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Huang Yong Ping, 65, Dies; His Art Saw a World of Power Struggles

His startling conceptual pieces (in one case using live creatures) commented on humanity, challenged conventional notions of art and sought to erase the artist's ego.



Huang Yong Ping with his sculpture "Wu Zei" at the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco in 2010. He borrowed images from the natural world to comment on human affairs. Bruno Bebert/EPA, via Shutterstock

Huang Yong Ping, a Conceptual artist and pioneering figure of China's post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde, whose controversial work often depicted the world as a Darwinian power struggle, died on Oct. 19 at his home in Paris. He was 65.

Alexandra Munroe, the senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, said the cause was a brain hemorrhage.

Mr. Huang was a conceptualist with a powerful visual imagination; in some sense he was also a contemporary version of the scholar-artist of Chinese tradition. A wide reader in philosophy, European and non-European, he infused his art with his learning and wisdom.

He kept a sharp eye on the political world around him and held it to moral account, often using images gleaned from nature — snakes, insects, turtles — to comment on human behavior.

Ms. Munroe included such images — bringing the artist's notoriety to New York — in the 2017 Guggenheim group exhibition ["Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World,"](#) which was named for a widely traveled piece by Mr. Huang.



Mr. Huang's "The Theater of the World" (1993) on display last year at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. In the piece, living insects, amphibians and reptiles were originally thrown together with the expectation that they would kill one another — an allegory for the human condition. After animal-rights groups protested, the piece was displayed without live creatures. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Miguel Tona/EPA, via Shutterstock

“Theater of the World” was a large cage-like enclosure — his model was the [panopticon](#) prison system — designed to hold a combative population of live amphibians, reptiles and insects (as well as inanimate figures of creatures). All natural enemies, the creatures were expected to kill off one another during the show’s run. The work was intended to be an allegory for the human fight for dominance, but it provoked an outcry from animal-rights activists. The Guggenheim displayed the cage without live creatures.



Mr. Huang’s “The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes” (1987/1993). It was a commentary on cultural stereotypes. Credit...Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

By the late-1980s Mr. Huang was working independently, from an anti-authoritarian perspective and increasingly in installation-like formats, as the

tide of experimental art in China continued to rise, though largely below the government's radar. To undercut the vaunted notion of art as ego-generated self-expression, he used chance methods — throwing dice, spinning roulette wheels, consulting the I Ching — to determine the material components of his work.

He was acutely aware of how, in a new “global age,” art was being used both to reinforce and to promote cultural stereotypes and hierarchies, like those embodied in the very terms “Western” and “non-Western.” In 1987 he put two canonical art history books — one written in Chinese, the other in English — through a washing machine and displayed the results: a sodden lump of pulp in which individual words and images were indistinguishable.

Underlying all this work was his interest in Asian spiritual philosophies, specifically Taoism and Chan (Zen) Buddhism, the one nature-centered, the other a challenge to Western rationalism. He brought these philosophies to his art.



Mr. Huang installing a show at the Jack Tilton Gallery in Lower Manhattan in 2000. Credit... Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mr. Huang was born on Feb. 18, 1954, in Xiamen, a southeastern port city in China. He studied oil painting at the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou and began making more traditional work in the 1970s. But he chafed at academic discipline and knew that a conventional career, catering to official tastes, was not for him.

While still a student, he traded in his paint brushes for spray guns and festooned his canvases with found objects. Intellectually, he also began to investigate the history of modern Western art — at that point little known in China — and found stimulating role models in avant-garde figures like Marcel Duchamp and John Cage.

After finishing school in 1982 he returned to Xiamen and there aligned himself with a collective of iconoclastic artist peers. They adopted the collective name Xiamen Dada, and became one of the most radical art groups in China at the time.

These artists were exponents of what would later be termed, in the West, an art of institutional critique. The group organized exhibitions in local museums only to cancel at the last minute, thus undermining the museums' authority to determine what art would be shown and when. At times, after exhibitions, the group made a bonfire of their work, an act that attacked the notion of art itself as an institutionally approved commodity.

Mr. Huang's reputation spread beyond China. In 1989 he was invited to participate in "Les Magiciens de la Terre" at the Pompidou Center in Paris, a path-setting major exhibition of what would come to be called global art. He was in Paris preparing for the show when news came of the Tiananmen Square

massacre, signaling a crackdown on dissidence in China. He decided to stay in Paris and made it his permanent home, eventually becoming a French citizen.

Mr. Huang produced ever larger forms of sculpture and installation and expanded his range of subjects. These encompassed critical references to international events like the Persian Gulf war of 1991 and the British handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, and to his own experience of being an immigrant.



"Bat Project 2" (2002) is a full-scale model of a section of an American spy plane that collided with a Chinese fighter jet. Credit...Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

East and West politics came together — almost literally head-on — in his monumental "Bat Project 2." On an invitation from the Guangzhou Triennial in China, Mr. Huang in 2002 constructed a full-scale model of a section of an

American EP-3 spy plane that had, the previous year, [collided with a Chinese fighter jet](#) over the South China Sea.

The incident had created a diplomatic crisis, and though it was resolved, tensions clearly remained: Two days before the Triennial opened, the Chinese authorities removed and destroyed Mr. Huang's piece. (He later reconstructed it for exhibitions outside of China.)

By this time, Mr. Huang had become one of a handful of Chinese-born artists regularly chosen for the international art circuit. In 1998 he participated in the influential group exhibition "Inside Out: New Chinese Art," organized by the Asia Society in New York. In 1999 he represented France at the 48th Venice Biennale. A traveling retrospective, "House of Oracles," was organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2004.

He later had solo shows at the Barbican Gallery, London, in 2008; at the Maxxi Museum, Rome, in 2014; and at the Grand Palais in Paris and the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, both in 2016. He is represented in New York by the Gladstone Gallery and by Kamel Mennour in Paris.

Mr. Huang's survivors include his wife, Shen Yuan, and his daughter, Huang Yan.

From the start, and emphatically, he removed himself from his work both as a personality and as any sort of moral judge.

In 1989, he recalled his participation in an important early group exhibition of new Chinese art. He had brought just two small works, both products of chance procedures, to a highly competitive, potentially career-making event.

“My participation was extremely successful,” he said, “simply because it had no effect at all. It was almost as if I had not been there. I didn’t have any influence. I was excluded from the power of influence.”