

# G L A D S T O N E

Philip Tinari, "Huang Yong Ping," *Artforum*, January 1, 2020

## ARTFORUM

PASSAGES

### HUANG YONG PING

By Philip Tinari



Huang Yong Ping, 2012.

I MET HUANG YONG PING for the first time over lunch in Guangzhou one Saturday in October 2002. He arrived fresh from the emergency room, having cut his hand that morning while collaborating with a crew of metalworkers on his *Bat Project II*, a 1:1 facsimile of the cockpit and left wing of a US Navy surveillance plane that had unexpectedly landed on the island of Hainan after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet nineteen months earlier. The plane was to sit on the plaza in front of the Guangdong Museum of Art, part of the first edition of the Guangzhou Triennial. Huang had injured himself in vain: Hours before the opening, his plane would be sliced up and hauled away, the provincial authorities having been tipped off by French and American consular officials about the meaning of the work.

This was the window between 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, shortly after China's entry into the World Trade Organization, a brief interstice when the idea of an emigrant Chinese artist returning to show in a state museum—creating something too confrontational for the discursive orthodoxies of the moment—was intellectually possible. I lived next door to Huang for a month in one of three apartments inside the museum, helping to edit the exhibition catalogue as his plane took shape. Listening late into each night to the meditations and barbs he traded with the exhibition curators and museum staff, I gained an arduous education in the struggles of his pioneering generation. I watched his fellow artists rally around him as the work was removed. And I watched him remain unperturbed as the controversy swelled, then waned, finally becoming fodder for later instantiations of the same project. What had interested him about the plane was not just the theatrical geopolitics it inspired, but the drama of objects it narrated: The original, after all, had also been cut into pieces, and was flown from China back to the US in the belly of another plane.

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Huang Yong Ping's 2002 *Bat Project II* mid-installation for the Guangzhou Triennial, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, 2002.

This defiant iconoclasm, tempered with an earnest sense of wonder, runs throughout Huang's formidable contribution to the intersecting trajectories of the 1980s Chinese avant-garde and the millennial global art world. In 1983, after graduating from China's most progressive and prestigious art school, the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now known as the China Academy of Art), he was assigned to teach high school in his hometown; he quickly gathered a collective around him, Xiamen Dada, which went on to burn its works at the end of its most significant show. For the epochal "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in February 1989, he submitted a proposal and a set of ropes to haul away the Sino-Soviet facade of the National Gallery in Beijing, which the curators had worked so hard to occupy. Invited to Paris a few months later as one of three Chinese artists included in Jean-Hubert Martin's "*Magiciens de la terre*," he built on the experiments he had begun with Eastern and Western art-history textbooks and washing machines, spinning copies of Chinese and French Communist newspapers into serpentine piles of pulp. Having relocated to France with his wife, the artist Shen Yuan, in the wake of China's student movement, he concluded a 1992–93 residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany, with *Theater of the World*, 1993: a tortoise-shaped panopticon filled with precise quantities of insects and reptiles. The piece would arouse controversy nearly a quarter century later when it was shown as the subtitular work of "Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World," which I cocurated at the Solomon

mediated variety that museums have come to know even better in the past two years, the critters were canceled, Huang's theater "deactivated."



Huang Yong Ping, *Empires*, 2016, metal, mixed media. Installation view, Grand Palais, Paris. From *Monumenta 16*. Photo: Raphaël Gaillarde.

The upheavals of 1989, both in China and the West, were the fulcrum of Huang's life and work. His struggle in the '80s to reconcile recently translated ideas of postmodernism with resurgent schools of Buddhist and Taoist thought—part of what had seemed a new Chinese enlightenment—gave way to the raw necessity and great opportunity of forging a path through an emergent globalization that he understood as precarious, even ignoble. When Harald Szeemann included nineteen Chinese artists in his 1999 Venice Biennale, Huang represented his adopted country alongside Jean-Pierre Bertrand in the French pavilion; the pairing seemed radical in the year of Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. In 2000, when the Shanghai Art Museum invited his longtime interlocutor Hou Hanru to curate its biennale, Huang filled the building—then located inside a former British racing clubhouse—with a sandcastle replica of the nearby HSBC headquarters (now occupied by the Pudong Development Bank), leaving the grainy form of one colonial structure to disintegrate inside another. Earlier that year, he had mounted an exhibition at New York's Tilton Gallery in SoHo that centered on *Travel Guide for 2000–2046*, 2000. The sculpture comprises 431 apocalyptic predictions pinned to a globe, its surface peeled like the skin of an apple (he took the image from Joseph Beuys). In hindsight, the work's prophetic catastrophizing seemed to anticipate the attacks of the following September and the two decades of destabilization that ensued.



Huang Yong Ping, *Bank of Sand, Sand of Bank*, 2000, sand, concrete. Installation view, Shanghai Art Museum.B From the 3rd Shanghai Biennale.

As the Western art world opened its narratives to other voices, and as China came to embrace, however selectively, its own avant-garde history, Huang finally attained the magisterial status of which he was at once desirous and skeptical. He astutely dressed me down in 2013 after seeing an exhibition I had copresented at Beijing's Ullens (now UCCA) Center for Contemporary Art, "DUCHAMP and/or/in CHINA," which bookended a presentation of the *Boîte-en-valise*, 1935–41, and related works with Duchamp-inspired pieces by Chinese artists, including Huang's *Large Turntable with Four Wheels*, 1987. "Duchamp," Huang told me, "would not have been happy to see our works used to shore up his heroism." Huang found ardent disciples among the new critics, collectors, and museums of China and was ultimately appointed an officer of France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. His work for the 2016 *Monumenta* filled the main hall of the Grand Palais with a topography of shipping containers framing a serpent and a giant Napoleonic bicorne, his critique of colonialism and globalization blown up to proportions beyond epic. And yet one always knew that this was not how he measured success.

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Huang's sudden departure comes at a moment when the contradictions of power and knowledge in which he reveled have grown as intense as his work ever imagined, but he remained calmly sagacious to the end. En route to New York for the Guggenheim opening in 2017, he wrote, on an Air France sick bag, about the fate of his *Theater*:

> It is safe for people to stand around the cage and look in, just as people today govern and are governed. People tend to pay attention only to the ones "being governed" (the chaos and cruelty inside the cage). Yet isn't this cruelty realized by the exquisite governance here embodied by the cage? An

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