

A Foreword to Viewing the M+ Sigg Collection: Why I collected what I collected

By Uli Sigg

What the M+ Sigg Collection consists of

The M+ Sigg Collection consists of 1510 works. Its earliest part dates from the Cultural Revolution Period (1966-1976). Then follow a couple of works from the No Name Group (mid 1970s), considered by some to be precursors of Chinese contemporary art which is seen to commence in 1979 and which is covered extensively in the collection until early 2012. The works range across all media including painting, sculpture, photography, performance documentation, video, installation and multimedia. The M+ Sigg Collection is an extraction from the Sigg Collection. The selection process aimed to allow the viewer to read a coherent storyline from the inception of Chinese contemporary art, including some of its roots, to the current decade.

A brief collection history

I arrived in China in 1979 and followed from then on the beginnings and subsequent development of Chinese contemporary art as best I could. Yet I did not collect any work then, for I was looking for the forefront of contemporary art as I had studied it in the West, and for long I could not find art of this kind. When again analysing the state of contemporary art in the 1990s I discovered that no one - individual or institution - had been collecting Chinese contemporary art in any but a purely random manner. Consequently, I changed my focus from that of a private collector searching for works according to his personal taste to one an institution might have: attempting to mirror the art production of the experimental artists living in the PRC, along the time line and across all media. I was interested in the works created in this unpredictable milieu and in the atmosphere of a nation in total transformation. Therefore works from the Diaspora artists living outside the PRC are rather sporadic and for cross-reference. The M+ Sigg Collection assembles works from 320 artists and thus provides a broad spectrum. This is the main aim: to inform the impressive breadth and depth of Chinese experimental art rather than single works or single artists. It is intended as an encyclopedic documentation referencing Chinese experimental art production in this specific period and to form in its current state a solid base for further collecting. The M+ Sigg Collection invites a critical reflection on the short history of contemporary art in China and cultivates lucid insights into Chinese society in a historical period that in retrospect will be considered very important.

Some thoughts on collecting

The M+ Sigg Collection has not been assembled in the simple pursuit of lining up masterpieces; in contemporary art attributions as such come and go. The type of institutional collecting seeks to bring together works with the vision of webbing a full context of a subject matter and through their combination to create additional meaning by enabling works themselves to charge each other up. Just as much as identifying the so-called masterpieces, this is about finding the pieces that may go unattended or are ascribed to artists considered second tier, a categorisation that is itself subject to change over time, in order to fill the perception gaps, narrate the underlying subtexts and open up

further space for the imagination of the viewer. This purpose may even suggest inclusion of a work by an artist with lesser potential, provided that this single work can document a specific phenomenon particularly well.

Every collection is a process materialized; it is a distillate of the collector's vision, imagination, intuition and passion, of research efforts, of the opportunities seized, of the resources made available, of hard work, and of the lack thereof. No collection can ever be complete, and this one is no exception. Artists are missing who deserve representation. Indeed collecting has its constraints: Financial means are finite, appropriate works may not be available at a given moment etc. No Chinese institution, for whatever reason, has ever publicly documented its contemporary art collection. The M+ Sigg Collection seems to be the first one made transparent. Today the M+ Sigg Collection is the most comprehensive known record of Chinese contemporary art. Yet it is work in progress, to be continued by M+, now in a new framework.

The impact of cultural identity

In any collecting activity subjective criteria take part in the selection process, consciously or subconsciously. This is particularly complex when collecting art created in a fundamentally different culture than one's own, which in my case happens to be European. One has to acknowledge, identify and overcome the blind spot that inevitably exists in such an endeavor. I am very fortunate to have had the most intense interactions with Chinese individuals, culture and society through my diverse activities in China over 33 years. Each activity allowed me a different access to the country: one as a business person establishing the first joint-venture company between China and the outside world in its current modernization process - this brought me into close contact with workers on the factory floor and up to the highest cadres on ministerial level and had me travel throughout the country at a time when this was a privilege reserved for very few Chinese people; a second access as a diplomat who had everything to deal with, from development cooperation projects in poverty-struck regions, political analysis, human rights dialogues to economic negotiations on all hierarchical levels; yet another access as a researcher and collector of Chinese contemporary art through intense discussions with and learning from artists and cultural workers in China, and by establishing and conducting the CCAA Chinese Contemporary Art Award and Art Critic Award. All these activities have provided rich Chinese context. While the public may see me as a collector I perceive myself rather a researcher of my ultimate study object which is China. And for art, I just happened to be in a financial position to acquire some of the fruits of my research. Since the early 1990 I also had much support in my collecting from my wife Rita, be it through her superb communication skills with artists, be it through not objecting to even the most extravagant acquisitions.

Another impact on my collecting comes from my longstanding engagement with Western contemporary art. It had me refrain from collecting Chinese contemporary art at a time when the works had characteristics clearly derivative of Western concepts. With hindsight, this may be somewhat regrettable for an encyclopedic collection. But given my earlier focus on the forefront of global contemporary art, well into the 1980s I did not see Chinese art creation as yet contributing to this particular global art discourse. These works were of high importance to Chinese art history but not beyond. Therefore when I later added such works to the collection, I restricted myself to a few examples that I consider sufficient to illustrate the various trends. This has also been my attitude towards early works of artists who later came to much acclaim. And it has remained an issue in every

acquisition: Whether an artist, a concept, a single artwork is in synch with or could ideally contribute to the global art discourse, or if it rather is of relevance for Chinese art history only.

The canon of Chinese contemporary art and artists has not yet been written. A broader perspective inclusive of the global discourse on contemporary art will add to this endeavor which is in process now. Fusing these aspects and others in my collecting may have led to different weightings as compared to a purely Sino-centric perspective. So be it. Through my participation in TATE and MOMA councils - and specifically through working closely with many prominent curators from East and West, I have learned that we act as individuals rather than agents of Eastern or Western cultures, and that the one thing we may have in common is vastly differing views on art.

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