PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION", MOSCOW HOUSE OF PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERY ON SOLYANKA, MOSCOW, RUSSIA
<b>2006</b>	"MISS MAO: GAO BROTHERS' SCULPTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION", KRAMPF/PEI GALLERY, NEW YORK, USA
<b>2005</b>	"ONE ABANDONED BUILDING'S VISUAL STORY", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS, CHINA
<b>2002</b>	"A DINNER WITH THE HOMELESS PEOPLE - PERFORMANCE",, JINAN, CHINA
<b>2001</b>	"EMBRACE: GAO BROTHERS' NEW WORKS", COURTYARD GALLERY, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2000</b>	"FUZE: GAO BROTHERS' PHOTOGRAPHY", EASTLINK GALLERY, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>1995</b>	"THE END OF MANKIND: GAO BROTHERS - INSTALLATIONS", JINAN PAINTING INSTITUTE, JINAN, CHINA

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## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

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<b>2016</b>	"1000 APERTURES & 1 VISAGE", IFA GALLERY, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
<b>2015</b>	"—  ", IFA GALLERY, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
<b>2015</b>	"TEMPORARY BOUNDARY: A SURVEY ON CHINA CENSURED VIDEOS & PHOTOGRAPHS", PARIS-BEIJING GALLERY, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
<b>2015</b>	"SECRET LOVE", TROPEN MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS
<b>2015</b>	"DEAD: A CELEBRATION OF MORALITY", SAATCHI GALLERY, LONDON, UK
<b>2015</b>	BEIRUT ART FAIR, BEIRUT, LEBANON
<b>2014</b>	"UNCOVERED CHINA", IFA GALLERY, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
<b>2014</b>	"OUTSIDE THE LINES: NEW ART FROM CHINA", RH CONTEMPORARY, NEW YORK, USA
<b>2013</b>	"SENSOR SHIP 0.46%", ART BASEL HONG KONG, HONG KONG, CHINA
<b>2013</b>	"LIKE THUNDER OUT OF CHINA", ARSENAL MONTREAL, MONTREAL, CANADA
<b>2013</b>	"INVESTIGATION NO.2:MR & MRS ZHANG", ART PARIS ART FAIR, PARIS, FRANCE
<b>2012</b>	"RED LAND, YELLOW STARS", IFA GALLERY, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
<b>2012</b>	"MY COUNTRY", IFA GALLERY, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>2012</b>	"UN-FORBIDDEN: THE POST-REVOLUTION OF NEW CHINESE ART", MACRO MUSEUM, ROME, ITALY
<b>2012</b>	"SECRET LOVE", OSTASIATISKA MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN
<b>2012</b>	"DEATH SHOW STUDIO", LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

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<b>2012</b>	"BRIDGE OVER TROUBLE", 798 YI ZHAO SPACE-798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2012</b>	"BORE-FEAR", 798 YI ZHAO SPACE, 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2011</b>	"VERBOTEN", THOMAS AMMANN FINE ART AG, ZURICH, SWITZERLAND
<b>2011</b>	"PINO PASCALI", RETURN TO VENICE/APULIA CONTEMPORARY ART-PALAZZO MICHEL DAL BRUSÀ, VENICE, ITALY
<b>2011</b>	"PINO PASCALI RETURN TO VENICE / APULIA CONTEMPORARY ART", PALAZZO BIANCHI MICHEL DAL BRUSÀ,, VENICE, ITALY
<b>2011</b>	"MIDDLE EAST", MIDDLE KINGDOM, ETEMAD GALLERY, DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
<b>2011</b>	"IN GOD WE TRUST CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART", BARD COLLEGE, NEW YORK, USA
<b>2011</b>	"DRAPEAU ROUGE/RED FLAG", CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART IN MONTREAL COLLECTIONS-MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,, MONTREAL, CANADA
<b>2010</b>	"STATE OF THE DAO: CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART", LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY, NEW YORK, USA
<b>2010</b>	"RESHAPING HISTORY: CHINA ART FROM 2000 TO 2009", NATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTER, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2010</b>	"INTRAMOENIA EXTRA ART MIRAGES", ALFONSO'S CASTLE OF BRINDISI, ITALY
<b>2010</b>	"HOT BED: SHANDONG CONTEMPORARY ART", SUNSHINE INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2010</b>	"DAEGU PHOTO BIENNALE", DAEGU CULTURE AND ART CENTER, DAEGU, KOREA
<b>2009</b>	"ELEVATION/INTEGRATION", IFA GALLERY, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>2009</b>	"CARTE BLANCHE", IFA GALLERY, SHANGHAI, CHINA

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<b>2009</b>	"XUN DAO: SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART", FREDERIEKE TAYLOR GALLERY, NEW YORK, USA
<b>2009</b>	"THE VERY CONDITION", WALL ART MUSEUM, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2009</b>	"MADE IN CHINA", THE MUSEUM OF NEW ART (MONA), DETROIT, USA
<b>2009</b>	"CONTACT PHOTO FESTIVAL", DRAKE HOTEL, TORONTO, CANADA
<b>2009</b>	"BETWEEN THE SEXES", PARIS BEIJING PHOTO GALLERY, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2009</b>	"ACTION-CAMERA, BEIJING PERFORMANCE PHOTOGRAPHY", MORRIS AND HELEN BELKIN GALLERY, VANCOUVER, CANADA
<b>2009</b>	VANCOUVER BIENNALE, VANCOUVER, CANADA
<b>2008</b>	"URBAN LUST", IFA GALLERY, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>2008</b>	"THE 2008 FOTO FEST- 12TH INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY BIENNIAL", HOUSTON, USA
<b>2008</b>	"MAHJONG, CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART FROM THE SIGG COLLECTION", THE BERKELEY ART MUSEUM, BERKELEY, USA
<b>2008</b>	"MAHJONG", CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART FROM THE SIGG COLLECTION- THE BERKELEY ART MUSEUM, BERKELEY, USA
<b>2008</b>	"CHINA...FORWARD: CHINA CONTEMPORARY ART", TSUM, MOSCOW, RUSSIA
<b>2008</b>	"AH! WE: CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART 1978-2008", CHINA NATIONAL THEATRE, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2007</b>	"THE EXHIBITION OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ART", THE STATE TRETAKOV MUSEUM, MOSCOW, RUSSIA
<b>2007</b>	"MADE IN BEIJING: CHINA CONTEMPORARY ART", MODERN ART MUSEUM OF HONGIK UNIVERSITY, SEOUL, KOREA
<b>2007</b>	"DRAGON'S EVOLUTION ", CHINA SQUARE ART CENTER, NEW YORK, USA

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<b>2007</b>	"CHINESE AROMA-HUANTIE TIMES CHINESE ART INVITATION EXHIBITION", HUAN TIE TIMES ART, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2007</b>	"CHINA UNDER CONSTRUCTION: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC", BEBORAH COLTON GALLERY, HOUSTON, USA
<b>2007</b>	"BREATHE: SHANDONG CONTEMPORARY ART EXHIBITION", SHANDONG MUSEUM, JINAN, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"THE FIRST ANNUAL EXHIBITION OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART", CHINA CENTURY ALTAR, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"TEN CHINESE AVANT-GARDE PHOTOGRAPHERS", ASIA ART CENTER, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"RUINS ", INOVA ART CENTER, PECKSCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSION, MILWAUKEE, USA
<b>2006</b>	"POST ELECTRONIC IMAGE", MUSTBE CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"PHOTOGRAPHY OF GAO BROTHERS, MATTEO BASILE AND RAIMONDO GALEANO", IL PONTE CONTEMPORANEA, ROME, ITALY
<b>2006</b>	"PHOTOGRAPHING CHINA", THE CIRCUMVALLATION SITE OF MING DYNASTY, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"MY SPACE, YOUR SPACE", WALSH GALLERY, CHICAGO, USA
<b>2006</b>	"MISS MAO", BLACK LIST PROJECTS, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM
<b>2006</b>	"FIELD OF VIISION: BEIJING", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"BROTHERS ", XIN DONG CHEN SPACE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM CHINA", SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART, USA
<b>2006</b>	"BETWEEN ART AND ARCHITECTURE", 798 AVANT GALLERY, NEW YORK, USA

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<b>2006</b>	"BEIJING-SOLDIERS AT THE GATES", FACTORY 798, DASHANZI ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2006</b>	"5×7 FRAME DECIDE THE ATTITUDE ", EXHIBITION IN PINGYAO INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL, PINGYAO, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"VEHICLE AND MIRROR IMAGE", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"UNLIMIT: GAO BROTHERS, HUANG YAN & ZHANG TIEMEI'S COMPUTERIZED PHOTOGRAPHY", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS- 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"TIAN AN MEN - TIAN AN MEN - GATE TO HEAVEN", FOAM PHOTOGRAPHY MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS
<b>2005</b>	"THE SECOND REALITY: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM CHINA", PIAZZA OF BERLAYMONT BUILDING, EUROPEAN COMMISSION, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
<b>2005</b>	"THE GESTURE. VISUAL LIBRARY IN PROGRESS", MACEDONIAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, THESSALONIKI, GREECE
<b>2005</b>	"THE FLOWER IN THE RUIN: CONTEMPORARY IMAGE EXHIBITION", NIU FANG DEPOT, MACAU, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"THE CITY IN 360 DEGREES: FRENCH AND CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHERS IN CHINA", BEIJING NEW ART- 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"START TO FLY: HE XIANGNING ART MUSEUM OCAT CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTION", HE XIANGNING ART MUSEUM, SHENZHEN, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"SCRATCH OR CHINA-SINGAPORE DIGITAL IMAGE ART EXHIBITION", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS- 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"PLACED IN CHINA", WALSH GALLERY, CHICAGO, USA
<b>2005</b>	"FORGE THE FABLE", MUST BE CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"FIELD OF VISION: EXTREMES", THE INSTITUTE FOR NEW MEDIA, FRANKFURT, GERMANY
<b>2005</b>	"CHINA AVANT-GARDE: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART", ARENA, SANTA MONICA, USA

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<b>2005</b>	"BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM CHINA", VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM
<b>2005</b>	"BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM CHINA", SEATTLE ART MUSEUM, SEATTLE, USA
<b>2005</b>	"BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM CHINA", MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO, THE DAVID AND ALFRED SMART MUSEUM OF ART, CHICAGO, USA
<b>2005</b>	"A UTOPIA OF THE VISIBLE: 13 OUTSTANDING ART PHOTOGRAPHERS IN CHINA", BEIJING NEW ART PROJECTS, 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2005</b>	"2005 PINGYAO INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION",,, PINGYAO, CHINA
<b>2004</b>	"TIANANMEN", CHINESE EYES GALLERY, PARIS, FRANCE
<b>2004</b>	"DESIGN THE MARBLE - 40 INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS IN CARRARA",,, CARRARA, ITALY
<b>2004</b>	"BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM CHINA", INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND ASIA SOCIETY, NEW-YORK, USA
<b>2003</b>	"THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL PHOTO FESTIVAL OF ROME", L'OFFICINA, ROME, ITALY
<b>2003</b>	"SOHO CONTEMPORARY", ART EXHIBITION- SOHO STREET, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2003</b>	"CHINESE ART TODAY", CHINA CENTURY ALTAR, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2003</b>	"BARE ANDROGYNY", A GROUP SHOW OF CONTEMPORARY ART- 798 ART COMMUNITY, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2002</b>	"THE FIRST TRIENNIAL OF CHINESE ARTS", GUANGZHOU ART MUSEUM, CHINA
<b>2002</b>	"2002 PINGYAO INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION",,, PINGYAO, CHINA
<b>2001</b>	"THE FIRST TIRANA BIENNALE", NATIONAL GALLERY & CHINESE PAVILION, ALBANIA

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<b>2001</b>	"THE 5TH LOS ANGELES INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE", BERGAMOT STATION ARTS CENTER, LOS ANGELES, USA
<b>2001</b>	"ROTATE 360", CHINESE PLAN ART EXHIBITION- PARAGOLD INT'I ART CENTRE, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>2001</b>	"NICE INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL: CHINESE ALBUM", MUSEUM OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN NICE, FRANCE
<b>2001</b>	"MAO Y'A PAS PHOTO", THE ESPACE D' ART CONTEMPORAIN OF LA ROCHELLE, PARIS, FRANCE
<b>2000</b>	"PORTRAITS, FIGURES, COUPLES AND GROUPS FROM THE MCAF COLLECTION", BIZ'ART, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>2000</b>	"MAN AND ANIMAL", PERFORMANCE SHOW, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>2000</b>	"FAMILY?", CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT, YUEXING INTERNATIONAL FURNITURE CENTER, SHANGHAI, CHINA
<b>2000</b>	"CHINA AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS' DOCUMENTS", FUKUOKA ART MUSEUM, JAPAN
<b>2000</b>	"CHINA AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS DOCUMENTS", FUKUOKA ART MUSEUM, JAPAN
<b>1999</b>	"THE PICTURE AND WRITING EXHIBITION OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS", GALLERY OF NANJING TEACHERS UNIVERSITY, CHINA
<b>1999</b>	"THE DOCUMENTARY EXHIBITION OF WORLD CHINESE INSTALLATION ART", HONG KONG ART COMMUNE, CHINA
<b>1999</b>	"THE DOCUMENTARY EXHIBITION OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART", CHENGDU, CHINA
<b>1999</b>	"THE 2ND ANNUAL EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE", SHENZHEN, CHINA
<b>1999</b>	"OUT OF CONTROL", DESIGN ART MUSEUM, BEIJING, CHINA
<b>1992</b>	"GUANGZHOU BIENNALE", GUANGZHOU, CHINA

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**1989**

"CHINA AVANT-GARDE", CHINA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM, BEIJING, CHINA

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**1985**

"SHANDONG MODERN ART EXHIBITION", JINAN, CHINA

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# TEXTS

## INTERVIEW BY IFA GALLERY ABOUT CENSORSHIP AND ART

GAO BROTHERS STUDIO (BEIJING, 24 APRIL 2013)



00:00

16:35

# UTOPIA, UTOPIA, HUMANITY, HUMANITY...

BY PIA CAMILLA COPPER, CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART CRITIC (ISTANBUL, AUGUST 2008)

## WHAT IF THE WORLD WERE A UTOPIA?

A perfect, ideal, just, fair, fraternal society based on the precepts or dreams of Plato, Aristotle, Tao Yuanming, Lao Tze, Mencius, Chuang Tze, Plutarch, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas More, the Count of Saint-Simon, St Thomas Aquinas; William Morris, John Stuart Mill, Emmanuel Kant, Karl Marx and other utopists. The irony is that utopia has come to mean a non-place, a non-existent state, nowhere. But isn't that where everyone wants to go? In a world where war, poverty, famine and generalized uncertainty seem to be the norm rather than the exception, more and more people are surely asking themselves if even a moderate form of utopia is even attainable. How can mankind live together in a society in which the weak and the strong have equal rights? Aren't we all, part of this conversation, entitled, Humanity? Massimo Sestini's photo of a boat of migrants desperately trying to reach Europe in an overcrowded fishing vessel off Lampedusa, is perhaps one of the most accurate images of our time. David's *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, in all of its agony, has been surpassed.

It makes me think of the *Forever Unfinished Building No.4* (2008). A digitally maneuvered photograph of all the political icons, movie stars, cartoon figures, and ordinary people of the Western and Eastern worlds all assembled in a giant edifice, an unfinished skyscraper. This is where we have arrived. Welcome to nowhere. I recently saw a drawing of the refugee boat photo by Saudi artist, Adel Abdessemed, just a boat of silhouettes in black pencil against a large white sheet of paper, drifting to nowhere. It went off like a grenade into one's consciousness.

## THE GAO BROTHERS HAVE BEEN THE GRENADE AUTODIDACTS (ATTENDING SOME ART SCHOOL ONLY BRIEFLY, IN MY CONSCIOUSNESS FOR YEARS.

In China, Gao Qiang (born 1962) and Gao Zhen (born 1956) are often disregarded. Outspoken political pariahs, criticizing the legacy of the iconic nation builder Mao Zedong, they are not considered either by the regime or by their fellow artists who most often prefer like Chinese junshi gentlemen painter to flee overpowering reality in favor of aestheticism. Yet these two brothers are the quintessentially misunderstood artists, Cassandras of what is to come, sentinels on the shores of the apocalypse. Not only are they saying what is essential, but they have been doing so for almost four decades, adamantly pursuing the answer to many of society most fundamental questions through their art. From a family of six sons in Shandong, (a widowed mother raising them alone), they originally came to Beijing to seek justice for their father, murdered for political reasons by the Red Guards. It is ironic that it was as young *shangfangzhe*—or petitioners—that they came to the capital (as this original reason for coming to Beijing is still integral to their work). They are still petitioning it seems, but not only the Chinese government, the world, a privilege only artists can accede to. Their mother, a talented paper cutter, was the first to teach them “how to make art” and with scores of other liberty-seeking individualists in the mid 1980s, inspired by the new wave movement, cynical realism and pop art, (burgeoning with a new capitalist openness) —this is what they have been doing for years.

the Qi Baishi academy, the Jinan academy as a painter's assistant), they have always been on the margins of the official art scene but covering a wide scope; doing installation, performance, sculpture, photography works and writing (a novel, *A Day in Beijing*) since the mid-1980s.

In 1989, in tandem with the explosion of the Stars Group, and a nascent avant-garde, they put together a giant art installation of ballooning penises called *Midnight Mass* (at the China Avant- Garde exhibition at the Beijing National Gallery) which would have shocked even Jeff Koons and put Anish Kapoor into a mildly induced coma. It was quickly labeled as blasphemous in China. Perhaps it was too soon. As with all art. A decade later, with *Word Hug Day, the Utopia of Hugging* (2000), they brought together hundreds of couples for a performance along the Yellow River (in their native Shandong) who simultaneously embraced in a show of open sensuality which was a raised finger to the prudish regime.

The invention of the sculpture of *Miss Mao* (2006) (which has had several incarnations, fiberglass, steel and a medley of colours), quietly galvanized the art scene. Who could have dared to imagine Mao, the handsome, heroic political father figure transformed into a gnome with the nose of Pinocchio, the pigtail of a Manchu and the breasts of the pre-pubescent girls, the Great Leader so often preferred? Only the Gao Brothers dared. *Miss Mao* was vilified for being too commercial, but they did not take it to heart.

In an openly consumerist society, it is hard to imagine how a funny doll of a Mao could represent more than a gimmick. However, all of those who know Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang also know that the death of their father was enough to warrant a lifelong hatred, quasi-atavistic of China's most ambiguous historical front man. As they once said to me: "Mao ideas permeate the blood of the nation, and a blood poison is as difficult to eradicate as a virus". *Miss Mao* is not a theme, it is an obsession. To desacralize Mao, is the brothers' lifelong quest.

In *The Execution of Christ* (2009), a firing squad of twelve clones of a portly and overly confident Mao have Kalashnikovs aimed at the Christ figure, saying the last word, the obliteration, the annihilation of all that which represents compassion. It is ironic that Mao, responsible for so many deaths, should never have been portrayed with a gun. The recent set of *Double Portraits* (2009), oil diptychs, 6m across, of dictators depicted as children and then as adults, also reflect on a recurring theme of the Gao Brother's, our inherent humanity: whether the human soul is born good (as Jean-Jacques Rousseau might have wanted), or evil (as Joseph de Maistre suggested). Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Hitler, Jiang Qing (a.k.a. Madam Mao); the child and the adult side by side, a pair, seem to be looking at a mirror, the mirror of their own evolution into monsters. *The Interview* (2007) a photo of long deceased dictators and mass murderers, figures of inhumanity, Mao, Stalin, Osama bin Laden, Pol Pot, etc. meeting in a digitalized composition is another version of the same story. Oh! humanity? Where has your humanity gone? It rings of Allen Ginsberg's "America" (Oh America, when will you end your human war?). I would suggest that this new series, conceived from 2002 to now, starting with the iconic *The Unfinished Building Series* then, *The Utopia of Construction No 5, No 6, No 15, No 19* (2014). *Between the Walls of Utopia*, is an extension of the theme of the Gao Brothers' life work, a study of humanity and about humanity, and also on utopia.

There are the reverberating echoes of past series like *Chinese Ark* (2000), *Sense of Space* (2000), *The Forever Unfinished Building No.2* (2005), *Morning Exercise* (2004), *The Passage of Time* (2005), *Outer Space Project: Map of China* (2007). The newer photos have taken this theme to the point of abstraction, transforming unreal buildings like honeycombs, bee hives, reefs filled with human life into quasi-mystical kaleidoscopes or mandalas. In the new photographs (much as in past ones), one glimpses individuals stacked like so many sardines, one on top of the other, in compartments, in the skeleton of future cities. The unfinished, cement structures, seem terrifyingly high and impersonal or endlessly long. And the inhabitants,

what are they doing? What are they thinking ? If we take a moment to examine their humanity, we might find that each and every one of them is different and unique like the buried terracotta warriors, each an island unto him or herself, preoccupied with his own reality, even though some are only shadows, their faces shaded.

How can we all live together, in harmony and at the same time fulfilling our own destinies and dreams? How can we all live together without impinging one another's freedom, how can we act in a way in which is universal acceptable and moral. Perhaps, it all comes down to the Confucian ethic of humanity or "ren 仁", man's benevolence to man, man's regard for other men, making humanity one's end, living for humanity.

Whenever I am in Beijing, I end up on the the Gao Brothers' rooftop for interminable discussions, dinners, snacks (watermelon comes to mind) and debates. More often than not, Lu Feifei, their eponymous muse, herself an actress and filmmaker, is there, making coffee or exotic juices and adding to the general mood of utopia-discussing. We discuss everything. Nothing is ever left out.

We discuss how Chinese cities are mushrooming into inhuman, impersonal collections of tower blocks. We discuss how massive urbanization has made a disenfranchised peasantry into a limitless stock house of labour for feckless factory owners. We discuss the nail families who refuse to dislodge and the developers who hire thugs to evict them. We discuss the end of the Chinese family, once composed of three or four generations under a common roof, sometimes a courtyard house or farmyard, now isolated and independent, living in fifteen-story domino blocks. The loneliness. We discuss the end of culture and of a certain culture, artisans, once the life-blood of China. We discuss the environmental hazards of such rapid, non-thought out industrialization.

The impact of environmental problems on health, references to Foucault. The contamination of baby milk products for example. Dissidents, jailed longer than Ai Weiwei, and more deeply scarred, appear now and then, dropping by unexpectedly. A poet with a gallery nearby reminisces about a sculptor friend, Gan Guo who committed suicide shortly after Tiananmen, out of disillusionment. It always seems as if the entire political consciousness of China appears and disappears on their rooftop terrace, and the discussions go on deep into the night ending at the no 6 Sichuan Studio in the 798 district over spicy noodles and warm beer. Old propaganda on the wall reminds us of the political climate.

This is not even about politics or censorship, this is about the future of the world. This is about humanity as a whole. It seems to me that our discussions continue and have been ongoing in the past few years most notably at the Kemper Museum Of Contemporary, the Centre Pompidou, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Princeton University Art Museum, the Wall Art Museum Beijing, the TSUM and the Tretyakov Museum in Moscow, the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, the Victoria and Albert museum in London, the MAC in Rome, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art in Chicago, the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, the Guangzhou Art Museum, even the National Gallery and the Chinese Pavilion in Albania, the Fukuoka Art Museum and to come back to the start and the very beginning of the Gao Brothers, at Beijing's National Art Museum, where it all began.

And that, of course, is what art is all about, humanity and utopia and discussing and re-discussing it until someone finally takes notice. Gao Brothers, take a bow!

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*For the exhibition at ifa gallery, also the gallery of a lifelong friend, at the Belgian space of the distinguished gentleman scholar Alexis Kouzmine- Karavaïeff who I met in the linongs of Shanghai, scouring artists studios for new art!*

# SOME SPACE FOR HUMANITY – THE BABEL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE GAO BROTHERS

BY BÉRÉNICE ANGREMY, CRITIC & CURATOR (BEIJING, 2008)

is a story of human life as told by the Gao Brothers over the last few years through their photographs and currently exposed in the new premises of the ifa gallery.

Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang, who have worked under the name of the Gao Brothers in the Chinese contemporary art world since the middle of the 80s, no longer need to be introduced as they are already known in China and abroad as representatives of a movement which belongs only to them, that of the “outsiders” among the outsiders.

The central theme throughout the photographs in this exposition is the representation of closed space in which man is more or less inserted, with all his desires, frustrations, sorrows, dreams and nightmares. This space, which I call the “narrative”, takes the form a cupboard in a building abandoned mid-construction, of a bee hive whose countless cells all fit together, and of a totally digital composition in which the identically reproduced windows take on a Kafkaesque appearance. But it is always about a place in which man seems to be emotionally moved, waiting, abandoned, lost, excluded, squeezed, stifled, never completely free, and yet, oddly enough, never feeling really bad either. It’s almost as if each man is caught in a trap of his own making.

Looking at certain *Land Art* compositions and performances from the 90s, it is clear that the Gao Brothers were interested early on in the visual and psychological relationship of a body (whatever body that might be) with space. So, are these objects, colours and human bodies inserted in the earth’s faults, are they slotted into spaces left empty by nature or artificially by man? But it is only from 2000 onwards that the Gao Brothers will regularly bring buildings into their compositions, something they will do methodically through the medium of photography.

With “Sense of Space”, a series of six photographs of male subjects squeezed into the compartments of a cupboard, the concept of “narrative space” clearly comes out and remains apparent right up into their most recent work. This means that narrative is revealed thanks to space, its compartmentalisations and its possibilities. This surprising work of art, similar in its composition to small mystic paintings, is an allegory of certain human qualities – prayer, waiting, sufferance, cruelty, vigil, reading – these figures are isolated from each other and there is no possibility of interaction.

Several of the series of photographs use as inspiration a building abandoned mid-construction that the Gao Brothers photographed in 2000 in Jinan, their home town; and this same building will appear continually in the compositions and technical photomontages, forming the backdrop for “The Forever Unfinished Building”, “Embrace”, “Passage of Time” etc. The Gao Brothers are undoubtedly attracted by the romantic and mysterious aspects of a place deserted before ever having been finished, or by the aesthetic aspect of a place drawn with pure geometrical lines or even by the endless possibilities for narrative that such a site provides, open for all to see, without walls or windows. But this is especially about inserting their narrative into a social place, a building under construction, symbol of the social and urban changes that China is undergoing. This will be the starting point of a visual reflection on the value of human relationships in a socially disrupted world.

Narrative underlies the Gao Brothers work in all areas because it is not only each photo that is built on the narrative mode, but likewise the whole work of art becomes a story with several chapters. “The Forever Unfinished Building” is a story that we have followed for six years and which already has four volumes; “Utopia of Construction” and “Outer Space Project” are already into their third and sixth volumes respectively etc.

In the early stages of each series, each person photographed on the site is literally the centre of the work, and he is clearly seen showing all of his emotion (love, the desire to approach another person, or the discomfort of a hug, indifference etc.). Thus, in “Confrontation and Embrace”, we see the inner hesitations of two lovers by following them through the floors of an open, empty building. In “Utopia of the 20 minutes Embrace” we witness the absurd and moving attempt to embrace in a place that is deserted and eerie.

Then over the course of the digital mastering in the photomontage, man becomes part of the construction, while the narrative grows within the same photograph. Ever since the first “Forever Unfinished Building” which dates back to 2001, the Gao Brothers have flirted with digital techniques to increase the building and enrich the man/woman story that they have undertaken to tell us. In the N.2 episode our eye follows several stories which in turn seem to follow each other.

Technically, the latest works by the Gao Brothers don’t have anything to do with photography.

The multitude of images integrated in the stories being told in “Utopia of Construction”, in “Outer Space Project” or in “Forever Unfinished Building No. 4” come as much from their own supply of everyday photos, as from the Internet. So this is about personal snapshots and the so called information images which, for many, form part of our collective memory.

In the series “Utopia of Construction”, the men seem to be minute and enclosed in infinitely duplicated windows, each one in a building where you can no longer see the forms and outlines. A stylised version and just a bit more frightening than the real skyscrapers, all in glass, that have invaded Chinese cities, “Utopia of Construction” denounces the urban dreams created by urban creators and architects, devoid of any human meaning. The photo is not black and white but more of a grey to insist on this atmosphere, drained of any cheerfulness that reigns over a reign of programmed happiness. The “Outer Space Project”, a black and white series, also reproduces the same schema of infinitely multiplied schizophrenic housing, but here the image is of a hive with countless cells. The hive takes the form of a heart or even more exactly, the map of China, and this reminds us that our lives and happiness are conditioned, like that of the bees. The people in these two series are not necessarily sad, just take a closer look and you will see that they are, on the contrary, living, walking laughing, climbing the walls of their space and sometimes those who are lucky enough to be together, are holding hands or hugging. No, they really are alive in a sad and repetitive universe which they themselves have created.

We go from an impression of dehumanised world in “Utopia of Construction” to the representation of humanity in all its entirety in “Unforever Unfinished Building No. 4”. Take a close look at the details on the extraordinary fresco and you will see unfold the story of 20th and 21st century humanity, portrayed in a humoristic, sometimes satiric way. Chinese pinups and old men, soldiers and school children, workers, mafia and bureaucrats, worried nurses, blinded lucid minds and beggars, political and show business personalities, all social classes, all genders, all myths and beliefs, rub shoulders in this “painting of community life”. And so we recognise the iconic figure of Marilyn Monroe holding down her mythical, white dress, humbly plagiarized by a Chinese actress in a red dress, there is also Spiderman, a statue of The Great Helmsman in full movement, Ben Laden or the Dalai Lama. We witness solemn and sometimes sad scenes; a young woman

being arrested, the parents of the children who died in the awful earthquake in Sichuan. This mass of scenes is paced from earth to the heavens by athletes in actions which resemble more the performance of circus acts than sporting competitions. We feel uncontrollably immersed in the world of Jerome Bosch, a 15th century painter who portrayed seething scenes of crude and ugly people in expressive postures. The special effects of the compositions lead us to believe that all these scenes do not belong to the “real” world. However the Gao Brothers, who laboured for months over this photomontage, are fully aware to what extent their sources come from a realm that reflects our daily lives. And precisely like Bosch, their attention to detail reveals them as meticulous observers of reality.

In this photograph, as with others in this exposition, each scene seems to be cut off from the next; each person seems to be acting alone. Only the construction, this forever unfinished building, brings them all together

The Gao Brother compositions call to memory the Christian myth about Babel, this human building which led to chaos and the total confusion of humanity. According to Genesis the descendants of Noah were trying to build the tower of Babel in order to reach the heavens. There was such a multitude of languages that Babel became a place of total chaos. The men, in punishment for their sin of pride, were condemned to live the rest of their lives in a kingdom of confusion, one in which they could not understand each other. In the Gao Brothers’ works, the multiplicity of characters does not hide the isolation of each individual, all the more discernible precisely because they are together. The Gao compositions bring out the fact that perhaps we have built a 21st century Babel.

## “EMBRACE REALITY, SURPASS REALITY”

INTERVIEW BY FANG SHENYI, CRITIC (BEIJING 798 ART DISTRICT, 8 AUGUST 2008)

TRANSLATED BY STACEY DUFF & ZHANG QING

Fang Shengyi: In the international art world, it's not unusual for brothers to collaborate on artistic projects. But in China you are the only two brothers who have made art together and gained wide recognition as an art group. Why did you choose to present yourselves to the public as the “Gao Brothers”?

Gao Brothers: At the very beginning, we called ourselves the Gao Brothers for practical purposes – the character ‘Zhen’\* in my name “Gao Zhen” is often mispronounced by others and misspelled in magazines. Meanwhile, my brother's given name, ‘Qiang’, is extremely common. In those days, many people were already calling us the “Gao Brothers”, so we thought that the name was direct and clear. We'd been collaborating for many years, so using one name together was not only appropriate but also a way to avoid confusion.

Fang Shengyi: The “Gao Brothers” has become a recognizable name in the field of experimental and avant-garde art, so naturally, you'll continue to use this name. Have you considered promoting yourselves commercially?

Gao Brothers: We will continue to use this name. It's easy to recognize, but ultimately a name is just a symbol. Actually, our projects have been completely separate from commercial ventures for many years now, even though we've cooperated with commercial galleries. We have not considered introducing commercial ventures into our artistic projects, and we hope that our art maintains a spiritual quality that is independent of the latest trends in the art world.

Fang Shengyi: A lot of people are drawn, throughout their entire lives, to a certain career. It might be the calling of a destiny, or simply a strong will that make them so committed. You have devoted the past few decades to a career in art, and to the making of experimental and avant-garde artworks. What is your motivation?

Gao Brothers: We choose our own careers and destiny, but unique circumstances in our lives also made the choice for us. So it's a combination of choice and circumstance. I started out studying Chinese traditional painting, but I found the medium too formulaic to express the complexity of contemporary life. I was also writing a bit of poetry, and even got an official award for poetry writing. I don't write anymore, but I still read quite a bit of literature. In college, Gao Qiang was studying painting before he switched to become a literature major. After graduating from college, he started creating art again. Back then, we were in the midst of the 80s New Wave movement, and a lot of young artists were looking for new ways of artistic expression. Back in the 80s, there was no art market, and we were making art simply because we loved it. For us, art is a lifestyle. The choice of art as our career may also be determined by our personalities, which are probably not suited for other types of jobs.

Fang Shengyi: The style of any artist, that is, the visual quality of the artist's finished pieces, comes from a process of thinking and deliberation. Usually, an artist's growth is also influenced by existing artistic concepts. Which existing artistic concepts do you most identify with? What ideas and types of deliberation went into the making of your art that we see today?

Gao Brothers: I think Joseph Beuys marks a turning point in the whole of contemporary art history. Before Beuys came along, art was a closed system evolving within the boundaries of tradition, or orthodoxy. Beuys directed art towards social reality. To a certain extent, he saved art. But our artistic career was not guided by Beuys's ideas. In fact, back in the early 80s, we did not know who Beuys was. In a declaration for the "End-of-the-century Art Show", we wrote that art was for the purpose of living and surviving. Art should relate to social reality and express the sensation of living. These ideas were shaped, in part, by the unique social circumstances at the time.

Fang Shengyi: Right. As a member of the audience, I can clearly sense that your art engages with social reality, and exerts an influence on social reality. Someone once said that "the meaning of art does not lie within itself, but within its influence on society". What's your take on this view?

Gao Brothers: We believe it's a matter of different perspectives. Some people focus on the innate structure of art; some emphasize the influence of art on society. As far as we are concerned, art is an open system. Depending on the form or method you use, your art takes on a different look. It's like a language. There are a variety of expressions you can use, but you've got to know the grammar well.

Fang Shengyi: Some people think that your work, "World Hug Day", has extended beyond the category of art. It also seems to be an ongoing project. Your recent work, "Forever Unfinished Building", features huge and desolate construction sites. Does the work have any metaphorical implications?

Gao Brothers: "World Hug Day" is an experimental art different from our previous works, both in methods of creation and exhibition. The work truly combines everyday life with art. We like to see it as Internet-related behavioral art. On September 10, 2000, we gathered a hundred and fifty volunteers in Jinan to implement a performance art project called "A Utopia of 20-Minute Embrace". Later we proposed on the Internet to name the 10th of September "World Hug Day", which received enthusiastic responses from people all around the world. During the past few years, we have been invited to implement "World Hug Day" performance art projects in Britain, France, Germany and Japan. We will continue to do this project until "World Hug Day" becomes universally recognized and accepted.

In 2000, when we first did the "Hug" performance in Jinan, we came across a huge, unfinished and abandoned building. Later we created the "Forever Unfinished Building" series, based on what we saw in Jinan. In our opinion, the series epitomizes contemporary China. Compared to Western countries, which have constructed relatively mature social and legal systems, China is like one unfinished building still undergoing construction, and no one can predict what this modern tower called China will look like when it's finally completed. No one knows when it will be finished, or what price people will have to pay to get it finished. We don't have a clue as to how the blueprint was designed, and whether there is any kind of rationale behind that design. Of course China is not isolated, but connected to the rest of the world; so in our recent "Forever Unfinished Building No. 4", we included images of international figures and events in the work.

Gao Brothers: If we have to look at what we've done in terms of stages, our artistic career has in fact passed through four stages. The first stage was around 1985 when we "stepped out of the tradition". We employed expressionist and surrealist styles to create visual imagery with an end-of-the-century feel. This was a transitional period for us. After 1988, we started creating experimental art. Our participating piece in the Chinese Modern Art Exhibition, "Mass at Midnight", as well as other installation works from the "Inflatable" series, marked a new stage in our artistic career. We began to form an original artistic vocabulary, a taste for experimental materials, as well as an attitude of insubordination, both politically and culturally. "The Art of

the Copy Machine” was created in the early 90s. The work utilized technology to strengthen the theme of political criticism. The third stage started in the mid 90s, when we tried to achieve in art a sense of spiritual transcendence and restructuring. We spent over two years working on the installation series entitled “The Great Crucifix”, which drew the attention of quite a few art critics and literary academics. During the same period, we also created artworks ranging from performance art to photography and on-site installations, such as “Mass on the Square” and “Installation on Tiananmen Square”. From the end of 90s till today – the fourth stage of our artistic career – we’ve been using performance and photography as the major media for creation. Most influential works created in this stage are “A Sense of Space” and the “Hug” series, which includes “A Utopia of 20-minute Embrace”, “World Hug Day” and “The Hugs of 20 Hired Staff” among others. The making of these works involved performance, photography, video and the Internet. Beginning from 2006, we introduced sculpture as another major element in our artistic vocabulary, and created sculpture pieces such as “Miss Mao”, “Catch the Miss”, and “The Wave of the Hand”. Though throughout these four stages, we experimented with different materials and different methods of artistic creativity, the focus of our art has always been to observe reality and transcend it.

Fang Shengyi: Today we see a lot of art practitioners who are earnestly hoping to obtain approval from the system or from certain interest groups. Why have you chosen to stay independent? The problem of survival is a problem everyone has to face. For the past twenty years China’s art market was only beginning to mature, without depending on the government, or the system, how did you manage to get by and fund your projects?

Gao Brothers: The system is ubiquitous. We were once also a part of the system, so we know how the system damages individuals. We are not willing to attach our lives – lives we only get to live once – to some system or organization, nor can we tolerate the oppression exercised by the system and the organization on individual freedom. Our family education taught us that “a man of honor does not join cliques”, and we still cling to that belief. As for the problem of survival, we have been rather lucky. We started cooperating with galleries since 2000, and we haven’t had any major difficulties with making a living and funding our own projects. Of course, financially, we are doing better today than before.

Fang Shengyi: What do you think is the most important quality about a work of art? Is it its Chinese characteristics, or its international appeal, or the individuality of the artist as reflected in the work? What do you think of the Orientalist tendency in art?

Gao Brothers: Individuality is naturally the most important. Chinese characteristics and international appeals are only byproducts of a work’s individuality. We believe that individuality comes from an artist’s lived experiences, and it is individuality that makes an artwork true, unique, unrepeatable and irreplaceable. Artists do not need to look for so-called “Chinese characteristics”. “Chinese characteristics”, as well as “the Chinese card”, “the Chinese way” and “the Chinese experience” – these are all phrases art theorists write in their summary reports on a Chinese art scene. Such phrasing is a strategy aimed at strengthening national competition in the international culture arena. Culture, like sport, is a competition that the collective Chinese have to win. Concern over art’s Chinese characteristics will eventually hurt the artist’s individuality and independence. When we create, we never stop to wonder if the work looks Chinese or not. It is the feelings and thoughts we get from real life that are most important and most deserve our respect. For Chinese artists to look for Chinese characteristics in art is as silly as looking for donkeys when you are already riding one.

Orientalism is a confused concept. Said’s orientalism is a discourse about the “Orient” invented by Europe according to European cultural logic. It is an idea of the Orient that satisfies the cultural needs of the West. Plainly put, the West indulges in a collective daydream about the East. Orientalism in the vocabulary of art criticism simply means that a work has a certain oriental, exotic flavor. For artists from both east and West,

the pursuit of exoticism should not be taken as a serious endeavor in art. Such a pursuit is simply boring, tasteless and childish, and only works for equally boring and tasteless businesses like foreign trade and tourism. We prefer art that reflects the individuality of the artist, while also relating meaningfully to a universal audience. The essence of orientalism and exoticism in artworks is strategizing. These works lack basic artistic integrity, and do not relate to our cultural reality in any truthful manner.

*\*Gao Zhen's given name, Zhen (甄), is a rarely used character and even many educated Chinese will not recognize it at first glance [trans. note].*

# INTERVIEW

BY BÉRÉNICE ANGREMY & JASMINE CHANG (BEIJING 798 ART DISTRICT, 13 AUGUST 2008)

TRANSLATED BY STACEY DUFF & ZHANG QING

**Bérénice Angremy:** The show we are cooperating on today is a continuation of themes you have been working on previously, namely “space” and “humanity.”. When did you feel that the meaning of space was included in your artistic thinking? Did it begin in 2000 with the series “A Sense of Space”? Had you thought about similar themes prior to your 2000 series?

**Gao Brothers:** “A Sense of Space” is a work we did in 2000. Before that, although we did not use space as a particular theme in our art, the sense of individuality and space has always been present, and quite deeply so. When we were kids, all six brothers had to share one bed, that was our first memory of space. Later, the sense of space expanded into a social setting. Between 1989 and 2003, we were not allowed to leave the country. At one point this made us so anxious that we considered leaving illegally. The year the Venice Biennale invited us to do our “The Utopia of Hugging” performance, we could not get a passport. It felt a little like Kafka’s novel, *The Castle*. Later, we were invited to participate in the International Photography Festival in Rome. We tried to get passports again, and it almost finished in a lawsuit with the police. But after a few days they told us to pick up our passports.

**Jasmin Chang:** How did you feel when you finally had passports? Did that experience inspire any of your works?

**Gao Brothers:** At that time, we could not quite believe it. It felt so surreal. When the authorities gave us our passports, they also gave us a briefing. They asked us to promise not to do anything against the government. We said, “Your imagination is even wilder than ours. The only thing we can promise is that we will not lie.” This was during the SARS epidemic, so we ended up not going to the show in Rome. Back when we were planning to leave the country illegally, we thought about turning the whole process into a work of art. But we decided against it. In the end we did not want to take that kind of risk. Perhaps it would have been a success, but then we would not have been able to return to China. That would have been even more unbearable; after all, this was our place. Later we were allowed to go anywhere in the world without having to worry about not being able to return. Only once we had actually been in another country did we realize our unshakeable affection for our own place. For us, obtaining a passport is a basic right. When that right was taken away from us, we felt closed in. Going abroad in and on itself is not that important. But as artists, of course we hoped to have the chance to communicate with the international art community. Also, shows we were holding on the Mainland were often banned. We thought that this situation might never change, it showed us how absurd reality was.

**Bérénice Angremy:** Can you talk about your experience before and after you created the works “The Forever Unfinished Building” and “Sense of Space”? Do these works have any connection with your relationship to the world and your position in it?

**Gao Brothers:** The idea for “The forever Unfinished building” grew out of the “Hug/ Embrace” series. “The Utopia of the 20 minutes Embrace” was first created on the banks of the Yellow River. Then we took our volunteers to Jinan. In Jinan, we saw a building abandoned in mid-construction, just on the shore of Lake Daming. We felt that it had a metaphorical quality, not unlike contemporary China. For so many years, China

has been undergoing a destruction and re-construction process. The whole country looks like a building endlessly in the making. We used that space in Jinan as a site for our photography. We went there a lot. But the images in the final artwork were taken at different times and places, they are not all from that specific building. “The Forever Unfinished Building” is also related to “A Sense of Space”, as it also expresses the relationship between people and space. “A Sense of Space” is a combination of symbolic architecture, involving not only physical space, but also, and even more so, spiritual space. “The Forever Unfinished Building” pushed the idea of “A Sense of Space” one step further, it incorporates more social elements.

Jasmin Chang: I think that a study of space is also a study of human nature. How do you define human space? How do you define a social space? And does your sense of space relate to a sense of frustration between fantasy and reality?

Gao Brothers: Unfinished architecture is a metaphor for a Chinese reality. China is like a huge construction site. Its political ideology or economic status, social system, and urban design are all in an unfinished state. On the other hand, unfinished architecture is also a metaphor for humanity’s incomplete life process. In its incomplete construction, contemporary China is distinct from the rest of the world. When you are in an unfinished, dilapidated building, you feel desolate – old and abandoned. You also sense danger. There are traps everywhere, you have no protection.

Jasmin Chang: In your “Forever Unfinished Building” work, you found a form of narration, and were able to reflect social reality in a microcosm. What is interesting is that your works with nudity are often banned, but politically sensitive works like “Forever Unfinished Building” – because of their microcosmic narrative – are often overlooked by censors, and you can show these works in galleries. But the social reality which is expressed cannot be discussed. What were you focusing on when you created the No. 4 piece in 2008?

Gao Brothers: “The Forever Unfinished Building, No. 4” includes images from several sources including the Wenchuan earthquake, forced child labor at brick kilns in the Shanxi Province, the Tiananmen Incident, the Dalai Lama, Marilyn Monroe, scenes from the film “Lust: Caution”, our friends, the President of the EU who came to visit our studio, some social events we read about on the Internet, and the work also has an image of Jesus Christ at the top, and one of Koons’ “Heart” at the bottom. We also put in some Buddhist imagery. We feel that China should have a faith, a spiritual faith which can act as a moral anchor. Our work combines reality and unreality in order to reflect contemporary China. We want to express that the reality we see seems good on the surface: the country is in a state of sustained development. But on a microcosmic level, there are lots of problems, and much chaos. It feels like the classical painting, “The Festival of Pure Brightness”\*. But we are not pessimistic people. This piece is an extension of another project we did earlier called “How Far Can You Walk In One Day in Beijing?” In that project, we went around for a whole day, talking with beggars on buses and migrant workers. We wanted to leave the future with a snapshot of the present. As time passes, the information in the snapshot will become more and more important.

Jasmin Chang: How does the material you choose express your ideas?

Gao Brothers: We get a lot of our material from the news. For a variety of reasons, many images we see there make their way into our work. We do not read contemporary fiction, if you read news from the Sina website\*\*, you will find that China is so strange and so surreal a place, it is beyond the imagination of any artist or writer, and so much more absurd. There are also compositional considerations – how to arrange

things, what to place at the top, and what at the bottom. If it is a group of people, we have to consider the relationship between these people. Some people ask us why we do not hire an assistant. But assistants will not do. Someone once said: the only thing that lasts is chaos.

Bérénice Angremy: Your earlier works were romantic but also serious. In the past few years however, there seems to be more and more humor in your work. A mixture of carnival and theater, sometimes bordering on drama. Why is that? Does humor lend itself to your work? Or are you expressing a cynical attitude toward society?

Gao Brothers: A sense of humor is essential. Without it, life would be difficult. Humor is a way to make life palatable, it also allows art to be distinguished from dogma, and lends flexibility to the composition process. In reality, humor can be a state of tension and seriousness; things can actually be both funny and grave. We have to balance these two extremes so that humor does not distract one from the theme. “The Forever Unfinished Building” is rich in detail – the composition is forceful. Details which contrast with each other are like musical notes. When we started the project, we did not know what it would lead to. We just felt that architecture could be transformed into something metaphorical. It was like playing a game of chess. An image that we began with would be replaced by another image – image by image, piece by piece. It is not that our earlier works were humorless. For example, “Miss Mao” was cute and horrific at the same time, it symbolized China’s new generation. Sometimes, we do not create an image to either criticize or be humorous. We simply hope that the images we create have a unique quality. Through deconstruction and appropriation, a fixed image can become subtle and ambiguous. Some people say that free-thinking intellectuals today should be wise and have a strong moral commitment, like Vaclav Havel, a politician with a modern mind. Eastern Europe has sustained some individualism and freedom even though it has undergone the purge of Communism. In comparison, Chinese intellectuals are frivolous. In the West, intellectuals have more allusions to draw on – it might have something to do with the background of Christianity.

Bérénice Angremy: Since the 80s, you have been very active artists. You have worked with sculpture, installation, and today have turned to photography. When and why did you focus on photography?

Gao Brothers: In 1989, we exhibited an installation work. Because part of it was banned, we had to photograph the prohibited segment and show it as a picture. The picture was later published in an art magazine, and many people thought that the effect of the photograph itself was good. In the mid-90s, we consciously started to use photography to create art. In Ai Weiwei’s *White Book*, we began taking photographs centered on the Mao portrait in Tiananmen. Because photography is more direct and realistic, it is more consistent with the themes we want to express. It is also more modern. All the possibilities of painting have been exhausted.

Bérénice Angremy: What has digital technology brought to your art?

Gao Brothers: The computer has liberated photography. The visual effects achieved by painting can be achieved by photography as well. Photography is also a freer and more spontaneous medium. But still, we try to limit the use of technology because if the technology is too obvious, it detracts from the themes the work is trying to express. “The Forever Unfinished Building ” expresses a sense of chaos. “The Utopia of the 20 minute embrace” expresses a sense of order and separation. It is an extension of “A Sense of Space.” “Utopia” expresses our understanding of space, how to utilize space within a limited frame, the relationship of space with nature. In reality, people are interacting within a limited space: physically, spiritually and also socially. In fact, “Utopia” is an anti-Utopian work.

Bérénice Angremy: Once, I compared your “Forever Unfinished Building No. 4” to Jerome Bosch. You did not like that comparison. Is it because you simply do not like to be compared?

Gao Brothers: We do not want to get stuck with a fixed formula. As far we are concerned, art is a way to obtain freedom, we do not much care about unified styles. We have always felt that if an artist keeps creating with the same formula, the artist is simply conforming to commercial demands. No game can be played over and over again and still be interesting.

Bérénice Angremy: How do you view Jerome Bosch?

Gao Brothers: We are classicists by nature. We like classical music and Michelangelo. Artists like him are not just clever. You can sense through his work that he contains the whole world in his heart. Classic artists are not characterless, but they are good at hiding their own personality. Character is not necessarily an issue, but if artists focus too much on their individual character, it is like when a cat is walking around with an erect tail just to show off. It is also unnecessary for artists to emphasize a Chinese quality. Doing so shows an anxiety over one’s own identity, a lack of confidence in the face of a dominant culture. An individual simply expresses his feelings and ideas to God.

Bérénice Angremy: Do you feel that as a creator you have a responsibility towards the existing society?

Gao Brothers: Yes, of course. We always feel that by working in culture, we have a social responsibility. We cannot go to extremes. We cannot intrude on others with our own pursuit of freedom. Our work expresses the relationship between ourselves and others...between ourselves and society. The work does not need to be labeled. The social responsibility we are talking about is more like a civic consciousness. We should always know where we stand. People ask us, “How are you doing?” We say, “Not bad.” People ask, “How are the Chinese doing?” We cannot say, “Not bad.” We do not like to be represented or to represent others. Every individual is a unique life. Whoever represents another person is canceling the life of that person. Some people who stand as intellectuals do not speak with any sense of responsibility. We know our place, and we are normal people. It is just that in an abnormal society, the normal becomes abnormal. Society is not well regulated, the bad becomes the good. In this society, basic judgments and commonsense knowledge are easily confused.

Jasmin Chang: How do you balance artistic creation and responsibility?

Gao Brothers: We rarely use artistic creation to justify our responsibilities. We make discoveries and we incorporate the reality we see into our art. The word *creation* sanctifies this process.

Bérénice Angremy: How do you look upon China’s contemporary art market?

Gao Brothers: The market is not mature yet. There is a so-called “For Others” market – with Westerners as the major buyers. The Chinese have not developed a taste for buying art, they are still learning to appreciate it – one step at a time. Generally speaking, we feel that the media is giving the market too much hype. It is a market which should develop at its own pace. But now it has become the only place where there is excitement about art. Artists should not focus too much on it. It is really frustrating to see that the market has become the only benchmark by which to judge the value of art.

Bérénice Angremy: Do you think the art market has helped you gain recognition abroad – and only abroad?

Gao Brothers: We are relatively lucky. Our work sells. It does not matter whether we get recognition at home or abroad, the world has become a global village. But on the other hand, we hope our work will sell more evenly, both abroad and here at home. We are still at the early stages during which Chinese art is gaining attention and momentum. If our work could be sold without being labeled or categorized, it would be a more normal situation.

Bérénice Angremy: How do you explain that many of the viewers who most identify with your work are from the West?

Gao Brothers: This is a very practical matter. Many of our works are banned in China, and we are relatively passive about it. Many overseas collectors invite us to participate in shows abroad. But actually some of our work would be more appropriate here, because it depicts the reality here. It is quite a dilemma. On the other hand, works like “A Sense of Space” express a spiritual oppression which is universal. We create from the perspective of our own living environment. As for whom identifies with the work, that is up to the audience to decide.

Bérénice Angremy: Do you think the colonialist attitudes of Western viewers which critics were discussing ten years ago are still relevant today?

Gao Brothers: We should face this so-called Colonialism with some detachment. Evoking this colonialist argument makes us seem fragile. If today we still think of the West as an enemy, we are much too diffident, as if the West was up to some conspiracy. As far as we know, most people who buy our work do so because they personally like it. For example, Uli Sigg bought our work. We did not see that he had any specific plan. He looked at the work for a long time and he bought it. He did not choose to do so because of some cultural strategy. Many people, when they are buying art, are not influenced by institutions. The “conspiracy theories” are a continuation of a Cold War mentality. If we look at the positive side, the West has developed democracy and modern thought. It has brought us into this game. What is so bad about that?

Bérénice Angremy: We often see you around in 798 Art District. At the same time, we feel that you are somewhat detached from the art scene there. It seems like you intend to remain in the margins of it. Is that so? If yes, why?

Gao Brothers: We seldom think in terms of cliques and try to avoid them. There are a lot of spaces here that we have never been to. People come to hang out in our space, and we welcome them. We have a very diverse group of friends, many of them come from outside the art world. People in the art world tend to be simplistic, we cannot seem to communicate with them. Some of our friends are writers and intellectuals who focus on social issues. Those are the ones we get along better with.

Jasmin Chang: What have you been busy with recently?

Gao Brothers: We are working on several projects. In the flea market in Moscow, we bought a bust of Lenin. Next year, in Lyon, there is an exhibition called “Conversations with the Former Soviet Union”. We bought the bust and did not want to sell it again. We made a much bigger one – five meters tall. Inside the bust, we have installed a video. We are also considering to make the story of Lin Zhao into an artwork.

\* The artists here are referring to 清明上河, sometimes translated as “Life Along the River During the Festival of Pure Brightness”, composed by the Northern Song painter, Zhang Zeduan [trans. note].

\*\* [www.sina.com](http://www.sina.com) is a popular website providing news, email and blog services in China, much like Yahoo [trans.note].