The New Art of China

Special section on China, by Richard Vine, Barbara Pollack, Jonathan Napack, and Lisa Movius, in *Art in America* (June–July 2004), 575 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

Amid all the news stories about budding entrepreneurs springing up all over China, one phenomenon has largely escaped notice: Venues for contemporary art are suddenly all the rage. In Beijing, more than a dozen new galleries have opened, mostly operated by foreigners. Seven years ago there were none, and foreigners were forbidden either to own galleries or to trade in art. The Shanghai Gallery of Art opened in January, filling its mammoth 18,000 square feet with works by both homegrown and expatriate artists and catering to eager buyers, of whom 40 percent are mainland Chinese.

Chinese artists, particularly in the realms of photography and video art, are also beginning to gain international notice, with a major retrospective now touring the United States. According to Christopher Phillips, curator of New York's International Center of Photography and co-organizer of the exhibition, as recently as five years ago local exhibits were being closed down without warning by Chinese officials. But when Chinese artists began receiving favorable reviews abroad, "the cultural ministry made a conscious decision to try to find ways to use this art to bolster China's image." Phillips acknowledges that the situation can put an artist in a delicate position, in "danger of seeming to be a government-sponsored 'official artist.'"

Many of the new artists seem drawn to the scene, writes Napack, a Hong Kong–based writer, because of the potential to become "remarkably affluent, relative to their country's average income." Those who can sell internationally "profit from global market prices but pay low Chinese living costs," while others can "moonlight in the booming design and media industries." Those who transgress certain limits still face arrest, but the limits are expanding. Add to the mix an emerging moneyed elite, interested in collecting art, and the coming of age of a "sixth generation," born after the bleak Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square, and the ingredients are in place for a new wave of artists, some of whom seem intent on pushing boundaries.

A performance piece by Gu Zhenqing, *Controversy Model*, prominently featured at the Beijing Biennial in 2003, displayed caged guard dogs chained to treadmills that were set in motion by the dogs' frenzied attempts to attack each other. The same show offered Liu Wei's *Event of Art*, a table of microphones under the legend "Everyone has the right to speak." Those who accepted the invitation were rewarded with ear-shattering feedback.

Many artists seem drawn to video and photography, suggests artist and writer Pollack, because these media allow them "to keep pace with the cultural upheavals in their country during the past decade." Christopher Phillips agrees: "Artists have realized that a whole way of life is disappearing and being replaced overnight by another, and much of their work represents a kind of stunned attempt to deal with this situation." The only unifying sentiment of this art, in Napack's view, is "a frustration with the moral bankruptcy of Chinese society mixed with a contempt for the hypocrisy of the West." In one show, he saw nihilism more radical than virtual-

***One of nine images that comprise Zhang Huan's 2001* Family Tree.**

ly anything one would expect "in the history of Western modernism."

Underlying it all seems to be a strange—at least to Western eyes—economic, cultural, and political dynamic. Many galleries are backed by real estate developers who, reports artist and critic Vine, use them "to attract high-end clients to new business or residential spaces." Many entrepreneurial print and photo artists sell their work directly to customers—and perhaps secretly inflate supposedly limited editions. And all of this happens under the not entirely benevolent eye of the government. President Jiang Zemin's "Theory of the Three Represents" address in 2000 named artists as one of the "advanced forces" of society. While Jiang's remarks placed the work of Chinese artists in a new political context, it remains to be seen whether the government will continue to allow China's contemporary art scene to expand in new and provocative directions.

No Thanks, Comrade

"Explaining Labor Weakness in Post-Communist Europe: Historical Legacies and Comparative Perspective" by Stephen Crowley, in *East European Politics and Societies* (Summer 2004), SAGE Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

With great fanfare, the European Union (EU) added 10 new states to its 15-member lineup this summer. The newcomers are poorer than their Western European neighbors, and eight of them—including the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia—are still shaking off the effects of long communist rule. Hardly anybody thinks it's going to be easy to mesh them into the EU, and Crowley, a professor of politics at Oberlin College, points to a surprising source of difficulty: massive differences between East and West in the role and power of organized labor.

The EU is built on a "social Europe" model, with powerful labor unions that represent the broader political and economic interests of workers at the national level in addition to negotiating wages with employers. Along with industry and business, these labor groups play a leading role in forging a wide variety of government social and economic policies. But in the former workers' paradises that recently joined the EU, organized labor is weak, decentralized, and rapidly losing members. It resembles American labor a lot more than it does its Western European counterparts.

The rate of labor union membership has been declining throughout Europe, but in the postcommunist states it has been plummeting, dropping from high levels around the time the Berlin Wall fell to only 29.7 percent of the working population in the period 1995–97—and much of that strength is concentrated in the stagnant industries that remain state owned. (The comparable rate in Western Europe at the time was 33.7 percent.) The decline occurred despite a period of postcommunist economic transition and upheaval "equal to or worse than the Great Depression." Real wages have declined, yet the postcommunist unions have rallied workers for only a small number of strikes.

Crowley brushes aside competing explanations and pins the blame for labor's weakness on the legacy of communism. During the communist years, unions were vehicles of the state and allies of management more than they were representatives of workers. The taint survives. According to surveys, people in the postcommunist states have less trust in unions than in any other civic institution. Union leaders, including those who helped undermine the communist system, have provided little direction, unsure "whether they should be defending their workers against capitalism or helping to bring it about."

Some observers think that integration into the EU will promote the transformation of Eastern Europe's unions into something more like, say, Germany's. Crowley is skeptical. Lacking legitimacy, fundamentally weakened by their drastic decline, and still directionless, the unions of Eastern Europe don't have great prospects. As the EU strains to draw the continent together, Eastern and Western labor remain oceans apart.