Bye Bye to an Art Boom

Perhaps it would look great in an amusement park, but the 70-foot-long, shiny blue brontosaurus with a big smiling face is grotesque at the Shanghai Biennale, which opened in early September 2008, less than a month after the Olympics ended. Shanghai is packed with visitors, buoyed by the tourist industry surrounding the games in this city that is itself preparing for the 2010 World Expo. I have come full circle, back to the city where my China adventure began. I've seen a lot in just four years—some of it amazing, some of it awful—but I'm still hopeful that I will find something thrilling amid all the art on view. Instead, I am confronted by this big, bright, and ugly monstrosity that sums up one strain of Chinese contemporary art that I would prefer to forget.

The dinosaur is the creation of Yue Minjun, known for paintings, and occasionally, sculptures of himself with a broad smile on his face. Now, he has put his grinning head on the bodies of an absurd herd of Paleolithic
creatures. Made of stainless steel and copper, the sculptures range in size from mammoth to miniature, leading an American visitor, I overheard, to mutter, "He's hit every price point." Pace Beijing issues a press release stating that the sculptures were produced with its support though it doesn't divulge the cost of the project or its price. Who would want one of these monstrosities? In an art world that celebrates Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, an ironic use of kitsch—stainless steel balloon doggies or diamond encrusted skulls—is a proven way of grabbing the attention of critics and collectors. But here in China, where emperors once ruled, I am reminded of the phrase, "the emperor's new clothes," unconvinced that Yue's sculpture, despite its prestigious financial backing, is a breakthrough.

The booming art market is never far from my thoughts given that the spring of 2008 was a record season in sales of Chinese contemporary art. Sotheby's and Christie's brought in a combined total of nearly $100 million in sales of Asian contemporary art in New York and Hong Kong, a total that includes art from Japan and Korea, but the majority comes from China. During the same period, mainland auction leader Guardian sold $40 million worth of contemporary art and Poly, its main competitor, made $27 million, plus both houses raised over $20 million from special sales in support of the survivors of the Sichuan earthquake. In the course of these auctions, new records were set for a string of Chinese artists with Zhang Xiaogang's top price rising to $6.1 million at the Sotheby's Hong Kong sale of the Estella Collection in April, trailing the $9.6 million that went for a painting by Beijing artist Zeng Fanzhi at Christie's Hong Kong in May and $8.2 million for "Hedbed No. 1" by Liu Xiaodong at Guardian, also in May. The Chinese art scene had become synonymous with auction fever and the prices were celebrated as proof that Chinese artists were now worthy of worldwide critical acclaim, the cultural equivalent of Olympic gold medalists.

The success of the market could be felt even at the Shanghai Biennale, which I hoped would reflect an independent spirit, highlighting artists that had not yet been tagged by auctioneers. This year's theme is Translocalmotion organized by artistic director Zhang Qing from the Shanghai Art Museum with European curators Julian Heynen from Germany and Henk Slager from the Netherlands, who took the time to make sure that the show was well installed. As with any exhibition of this breadth, there are things to like, especially a soft-sculpture of an airplane, made of canvas over a metal frame, large enough to accommodate visitors in its cockpit. It is made by female artist Yin Xiuzhen who shows at Beijing Commune and who was featured at the China Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, curated by Hou Hanru. But, unfortunately, even the best works in Translocalmotion are overshadowed by Yue Minjun's dinosaurs, which dominate the second floor of the museum.

The Shanghai Biennale in 2000 inspired a host of radical satellite exhibitions with artists going out of their way to challenge both homegrown censors and foreign visitors. The 2008 edition is tamer and the shows around the city aim to capitalize on the event without ruffling sensibilities. Across People's Park from the Shanghai Art Museum, curator Victoris Lu has assembled an exhibition of young artists at MOCA Shanghai titled Butterfly Dream. Obsessed with Japanese anime, this generation seems anxious to follow in the footsteps of the Japanese art world superstar Takashi Murakami who has branded his images onto luxury goods as well as his paintings and sculptures. A more meditative artwork is installed at the gallery Shanghart, where dealer Lorenz Helbling is featuring a new video installation by Yang Fudong called East of Our Village, which trains a camera on a pack of wild dogs scavenging for food from animal carcasses in a poor rural town in northern China. This work, slated to be shown at Marian Goodman gallery in New York in 2009, at least reminds viewers of a part of China not benefiting from the economic boom taking place in the cities. At the Zendai Museum, Leng Lin, who continues to operate Beijing Commune even as he has assumed his position as president of Pace Beijing, curated a retrospective of the artist Song Dong, husband of Yin Xiuzhen and a frequent participant in international biennials. His career—once relegated to underground exhibitions in Beijing East Village—
has skyrocketed. His installation, Waste Not, made of hundreds of objects his mother accumulated during her lifetime in a courtyard house, will fill the atrium of New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2009.

The only show in Shanghai that delivers a shock is British artist Yinka Shonibare at the new hot spot, the James Cohan Gallery, a branch of the New York dealership that has recently opened in the French Concession. Shonibare specializes in headless mannequins, dressed in 19th-century European garb fashioned from textiles associated with Africa, a critique of British colonialism in another continent. In Shanghai, these sculptures displayed in the ground floor of an art deco house that used to be a doctor's office, fill the foot floors and modernist design flourish on the doors and windows, clash with the 21st-century skyscrapers of the surrounding city. As I leave I see red characters above the front door, which Arthur Solway, the gallery director, tells me read "Let the spirit of Mao Zedong flourish for 10,000 years."

At the opening night of Butterfly Dream at MOCA Shanghai, I run into Hou Hanru, the energetic jet-setting curator who turned the Shanghai Biennale in 2000 into an international event. I ask him what he thinks of this generation of Chinese artists with their cutsey cartoon characters and commercial ambition. "No comment," he answers with a grin on his face. "Well, what do you think of the biennial?" I ask him. "I fucking invented the Shanghai Biennale so what am I supposed to say," he quickly replies. "No comment, no comment."

At the Starbucks on People's Park, I keep meeting people I know from the United States, who are in town not only for the Biennale but also for ShContemporary, an international art fair inaugurated in September 2007. Biennales are curated shows that generally take place in art museums, whereas art fairs are commercial events, gathering together dealers who pay a fee to present their artists. In its first year, ShContemporary ran into problems when one of the fair's organizers, Swiss dealer Pierre Huber, took unfair advantage of his position when he put a work from his personal collection on the cover of the fair's catalogue and then took European collectors to Chinese artist's studios, demanding a cut of any resulting sales. Huber put his own financial interests ahead of those of the galleries participating in the fair, One participating dealer, Enrico Navarre (who already was in a dispute with Huber) sued him for his actions and ShContemporary fired him. Now, under the direction of Lorenzo Rudolf and the Italian exhibition company Bologna Fiere, the fair in its second edition has attracted more international dealers than any other like it in Asia. It is considered a testing ground—will Chinese collectors pony up for western contemporary art?—with over 150 dealers hoping to find the Chinese Charles Saatchi.

ShContemporary is held at the Shanghai Exhibition Center, a 1955 Soviet-designed gingerbread confection that is as inhospitable to contemporary art as the Shanghai Art Museum is ill-suited for the biennial. In the fountain outside the center stood a monumental stainless steel scholar's rock by Zhan Wang, who is shamelessly posing in front of his work for collectors arriving at the scene. Inside the vast exhibition space, I find many galleries from New York—Lehmann Maupin, Max Protetch, Jack Tilton, Arthur Solway of James Cohan's Shanghai annex—all waiting for the Chinese buyers to arrive. Jack Tilton's booth has a gigantic sculpture of a naked woman titled Virgin by a female Chinese artist named Xiang Jing, priced at $750,000. He looks anxious as he waits for collectors to show up, as do the other participating galleries in the mostly empty halls. Pace Wildenstein's booth, manned by a team of gallery directors including Leng Lin, has the most interesting approach, showing works by western artists that have the look of artworks from Asia, for example, a Pop art rendition of a scroll painting made by Roy Lichtenstein.

ShContemporary is one of four art fairs that are held in China, all of them trying to compete with the auction houses for a share of the booming art market, but with mixed results. I have just come from Art Beijing, one of two fairs held in the capital city every year, the other being China
International Gallery Exposition or CIGE. Neither has yet managed to attract the international roster of dealers found at ShContemporary but they may be making better inroads with the Chinese collectors, appealing to their tastes with more accessible examples of art by middle-of-the-road Chinese artists. I thought the paintings at Art Beijing looked like those found in hotel rooms, pretty pictures of young girls and slightly impressionistic landscapes. But, the opening was packed, with lines streaming out from the exhibition center into the adjoining park. ShContemporary has works by many artists familiar to me, as a New Yorker, but new to audiences in China. Despite big banners on the street and an extensive ad campaign in the local press, attendance is weak. Far more successful is the fair that I attended in Hong Kong, HK 08, in May 2008. For one thing, the Hong Kong fair did not have to contend with the 34 percent luxury tax on sales of art that exists in mainland China. As a result, it lured good galleries from Europe and the United States and the dealers succeeded at selling artworks with price tags in the $1 million range. The buyers came not only from the mainland China, but from Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan, where collectors have been following western contemporary art movements for some time. Few of these Asian collectors are visible at ShContemporary.

The night of the opening of ShContemporary, Pearl Lam hosts a dinner party at her penthouse apartment at 41 Hengshan Road. As always, she has gathered a mix of international power brokers whom I rarely have the chance to meet on my home turf. That evening I find myself talking with three fair directors—ShContemporary’s Lorenzo Rudolf, Art Basel’s Marc Spiegler and Matthew Slotover from Frieze in London. Jeremy Strick, the director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art is chatting with Jerome Sans of the Ullens Center. American collectors Don and Mera Rubell are discussing their disappointment in the Biennale with Melissa Chiu, the director of the Asia Society Museum in New York. Pearl is running late and the Rubells are running out of patience, complaining of standing for nearly an hour before we are invited to sit down at 10 pm for dinner. "It certainly shows that it’s a big world out there," Don Rubell tells me when I ask how he likes the fair,
but it is clear that he is unimpressed by what he’s seen. It’s amazing that Pearl has time to organize these parties—she’s throwing one every night this week given that her gallery, Contrasts, also has a booth at the fair. She was there all day, drinking diet Coke and promoting her latest discovery, Iranian artists. Meanwhile, at night, she choreographs her guests, changing the seating plan with each course, to make sure to keep the conversation flowing.

Despite Beijing’s extensive gallery scene, its auction houses and art fairs, Shanghai is still the city that draws foreigners to China. The reaction of the first-time visitors at the party is the same mixture of excitement and amazement that I once felt about this city where you can find a cricket market just a block from the Shanghai Art Museum. David Velasco, a writer from Artforum magazine, tells me, “I can see that I’ll have to come back here again soon.” But I detect a note of caution—even fear—from those who have already invested in the Chinese art scene, the dealers and fair directors on hand, disappointed by the quality of the art on view at the Shanghai Biennale and the poor turnout this first day at the fair. Is this bubble about to burst?

There is a disconnect between the fantastic possibilities that China’s art scene has to offer—new artists, new museums and a potential pool of new millionaire art collectors—and the reality that it has delivered. The lights are already out in the Shanghai skyline after midnight when the party departs for its next destination, an installation by artist Qiu Anxiong that Contrasts gallery is sponsoring in a 4,000-sq.-ft. converted factory in an industrial park. Qiu, who became a sensation at Art Basel in May with his Cultural Revolution films installed in a full-scale train, has filled the space with an army of 300 identical grey terracotta bull terriers. Outside the warehouse hangs a neon sign with the show’s title, “We are the World.” As Lam explains, the installation is the artist’s response to the arrogance of a French artist who had commissioned Chinese workers to fabricate similar statues of dogs, then didn’t pay them what he had promised, complaining that the craftsmanship was not up to par. Qiu made an exact replication of the workshop that produced French artist’s commission—with the craftsmen working on site—in order to make a statement about the exploitation of Chinese workers by international companies. At this hour, the workers are gone, but we can see the production line that would be operating during the day. In their absence, the installation is a silent reminder of the cheap labor and low cost production available in China that has not only benefited foreign companies but Chinese artists as well. The same economic conditions have made it possible for Yue Minjun to create his team of colorful dinosaurs, or for Qiu Anxiong to make this critical statement. But, it would be rude to raise this issue at the end of a very long, very lively evening in the company of Pearl Lam. Instead, I enjoy a moment in this industrial space in the middle of the night in Shanghai, happy that at least one Chinese artist on this visit is taking on a political issue.

Six months later, in February 2009, I am back in China and the climate has changed considerably from that humid, effervescent evening in Shanghai. I am in Beijing and it is cold, though I’ve missed the snow by a week. The economic climate has also changed—the world financial crisis is taking its toll on China’s export market, as well as the international art market. I’ve come from New York where the Chelsea gallery district is depressing, with very few collectors trudging through the streets in the bleak winter weather. Beijing is always quiet at this time of year, just weeks after the Chinese New Year celebrations and months before things pick up again at the beginning of April. I wonder how my friends are faring here, given the stark drop in the market for Chinese contemporary art. Sotheby’s, for one, terminated its New York sale of Asian contemporary art this fall, holding a single event in Hong Kong in October, which brought in a comparatively low $11 million, less than 25 percent of its total of $52 million for three sales of Chinese contemporary art in Hong Kong the previous spring. Poly and Guardian are suffering too. Poly brought in a total of only $58.5 million for its fall season, in comparison to $151.7 million in the previous spring. Guardian sold just $52 million for the fall, dropping its contemporary side from its schedule entirely, in contrast to $210.4 million in the spring. As I ride in the taxi from the airport, I prepare
to hear the worst from Beijing dealers, based on accounts circulating in New York that galleries are closing at 7% and that artists are abandoning their mansions and leaving Beijing in droves.

As I did on my first trip to China, I am staying with Meg Maggio who now has her own gallery, Pekin Fine Arts, in the Caocangdi section of Beijing. When I first saw Caocangdi in 2004, it was little more than a rural village with muddy streets leading up to Ai Weiwei’s compound. The area has been transformed into a trendy gallery district, far more sophisticated than the more commercial 798, with wide paved roads and free-standing exhibition spaces. The better establishments—Boers-Li, Urs Meile, Alexander Ochs, Shanghart, Korean gallery Do Art (now closed), New York gallery Chambers Fine Art, and Beijing Art Now Gallery—have all moved into Caocangdi, practically all of them in buildings created by Ai Weiwei. Pekin Fine Art is located within a development of 19 buildings, also planned by Ai Weiwei, rows of grey bunkers, imposing and austere from the outside. The interior of Pekin Fine Arts is impressive with a central entrance opening on to two opposing exhibition rooms, both double story high. Upstairs, Maggio has created two living quarters, one for herself and one for guests, where I am comfortably situated for this one-week stay.

Always the art ambassador, Maggio wants to make sure that I don’t have the wrong impression of the downturn in the Chinese art market. “I’ve sold five paintings since the beginning of the year,” she says, sitting behind the computer in her office surrounded by photographs by Wang Qing Song and Zhang Huan. These are for sale, but reflect Maggio’s buying habits at a time earlier in her career when Chinese artists had few other choices for a dealer in Beijing. Now, her gallery stable includes artists from other parts of Asia. The garden behind the gallery is decorated with fake red blossoms, twisted onto branches of the trees in the backyard, a piece by the Korean artist, Choi Jeong Hwa. Maggio is in the midst of installing a show by Taiwanese artist Huang Zhiyang, a room full of bronze pods covered in gold leaf resting on a floor embedded with LED lights. These are top artists in their home countries and Maggio has found them far easier to manage than the Chinese artists who used to be her primary focus but have since transferred their allegiance to Chinese-born dealers. Wang Qing Song shows with China Blue, Lin Tianmiao is represented by Long March Space, and many other artists that Maggio introduced me to when she was director at Courtyard Gallery now work with other galleries. But, as Beijing has grown into a hub for collectors from throughout Asia, Maggio has capitalized on this trend by expanding her roster of artists to mirror this development.

After settling in with Maggio, I need to see Zhang Fang and fortunately, Wang Qing Song’s studio is just two buildings down from Pekin Fine Arts within this gated complex. I bundle my coat around me as I make my way through the chilly grey brick street to the artist’s front door. As soon as she sees me, Zhang Fang offers coffee and sends one of the studio assistants out to buy milk. They have a new espresso machine that they want to show off, the kind that takes aluminum capsules of coffee and spits out a single cup in a minute. Another assistant is busy preparing a meal, chopping vegetables and heating oil in a wok on the stove. Wang Qing Song’s studio is almost the size of Pekin Fine Art with the same polished cement floors and double vaulted ceilings. The room designated as the office, lined with computers to work on Wang’s photographs and to run his career, is heated, but it is time for a mid-afternoon break for lunch, so the team is out in the main space, too large for a compact heating unit. It is cold and everyone sits around on high stools in the kitchen, with their winter jackets on. Wang Qing Song comes over, dressed in a plaid shirt and patchwork jeans that clash with each other, and gives me a big hug, but we are frustrated by the language barrier since he speaks no English.

Zhang Fang, as wife and business manager, is busy trying to figure out how to keep her husband’s market going in a recession. Wang will premiere his first short film, Skydraper, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles later this spring and the Getty Museum is on the verge of acquiring a group
of photographs. Zhang Fang, my friend and interpreter, asks me what I want to see this week in Beijing, anxious to get back to work for me so that she can simultaneously advance her husband’s career. Her two young sons, Leonardo and Michelangelo, are not at the studio. They are at the family’s apartment in an upscale development about a half an hour away with Zhang Fang’s parents. I ask after the children and catch her up with news about my family in New York before giving this hard-working mother my list of tentative appointments.

With this spacious studio and bourgeois living arrangement, Wang Qingsong would seem like the perfect example of a Chinese artist who has benefited from the boom. But, his lifestyle is nothing compared to that of painter Zeng Fanzhi, who works around the corner in Caochangdi. Zeng, who was relatively unknown in the west before his painting sold for a record $9.6 million in 2008, picked up his land in the area for a low price several years earlier and built his own 3,000-sq-ft. studio with skylights and an elegant garden filled with ancient scholar’s rocks. On half of Zeng’s property, his long-time dealer Lorenz Helbling has opened the Beijing annex of Shanghai. With Puccini on his sound system, Zeng paints large-scale canvases, most recently of thorny thickets glowing in the moonlight, a shift from the work that made his reputation, portraits of Communist youth wearing masks. In lieu of studio assistants, he has a personal chef in the state of the art kitchen installed on the ground floor (he also has a gym to work out in upstairs). His family lives elsewhere in a condominium in the city, which he drives to in either his Mercedes Benz or his Ferrari.

Despite the economic downturn, Zeng Fanzhi has little need to worry. He was picked up this past year by Acquavella Galleries in New York with a two-year contract that guaranteed him more than $20 million. He told me that he chose Acquavella because they showed the British painter Lucian Freud, an artist whom I greatly admire, but I also found out that the New York-based collector-dealer Jose Mugrabi had been instrumental in bringing the parties
together. Meanwhile, Helbing who had been representing the artist for more than a decade, is also preparing a show of his paintings. It would be a stellar year for Zeng, if the market for his work would hold.

The next day, without Zhang Fang in tow, I negotiate a taxi ride to Factory 798 to track down the truth about rumored gallery closings. The area has become a tourist destination so all I have to do is tell the driver, "See So Ba" (7-9-8 in Chinese) and he brings me to the front gate. The factory district is barely recognizable. It was revamped for the Olympics into a neo-Montmartre with cafes lining the cobblestone streets and new signage clearly indicating the location of dozens of galleries. The Ullens Center has opened a swanky restaurant at street level and I meet Colin Chinnery to view the exhibition on view. It is Breaking Through the Ice by conceptual artist Qiu Zhijie, a formidable and witty figure in Chinese contemporary art who is also a leading educator at the China Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou. Up until recently, there was a limited market for his photographs and most of his projects could be plotted out on a sheet of paper, all ideas and very little material. So, I am shocked to see his presentation at Ullens which starts with a full-scale replica of the front of a ship breaking through a ground of Styrofoam blocks of "ice." Inside the center's huge 20,000-sq.-ft. exhibition space, there numerous sculptures and installations—stuffed steers embedded in the floor as if swimming through water, bulbous plastic clouds hanging from the ceiling, figures made of straw hoisting a printing block the size of a bank safe in the air—all contained within 30-ft.-tall wooden ramparts that look like the loading bay for an ocean liner. The walls are covered with reams of paper, expertly drawn scroll paintings of surrealistic scenes, worthy of a show on their own. The exhibition is inspired by the artist's research into the record number of suicides that take place at the Yangtze Nanjing River Bridge in Nanjing. I think it is a form of professional suicide to jam-pack a lifetime of ideas into one show, even in a gallery as spacious as this one. Chinnery and I talk about the Chinese artists' tendency to mistake scale for content and the failure of curators to edit, which would have helped greatly in this instance.

Chinnery and I go off for a lunch of Sichuan food, because he is anxious to tell me about his new position, as the artistic director of Sichuan. Lorenzo Rudolf has already departed from the fair's management team, after the weak results of the 2008 event. So Chinnery, who has been out of a job since he left the Ullens Center in the spring of 2008, accepted the position, already talking as if he is organizing a museum show or a biennial, rather than a commercial venture. Chinnery, a sprightly man in his 30s whose cute features perfectly combine his British and Chinese DNA, looks young, maybe too young to run an art fair. But, I cannot question his evident intelligence or his commitment to the advancement of Chinese contemporary art. "There is a lot of cynicism about China right now because of the art market bubble," begins Chinnery and he is the only person I meet in Beijing who is willing to use this term to describe what's happened to the art market. "There are a lot of people guilty, both from outside China and inside China, who were participating in blowing the things out of proportion. But that doesn't mean that once the bubble bursts, there will never be anything interesting in China again." Discussing artists who have been consistently making good work but did not make auction records or news headlines, he says, "The bubble bursting takes all the bullshit out of the equation." The quality of the art will improve, he speculates, as the market shrinks, requiring artists to focus on their ideas, rather than competing with galleries for business. But, in his present capacity, he has his work cut out for him, running a fair that had a shaky reputation in terms of sales, even in better times. I do not envy the hundreds of hours he will have to spend flying to New York and London to persuade dealers to sign on. Like many of the people I meet in China, he is confident, or at least, unafraid of a challenge.

Later that afternoon, I meet Long Lin at Beijing Commune, which he is still managing while simultaneously supervising Pace Beijing which is undergoing renovations and is closed for the winter. It will reopen in late spring, he says, with a show of works by Chinese artists, not with the famous
American painter Chuck Close as was originally intended. "We can feel the bad atmosphere from outside economics but we still feel the confidence for the long-term development," says Leng Lin when I ask him about the market. "Even if prices fall, it will be like 2004, before the boom of 2006 and 2007, but it will never again be like the 1990s when there was no market at all." Since he has been active in the Chinese art market since the early 1990s, I trust his perspective. But I knowing that Pace has eliminated 20 positions in New York, I wonder if the gallery will still be as invested in China and I ask him as much. "Yes. They feel this is a long-term investment," he says.

I spend the afternoon going around 798, talking to dealers at several of the better galleries. None of them are planning to close, stating that winter is always a slow time of year. I found out that Seven Star Group, the government-owned real estate company that holds the property at 798, threatened to double the rent. There were widespread objections and most tenants had gone on to month-to-month leases at 2008 rates. Meanwhile, the cafes are busy with twenty-something BeiJingers coming in to get out of the cold and taxis are lined up at the entrance of the district dropping off visitors at a steady pace.

Unable to shake the idea that people in Beijing should be more concerned about the downturn in the art market, I go out with Zhang Fang the next morning to interview Chinese-speaking art players whom I think might offer a more sober perspective. "Chinese people are hopeful that the Chinese contemporary art trend will not change all that much, it will just slow down a little bit," says Huang Liaoyuan, director of Beijing Art Now Gallery. A former rock-and-roll promoter with a goatee and laid-back demeanor, Huang is partners with Zhang Rui, the collector who owns Le Quai restaurant, and he assures me that both of them have not changed their lifestyles one bit due to the changing economic climate. "Zhang Rui is about to leave for a trip to Indonesia," he tells me. "In the United States, maybe there are ten collectors and they have already bought Chinese contemporary art, but in China, there are 100 potential collectors and only one has started to buy so there is a 99 percent potential." This stance—using the worldwide economic crisis as an opportunity to develop a domestic consumer base—echoes Chinese government policies of the moment. "In terms of millionaires who want to be in this art market, there is a big expansion," says Dong Mengying, the director of local fair Art Beijing. I am not sure if he is making this up, given that there has been a drop in the number of millionaires in China since the crash of its stock market in the fall. Like Chimney, he views the cooling down of the art market as a good thing, leaving room for new collectors who might have been scared off by high prices and giving his staff the opportunity to work on the quality of his fair. I ask him how he can stay so positive. "Compared to what has been achieved in the west, China still has a long way to go," he says. "We still have a lot of things—both material and spiritual—that we haven't obtained yet so we remain optimistic."

"Are all these people on drugs?" I ask Meg Maggio, when I return to Coachenghi after the interviews, shocked by the ubiquitous optimism which strikes me as denial. Maggio, who maintains a staff of four and a crew of art installers, seems just as confident as the others that she will be able to continue with her business, albeit at substantially lower prices. "There is a sense here that China has responded very quickly and positively to the economic crisis and that has impressed people here and abroad," says Maggio, spouting a line that sounds a lot like propaganda to me. When she sees my skepticism, she adds, "You come from New York, the epicenter of the financial crisis, so you feel it more acutely."

I decide to call Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, artists who lived in New York in the 1990s, returning to China when their son, Sean, was born in 1995. Because of their experience in the United States, they have always been honest and forthright with me about conditions in China. Lin Tianmiao, a compact powerhouse of a woman with short cropped hair and rectangular designer eyeglasses, is the most successful female artist in China, deservedly
so for her ethereal fabric works—photographs printed on canvas—with layers of white thread embroidered over their surfaces. Wang Gongxin, much more casual and easy-going, is a formidable video artist, a pioneer in the use of digital media in China. I often visited them at their home, a charming 19th-century farmhouse filled with Ming furniture surrounding a Zen garden with fishponds. Now, Gongxin, answering his cellphone, is excited to hear I am in town because he wants me to see the new house they are building and he invites me to the construction site. Maggio, curious about the project, invites herself along and we head out on the long drive to Songzhuang village, a suburb of Beijing.

Before we even arrive at the site, we are flabbergasted by the neighborhood. As opposed to their former residence which was surrounded by working farms and cornfields, this new house is located in the middle of a gated community with McMansions, identical to those found in American suburbs, abutting each other on every side. It is not the type of place where you would expect artists to choose to live. Wang Gongxin greets us and warns us to be careful since construction is underway. We walk up the sloped driveway to the entrance and look up. The front of the house is identical to the Whitney Museum in New York, a geometric configuration of cement slabs, startling modern in comparison to the surrounding homes. It’s enormous—20,000-sq-ft.—four stories high with two extensive studio spaces installed below ground level. Lin Tianmiao meets us on the ground floor where there are the barebones of a kitchen and living room. A fireplace, an amenity unheard of in China, is situated in the middle of the wall.

From a terrace off the master bedroom on the third floor, we survey the backyard. Teams of workers are moving earth and there are deep cement holes in the ground indicating the placement of the lap pool and the waterfall. In the center, there is a sunken garden where bamboo will grow, a courtyard surrounded by windows allowing light into the underground studios. Wang Gongxin calls out to the workers, commenting that he has to supervise every
detail to get it right. Lin Tianmiao is beaming over their accomplishment. Rather than using an architect, they have designed the place themselves.

With the art market here expanding every year since 2004, there are those, like Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, who are still spending freely on sheer momentum. Though not the beneficiaries of auction records, these have been good years for these artists, who have sold from their studios as well as through dealers. They need the right setting to present their artworks, to entertain foreign visitors who are potential buyers. This new home will be, they hope, even more of a reason for prestigious guests to make the trek out to Songzhuang, to see this creation which they consider an extension of their art production.

Flaunting success and wealth has not slowed down in Beijing, even with the economic downturn. One night, Maggio and I are picked up by the collector Yang Bin to go to dinner at the house of his friend, Zhang Rui, the partner in Beijing Art Now Gallery. Yang Bin has made his fortune with Buick and Cadillac auto dealerships and Zhang Rui comes out of telecommunications, two industries that I would suppose are susceptible to economic force. But Yang Bin, an enthusiastic cheerleader for the Beijing art scene always sporting a broad smile and wearing a colored polo shirt and slacks, boasts that his sales are up this quarter and asks if I will join him on a family ski trip planned for the following week.

Normally, I spend most of my time in Beijing in the northeast section of the city where Caocchangdi and the other gallery districts are located. This evening, we go off in a different direction to the northwest of Beijing by the Badaling Expressway. After a long drive, we are stopped by security guards at a front gate, waiting in the dark as they decide to let us in. We drive along a wide boulevard lit by a pattern of multicolored neon bars and pass a clubhouse that looks like a 1980s disco palace. We arrive at Zhang Rui’s house, a cookie-cutter version of a mansion, identical to the others on his street. But once inside, I am confronted with an interior of the likes that I have never seen before. He has modeled his home directly on the design of the Guggenheim Museum with a circular ramp rising three stories high. In a sunken living room at its base, there is a white lacquered grand piano and a video installation by the American artist Tony Oursler as well as a soft sculpture of a life-size convertible in bright hot pink foam. Looking up, I see a digital photograph by Chinese artist Miao Xiaochun, a monochromatic expanse of piles of human figures thrown up in the clouds, stretching across the second-floor landing. Lining the ramp, throughout the house, are paintings and sculptures lit by spotlights.

Yang Bin and Zhang Rui are two of the most visible collectors in Beijing, organizing tours of their artworks for foreign visitors and shepherding groups of mainland businessmen to Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach. I ran into Yang Bin at ShContemporary, where his wife Yan Qing had a booth for her venture, Aye Gallery, a small gallery that she runs from a condominium in the center of Beijing. While Aye shows the kind of realist painters that find favor with mainland buyers, Yang Bin was surveying the foreign galleries, picking up works by western artists. He showed me a small statue of a man in a plaid shirt by German artist Stephan Balkenhol that he bought for 65,000 euros from Helsinki’s Galerie Forsblom Gallery. He was so proud of his purchase that he did not hesitate to share its price with the press.

"Now is a good time to buy art," says Yang Bin to me as Zhang Rui pours him a glass of Bordeaux. "It is better when the market goes down. Many people are talking to me about buying art now." Yang Bin speaks in halting English, but he gets his point across. I am curious if he is concerned about the value of his collection which has had to go down in recent months. "No, no, it’s a good time." With curly black hair and a dress shirt always unbuttoned down to his chest, Zhang Rui likes to behave as if he is a worldly playboy, unencumbered by his wife and young daughter. His family is absent tonight from what is essentially a business meal, a mixture of architects and
television producers with whom he wants to share his plans for his new art hotel. The project was supposed to be completed in time for the Olympics, but construction was suspended when all work in the city was halted to give the smog and industrial fumes a chance to clear before the games and he has yet to set an opening date. When it is ready, every room in the hotel will be designed by a different artist and some of Zhang Rui’s largest artworks will be installed in the lobby and on the grounds in front. In the middle of the meal, he pulls out a book with computer-generated drawings of the project. He only needs $5 million more to finish the hotel, he tells the group.

“Do you think the art market is a bubble?” a pretty young woman who is a television spokesperson asks me in perfect English, as a plate of stir-fried scallops and lobster is passed along the table. “Well, the entire art market worldwide is in a recession,” I answer but I am not sure she understands. She nods her head and shares my remark with her husband, sitting beside her. “You are always asking me if there are Chinese collectors,” says Maggio. “Well, everyone here is a collector.” After dinner, the group goes upstairs to see what Zhang Rui has brought home from his recent trips to India and Korea. It is a chaotic display of artworks, with no overriding aesthetic. But it is clear from many of his choices that he wants to tweak the boundaries of good taste. In the bedroom are art works with an erotic bent, including a near pornographic crotch shot by the American photographer Cindy Sherman.

Now that I’ve seen Zhang Rui’s collection, Yang Bin is anxious for me to see his latest venture, Aye East Station, a new gallery space that his wife will be opening in March. I don’t think I will have time because I am leaving the next day to return to the United States. He makes arrangements with Maggio to pick us up early in the morning, before my afternoon flight. He hands me a catalogue, a heavy tome that I worry will weigh too much to bring back on the plane, produced in conjunction with a show of his collection at the Ludwig Museum in Germany. Zhang Rui’s party is nowhere near winding down, but I can see that the guests are ready to relax into Chinese for the rest
of the evening, no longer accommodating this English-only visitor in their midst. Our host orders two young men on his staff to drive us all the way back to Caochangdi, an hour away from this upscale suburb. Maggio and I sit in the back seat of the car while we listen to the driver and his companion reach friends on their cell phones, making plans for an evening out in Beijing, once their work day is complete.

As promised, Yang Bin shows up by 9 A.M. the next morning, just as I have finished my first cup of coffee. Maggio has not seen the new gallery but is already telling me that it will be a major addition to the Beijing art scene and tries to convince me that I should return for the opening. She chats with Yang Bin in Chinese as we make our way back to downtown Beijing to Pingguo Shequ, or Pingguo Community in English, a vast apartment complex built by real estate developer Zhang Baquan. At the center of this neighborhood is the Today Art Museum, the anchor of a cultural mall called 22 International Art Plaza, designed to accommodate galleries, boutiques, dot com companies, and coffee houses. After we park Yang Bin’s Cadillac SUV and walk to his new space, it is clear that for now he will be the only gallery in this stretch of empty storefronts. Old women in blue uniforms sweeping the plaza and a lone security guard walking its length are the only people we see here so early in the morning.

“It’s ridiculous to think you only open an art gallery at the top of the market,” Yang Bin says to me when I ask him if now is the most propitious time to start up this venture. The gallery is as large as any I have seen in Chelsea with a main exhibition space with ceilings 30 feet high. Upstairs there is an office with shelving already built-in and a wood paneled lounge where I can imagine Yang Bin and his collector friends hanging out in between golf games. Yang Bin introduces me to his business manager, brought into the gallery after proving himself as one of the top salesmen at his auto dealerships. With no experience in the art trade, soon he will be unpacking and hanging Yang Bin’s collection of works by Xu Bing, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun and Zhang Xiaogang, getting ready for the inaugural show just weeks away.

This is my last day in Beijing and I am determined to get to the bottom of things. “How can Yang Bin afford to take on such a project at this moment?” I ask, since he is a businessman and must be concerned with the bottom line. With Maggio acting as translator, he switches to Chinese and tells me, “I will explain why there isn’t such a great reaction to the economic crisis right now in China.” He goes on to say that the Chinese are savers, always putting aside money in case of a crisis. “My grandfather came from the countryside and they would store three years of their harvest, in case there was ever a bad year.” Maggio backs him up by saying, “People are more prepared for the eventuality of something bad happening here than we are.” Yang Bin goes on to insist that while Americans threw their money into the stock market or real estate, the Chinese were more cautious. “I suppose Americans are jealous of the Chinese way of managing money?” he asks me and I don’t know what to answer. I had never seen a shred of arrogance or nationalism on Yang Bin’s part before and I don’t know details about the Chinese economy well enough to argue with him. All I know is what I read in American newspapers—accounts of factories closing and the stock market toppling—which make the situation in China sound much more precarious than is reflected in Yang Bin’s point of view.

Though I am concerned about missing my flight, Yang Bin assures me that we have time for lunch. We head over to the China Grill, located on the 66th floor of the Park Hyatt Beijing, offering a spectacular view of the city, including a straight shot at the new CCTV Tower, the Rem Koolhaas designed skyscraper that will now dominate the Beijing skyline. Zhang Rui comes over to join us and the conversation is mostly in Chinese, so I spend most of the lunch looking out through the windows at the city below. So much has changed in Beijing in just five years since my first visit. It has been torn down and rearranged, eliminating many of the hutongs and back streets that I found
so charming and turning the Silk Market from an outdoor free-for-all into an indoor shopping mall. Beijing has become a place where Louis Vuitton and Hugo Boss are as easy to find as their knock-offs and where cab drivers maneuver in shiny new Volkswagen sedans, instead of cars no better than tin cans with red stars on top. Economy or no economy; the changes that have been made will not be reversed. I suppose that that is what gives businessmen like Zhang Rui and Yang Bin their confidence, knowing that the progress of their country has been remarkable and cannot be erased, even if the pace of change slows down a bit.

"You will come to my opening in March," says Yang Bin as he reaches for his phone to call a driver to take me to the airport. "Yes, you have to come back and bring your husband," says Maggio, urging me to take up the offer. I already have been invited as a guest of Art Beijing for the fair in April and there's a press junket to Art HK, the Hong Kong art fair, in May. I have many reasons for returning to China in the coming months, opportunities to see how its art scene will develop in the new economic climate. The situation may have changed but not so drastically that the institutions—the museums, galleries, auction houses and art fairs—would disappear anymore than this restaurant where we are enjoying lunch will evaporate. I say my good-byes and walk away from the table of friends towards the elevator. I pass a bank of wine bottles, turned on their side so their bottoms form a wall of dark red circles, as much a symbol of the new China as red flags in Tiananmen Square represent the old. There's a woman in a hotel uniform at the reception desk whose sole job seems to be to say "Welcome" and "Bye bye" to guests as they come and go. She says "bye bye" to me as I press the down button and wait to descend back to the streets of Beijing below.

Afterword

Just over a decade ago, when I wrote my first article on Chinese contemporary art, "Post-Maoism", in the March 1998 issue of Art & Auction magazine, I had to press my editors to begin to pay attention to this new art trend. At the time, coverage of the Asian art market focused primarily on auctions of antiques—Ming furniture, classical paintings, bronze Buddhas, snuff bottles—with rarely a mention of the new art movements emerging from China. But, things were already changing. Artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, Zhang Huan, and Gu Wenda had moved to New York during the 1990s and were making their presence felt on the international biennial circuit. New York art dealers, especially Max Protetch and Jack Tilton, were introducing Chinese artists to an American audience, bolstered by the groundbreaking 1998 show, Inside Out: New Chinese Art, taking place at Asia Society and PS 1 Contemporary Art Center. (Typical of that time, China: 5,000 years, another major exhibition in 1998 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, excluded post-1989 art movements due to restrictions placed by the Chinese government)