



Who is He? A Geng Jianyi Retrospective

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UCCA Great Hall

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Featuring more than 90 works spanning painting, installation, performance, and video, this exhibition provides a comprehensive overview of the art of Geng Jianyi, one of contemporary China's most influential conceptual artists. Offering a vivid picture of the artist's three-decade-long creative practice, the exhibition documents how he continuously pushed the boundaries of art and uncompromisingly challenged preexisting art forms.

Beijing, CHINA — From March 18 to June 11, 2023, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art presents “Who is He? A Geng Jianyi Retrospective,” a systematic look at the artistic career of one of contemporary China's most influential conceptual artists, Geng Jianyi (1962-2017). Continuing UCCA's ongoing emphasis on the history of contemporary art in China dating back to the emergence of the '85 New Wave, the exhibition surveys the breadth of Geng's more than 30-year-long creative practice through more than 90 representative artworks in mediums including painting, installation, performance, and video. Supplemented by a wealth of archival materials, the show provides a comprehensive overview of how Geng constantly broke new ground through his experimental practice, pushing against the limits of pre-established art forms. Many of the works on display are being shown to Beijing audiences for the first time. Co-organized by the Power Station of Art and UCCA, “Who is He? A Geng Jianyi Retrospective” is curated by Karen Smith and Yang Zhenzhong, with Zhang Peili as special consultant.

A towering figure in Chinese contemporary art, Geng Jianyi's career began alongside the '85 New Wave, a movement which ushered in a new era of art, one that encompassed innovations in both artistic expression and theory. He first gained wide attention in 1985 when he graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (today the China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou; his graduation painting *Two People Under a Light* pointedly questioned artistic values of the time, which positioned narrative as art's purpose or primary objective. Soon thereafter, he participated in the influential “'85 New Space” exhibition, and joined the artist group Pond Society. Over the next three decades, Geng would continue to search for the meaning of art in his practice, attempting to break through boundaries and move beyond the limits of existing formats. Many of his artworks and activities took simple acts of daily life as their content and form, which Geng hoped would encourage his audience to think differently about art's meaning and significance. He spent a great



deal of his time pondering fundamental questions at the root of artistic language: How to see? How to justify? How to regulate? How to read? How to visualize? How to recover? Creating art in response to these issues, he re-imagined the possibilities of conceptual art through painting, photography, video, installation, performance, printed matter, and readymades, demonstrating a deft touch across a plethora of different media and techniques.

The title “Who is He?” comes from an important conceptual work that Geng Jianyi created in 1994, which is also featured in the exhibition. The artist instinctively asked the titular question after a stranger stopped by his house while he was out. Gleaning specific clues about the appearance of this mysterious “he” by talking to his neighbors, Geng created a piece of conceptual art consisting of hand-written documents, drawings, and photographs. The work itself may serve as an introduction to numerous different threads that run through Geng’s practice, such as the exploration of individual identity, reflections on everyday life, and the use of “investigation” as an artistic methodology. Adapting this title to ask “Who is Geng Jianyi?”, the exhibition presents key artworks from throughout his career that highlight both his diverse approach to art and the distinctive means by which he sought, and found, answers.

The exhibition eschews a strictly chronological or thematic approach towards presentation, instead drawing upon systematic analysis of the artist’s creative concepts. The 90 odd works on display are organized into areas such as “50 Percent,” “Early Works,” “In the Dark,” “Mixed Media and Installations,” “Handmade Books,” “Healthy Attitude: Archival Materials,” “Form Project,” and more. Moving between different areas, viewers may gain a sense of the breadth and depth of Geng’s artistic explorations and gradually begin to grasp the questions he raised across different points in his career, as well as the changes in media, means of expression, and conceptual thinking that accompanied his shifts in focus. The artworks in “50 Percent” discuss the relationship between audience and art, driven by Geng’s concept of the same name, which expresses the idea that the artist completes half of an artwork and the audience completes the other half. In works such as *Forms and Certificates* (1988), *Useless* (2004), and *Floor* (1997/2023), Geng attempted to reduce the distance between audiences and art. “Early Works” provides evidence of how Geng’s artistic talent was readily visible even at the beginning of his career, as well as how he challenged artistic orthodoxy from the onset. *Two People Under a Light* (1985), a massive reproduction of *The Second State* (1987), and *Haircut No. 3: '85 Another Shaved Head of Summer* (1985) embody the artist’s early mastery of line, shape, and



color, while also revealing how he doubted and interrogated the period's prevailing artistic norms. These were also among the works that first brought Geng to prominence in the art world. "In the Dark" consists of a series of experimental works the artist began in 1995, which directly utilize materials from photographic darkrooms. For the most part putting aside standard photographic methods of exposure and development, Geng employed a variety of destructive acts to produce works with bracing visual impact.

Thoroughly avant-garde in his creative outlook, Geng Jianyi's practice was defined by his free embrace of, and willingness to move between, multiple mediums. "Mixed Media and Installations" focuses on the artist's work in what may broadly be defined as "new media." Artworks include the "Untitled" series (2015) of interactive installations and *Stubborn Image* (2016), which constructs projectors out of flashlights and lamps. Meanwhile, "Handmade Books" collects the unique artist's books Geng made between 1990 and 2006. He explored the processes of mimeographing and manual bookmaking through a series of experiments, from the misprinted faces of *Reading Material* (1990), to the electric books that can move by themselves in *Moving Books 1-6* (2006). In "Healthy Attitude: Archival Materials," visitors can learn more about Geng's endeavors in art education and exhibition planning, which he undertook in parallel with his own art practice. The area contains materials covering Geng's interactions and collaborations with other artists, his reflections and feelings about art and artistic identity, and the profound impact that his educational philosophy of "art can be learned, but not taught" had on young artists.

Furthermore, as a tribute to Geng Jianyi's at once sincere and ironic appropriation of bureaucratic "forms" in his practice, exhibition curators Karen Smith and Yang Zhenzhong have specially organized the "Form Project." They have written a letter inviting the artist's relatives, friends, colleagues, teachers, and students, as well as those that had more fleeting encounters with him, to fill out a form—there are no constraints on the content of this form, but it is hoped that participants may share stories of their interactions with Geng, their memories of him, or related anecdotes. Previously completed forms are on display in the exhibition space, to be joined by new submissions. In addition, the exhibition also features several works made of paper pulp, which emerged from a project the artist participated in at a Japanese paper mill in 2016. Presenting his work in countless different mediums, "Who is He? A Geng Jianyi Retrospective" shares the artist's doubts about and challenges to established artistic concepts and paradigms, his activities as educator and exhibition organizer, and also the public's memories and appreciation of him. The exhibition



comprehensively reactivates Geng's artistic explorations and philosophy of life, which remain ahead of their time. In doing so, it seeks to inspire audiences to enter into conversation with Geng's groundbreaking, unique practice, and to ponder and find answers to the question "Who is He?"

Support and Sponsorship

The exhibition has received invaluable support from many sources, including Geng Jianyi's family, friends, colleagues, and students, as well as various art institutions, collectors, and galleries who have generously lent their works. The exhibition is supported by De Ying Foundation. Exclusive wall solutions support is provided by Dulux and Genelec contributed exclusive audio equipment and technical support. UCCA also thanks the members of UCCA Foundation Council, International Circle, and Young Associates, as well as Lead Partner Aranya, Lead Art Book Partner DIOR, Presenting Partners Bloomberg, Voyage Group, and Yinyi Biotech, and Supporting Partners Barco, Dulux, Genelec, and Stey.

Public Programs

Throughout the exhibition, UCCA's Public Practice Department will host a variety of activities, providing audiences with different perspectives from which to understand Geng Jianyi and the times and artistic milieu from which he emerged. In four installments of the "Conversations" series, we will trace out the course of Geng's life and artistic practice, interpreting and analyzing the artistic concepts he created. The inaugural session, "He Did Exist," will be held at UCCA's auditorium from 10:30 to 12:30 on Saturday, March 18. Moderated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari, the discussion will feature exhibition curators Karen Smith and Yang Zhenzhong, exhibition special consultant Zhang Peili, artist Lin Tianmiao, and China Academy of Art, School of Art and Humanities professor Zhou Shiyan, each sharing their experiences and insights to convey an even more vivid, three-dimensional image of the artist, while also responding to the exhibition title's question of "Who is He?" from multiple angles. The event will also be broadcast live on UCCA's official WeChat, Bilibili, and Zai Art accounts.

For the exhibition's "Cinema Arts" programming, we are collaborating with Imagokinetics Lab to set up a "projection room," conducting video experiments, sketches, dream recording, and darkroom workshops at a distance of one meter. Reexamining the artistic framework that Geng Jianyi formulated, these activities aim to further explore the development and current state of Chinese contemporary art



from the perspective of global art history. Furthermore, a three-part workshop focused on the artist's commonly used media will give participants a chance to experience the unique characteristics of his favorite materials. Through this diverse range of events we hope to grant audiences a more complete picture of Geng and his indefatigable artistic, experimental spirit.

About the Artist

Geng Jianyi (1962-2017) was born in Zhengzhou, Henan province, and graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Oil Painting Department in 1985. After settling in Hangzhou, he worked at Zhejiang Sci-Tech University and the China Academy of Art. As an important figure of the '85 New Wave, Geng Jianyi became widely known from the mid-1980s. In 1986 he joined the avant-garde art community "Pond Society," and he established the "Sneeze" work group and the "ImageLab" in 2008 and 2010, respectively, which developed experimental art projects like "Lunar Eclipse" and "Classroom." Through media and formats such as performance, basic materials, installation, and collages, Geng observed and asked questions about society and our surroundings, as well as initiated discussions on themes like personal expression and identity. Geng consciously strove to maintain a distance between himself and the world, and to take an attitude of disengagement when observing, to contemplate in this detached manner the rules, instruments, or various components behind the automatic operation of society. Geng attached great importance to building a relationship between the audience and his artworks. In some of his works, he tried to control the distance between viewer and art, so as to engage or help solve the barrier of communication between the two. By using certain symbols, he would challenge and test the audience's awareness.

His major solo exhibitions include "Stubborn Image" (OCAT Shanghai, 2016); "East to the Bridge" (OCAT Shenzhen, 2015); "Wu Zhi, Geng Jianyi Works 1985-2008" (Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, 2012); and "Geng Jianyi, Excessive Transition" (ShanghART Beijing, 2008); Important group exhibition include the 57th Venice Biennale (2017); the Gwangju Biennale (2014); "85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art" (UCCA Beijing, 2007); "The Real Thing" (Tate Liverpool, 2007); the 1st Guangzhou Triennial (Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002); "Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual Art in the Nineties" (Chassé Kazerne, Breda, the Netherlands, 1997); the 45th Venice Biennale (1993); "China Avantgarde" (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 1993); and "China/Avant-Garde Art Exhibition" (National Art Museum of China, Beijing, 1989).



About the Curators

Karen Smith

Karen Smith is a curator, art critic, and writer, specializing in contemporary art in China. In 2012, she was appointed as the founding director of OCAT Xi'an. Since 2015, she has also worked as the artistic director of Shanghai Center of Photography (SCoP), and she also joined De Ying Foundation in 2021. Her curated exhibitions in or about China include "About Material Expression" (OCAT Xi'an, 2022); "One Light, Different Reflections: Wing Shya" (Kyotographie Photo Festival, Kyoto, 2020); "The Space Between Us: Alec Soth" (SCoP, 2020); "Out of Ink: A Selection of Works by Chinese Artists" (Pera Museum, Istanbul, 2019); "Social Geography: Journeys with a Camera Across China" (SCoP, 2018); "OVERPOP" (co-curated with Jeffrey Deitch, Yuz Museum, Shanghai, 2016); "Grain to Pixel: A Story of Photography in China" (Monash Art Gallery, Melbourne, 2016, SCoP, 2015); "A Potent Force: Duan Jianyu and Hu Xiaoyuan" (Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2013), and "The Real Thing" (co-curated with Simon Groom and Xu Zhen, Tate Liverpool, 2007). Smith is the author of books on China's contemporary art scene, including *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (2005), and the three-volume series *As Seen; Notable Artworks by Chinese Artists* (Post-Wave Publishing/UCCA, 2011/2013/2015).

Yang Zhenzhong

Yang Zhenzhong (b. 1968, Zhejiang province) is an artist and curator. Yang focuses on conceptual art practice, through video, photography, installation, sculpture, and other art forms. He has participated twice in the Venice Biennale, in 2003 and 2007. Working as a curator since the 1990s, he has also planned and initiated dozens of contemporary art projects in Shanghai, including "Art For Sale"; "Express Art Exhibition"; and "Hipic."

His selected solo exhibitions include: "Surveillance and Panorama" (Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2018); "Eternal Return" (Moscow Museum and Exhibition Association Manege, 2014); "Trespassing, Yang Zhenzhong Solo Exhibition" (OCAT Shanghai, 2013); "Don't Move, Yang Zhengzhong Solo Exhibition" (ShanghART, Beijing, 2011); "Yang Zhenzhong" (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2006); "Light As Fuck!" (BizArt, Shanghai, 2002). Selected group exhibitions include: "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World" (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2017); "Our Bright Future: Cybernetics Fantasy" (Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin-si, South Korea, 2017); "Avant-Garde China: Twenty Years of Chinese Contemporary Art" (The



National Art Center, Tokyo, 2008); "Global Cities" (Tate Modern, London, 2007); and more. Yang's artworks have been shown in numerous prominent biennial and triennial exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2003, 2007), Shanghai Biennale (2002, 2016), Guangzhou Biennial (2002, 2005, 2012), Asia Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art (2006), and Lyon Biennale (2013), among others. His works are also in the collections of many public and private institutions such as MoMA (New York), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Ikon Gallery, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris), and the UBS Collection.

About Power Station of Art

Established on October 1, 2012, the Power Station of Art (PSA) is the first state-run museum dedicated to contemporary art in mainland China. It is also home to the Shanghai Biennale. Standing tall by Shanghai's mother river, the Huangpu, PSA now occupies a building with a total area of 41,000 square meters. With an internal height of 27 meters, the museum boasts 15,000 square meters of exhibition space, and its 165-meter chimney, as well as being an independent exhibition space, has become an integral part of Shanghai's world-famous skyline.

Renovated from the former Nanshi Power Plant, PSA was the Pavilion of Future during the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. The museum has not only witnessed the city's vast changes from the industrial age to the IT era, but also provided a rich source of inspiration for artists with its simple yet straightforward architectural style. And as a generator for Shanghai's new urban culture, PSA regards non-stop innovation and progress as the key to its long-term vitality. The museum has been striving to provide an open platform for the public to learn about and appreciate contemporary art, break the barrier between life and art, and promote cooperation and knowledge generation between different schools of art and culture.

About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's leading contemporary art institution. Committed to bringing the best in art to a wider audience, UCCA shares a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives to a public of more than one million visitors each year across three locations. UCCA Beijing sits at the heart of the 798 Art District, occupying 10,000 square meters of factory chambers built in 1957 and regenerated in 2019 by OMA. UCCA Dune, designed by Open Architecture, lies beneath the sand in the seaside enclave of Aranya in Beidaihe. UCCA Edge, designed by New York-based architecture firm SO – IL, opened in Shanghai in May 2021.



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Formally accredited as a museum by the Beijing Cultural Bureau in 2018, UCCA also operates non-profit foundations, licensed by the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Hong Kong government. UCCA's commercial ventures include the retail platform UCCA Store, the children's education initiative UCCA Kids, and collaborations and projects under the rubric UCCA Lab. Opened in 2007 and revived by a committed group of Chinese and international patrons in 2017, UCCA works to bring China into global dialogue through contemporary art.

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