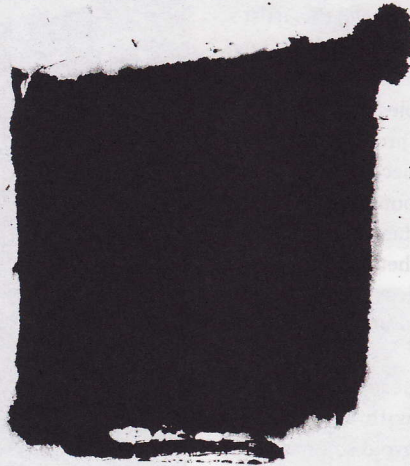


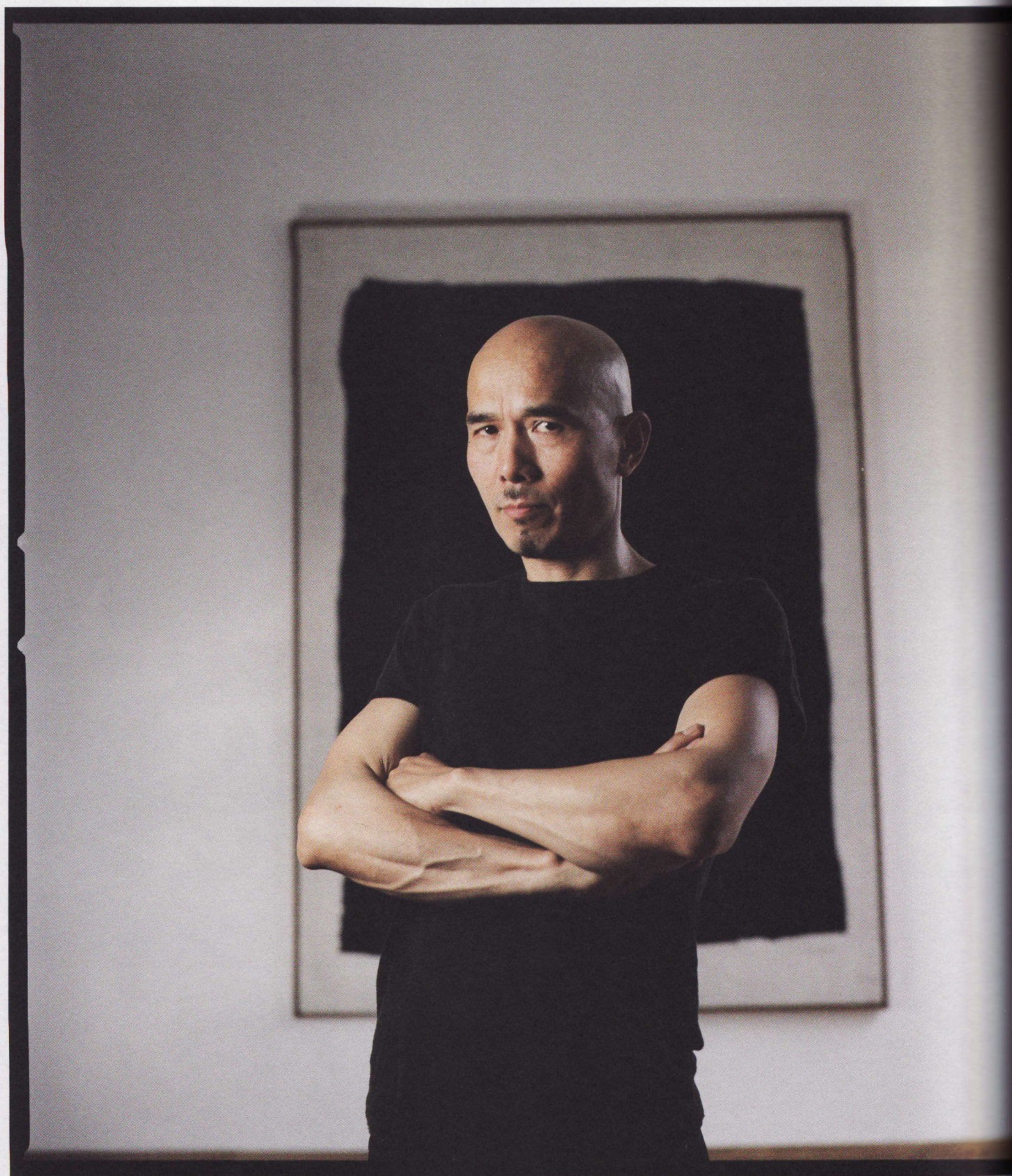
YANG JIECHANG



The Communist Party Didn't Pay the Bill

Tracing an artist's progression from dense ink abstractions to morbid reflections on the Tiananmen Square massacre and humankind's degradation of the environment.

By Britta Erickson



1. **MASSACRE**, 1982, ink and mineral color on paper, 330 x 320 cm.

2. **TIBETAN EARTH, SKY AND PEOPLE NO. 1**, 1982, ink on Xuan paper, 8 panels, 500 x 1600 cm overall.

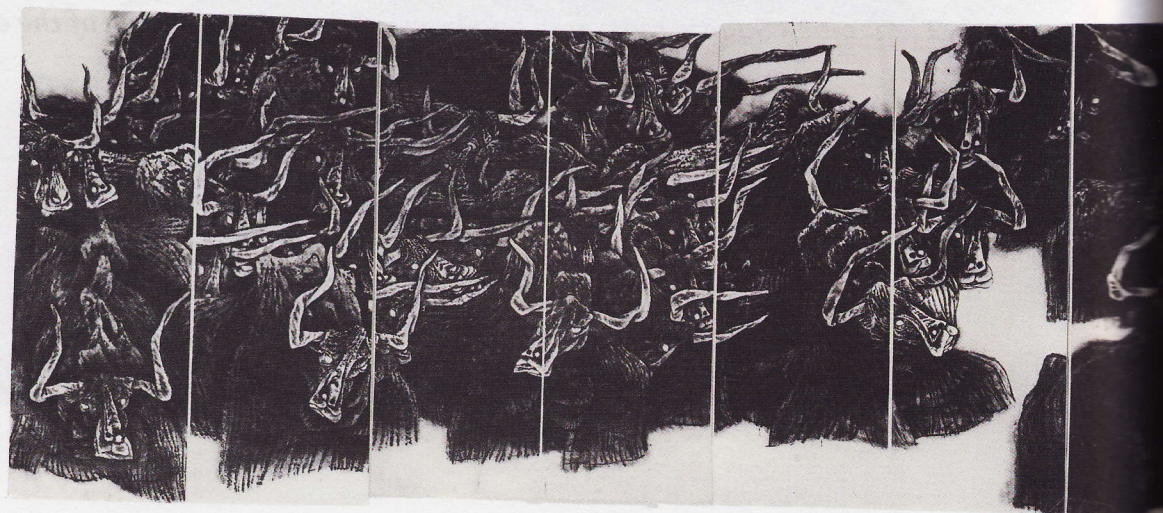
3. **UNDERGROUND FLOWERS**, 2007, porcelain sculptures, boxes, set of 6, boxes: 49.8 x 49.8 x 6.1 cm each.

4. **100 LAYERS OF INK**, 1992, ink on Xuan paper and gauze, 100 x 127 x 12 cm. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York/Beijing.

5. **UNTITLED**, 1985, ink on rice paper, 75 x 125 cm.

Yang Jiechang's monumental pair of works *Massacre* and *Fire* (1982) depicts in one composition a mass of human heads grimacing in the throes of death, rendered in ink against a red-stained ground; the other composition is a vivid, swirling wall of flames. Created as a graduation work at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, the works were an expression of the kind of devastation and chaos that China was hoping to leave behind as the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) faded into memory. Although the paintings showcased the artist's talent with brush and ink as well as his knowledge of Western drawing, the subject matter of cataclysmic destruction was the antithesis of all that was expected of and acceptable for a 26-year-old Chinese art student at the time: consequently his professors rejected the works. Yang painted a substitute graduation piece, *Tibetan Earth, Sky and People No.1*, an eight-panel panorama about pastoral life in Tibet—a popular subject at the time—and he graduated on schedule. Nevertheless, Yang's transgressive approach—whether delivered in his paintings, installations, performances or videos—is a recurrent theme in his career, frequently resulting in confrontations with the art establishment in China and elsewhere.

Among contemporary avant-garde Chinese artists, Yang is unusual in that his art education began with a traditional apprenticeship. Having decided that his 13-year-old son would be an artist, in 1969 Yang's father introduced him to the prominent local calligrapher, Lin Junxuan (1908–97). At first Yang was only permitted to perform such lowly tasks as preparing tea and grinding ink sticks. Observing Lin and his acquaintances' interactions over tea and the brush, Yang came to perceive art creation as a nexus of social activity wherein the process was in many ways more important than the finished product. Two years passed before he was allowed to begin his study of calligraphy by selecting a model text: he chose the *Diamond Sutra* as carved into the rock at Mount Tai during the sixth century. Eventually, however, Yang realized that to take as his model huge characters originally carved 60 centimeters-square each was to choose something with a scale and style unsuitable for common, everyday use, such as designing the political posters omnipresent





3.

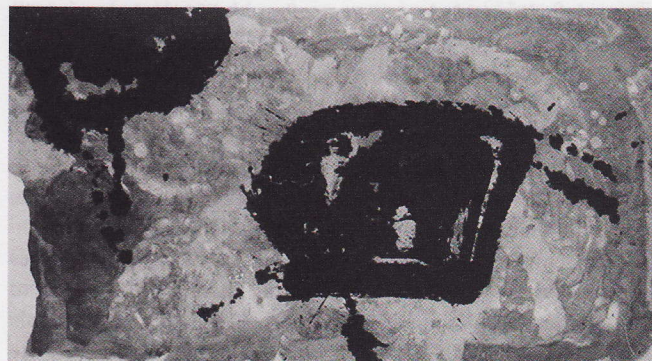


4.

during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, Lin insisted he retain the model, because he believed that learning something useless was a valuable exercise. This traditional lesson was particularly remarkable given the context of the time, when all art was expected to further the goals of the Revolution.

While elitist art and education were denigrated during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in the closure of China's art academies, the government promoted populist art, including folk art: from 1974 to 1978 Yang studied at the Folk Art Institute in his hometown of Foshan, in Guangdong province. In 1978, he entered the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, which had reopened following the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution two years earlier. Although he had joined the Chinese Painting department, the entrance exam had emphasized Soviet-style realism. In preparation, Yang had studied drawing, watercolor and meticulous *gongbi* techniques traditionally associated with Chinese bird and flower painting, and he continued these studies for two years as part of the department's required curriculum. As a result, by the time he completed his graduation project, the monumental diptych *Massacre* and *Fire*, he was thoroughly versed in Western-style realism, particularly figurative realism, which he put to good use in *Massacre*.

Following graduation, Yang studied Taoism under Master Huang Tao at Mount Luofu and Chan Buddhism at the Guangxiao Temple, both in Guangzhou, and turned to simplicity as the goal of his art. In 1985, he produced *Untitled*, a large abstract ink painting that nonetheless retains the suggestion of a landscape, displaying a hilly ink mass against a blank ground. Two years later he painted *Ink Square*, a pure abstraction with a rough square form rendered in dense ink against a blank ground. While Yang was aware of the history of Western abstraction and minimalism and *Ink Square* may call to mind such works as Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square on a White Ground* (1914–15), Yang's development of a body of abstract works was entirely inspired by his ink training and Taoist practice. Abstract paintings like *Untitled* (1991), built up from layers of ink, at times mixed with other materials or applied over a layer of gauze, came to constitute an important aspect of Yang's work during the early 1990s. The "100 Layers of Ink" series (1992–94) is a distinctive



5.

subset of Yang's abstractions. Frequently, simple shapes drawn from disparate sources including children's drawings, everyday objects and personal symbolism, are layered atop a black rectangle. *Fingerprint: One Hundred Layers of Ink* (1992–94), for example, presents a rounded form with its interior made up of concentric curves that resemble fingerprints.

After a period of relative serenity in Yang's life, the six months from late 1988 to mid-1989 were punctuated by dramatic events. In December 1988, Yang traveled to Europe, first visiting Heidelberg, Germany, where the woman he was shortly to marry, art historian and curator Martina Köppel-Yang, was a student; they now live in Paris and Ittlingen, a village near Heidelberg. In February 1989, two of Yang's ink paintings were included in the first major exhibition of contemporary Chinese art held at the China National Gallery in Beijing, "China/Avant-Garde" which marked a post-Cultural Revolution high point for freedom of expression and acceptance of the avant-garde. By April, Yang was in Paris preparing his first site-specific works for "Les Magiciens de la Terre," at the Centre Pompidou; he was still there when the Tiananmen massacre took place in Beijing on June 4. In half a year Yang witnessed a high point for Chinese cultural development, as well as a nadir, and he decided to remain in Europe.

Yang responded to the slaughter at Tiananmen Square in both overt and sublimated ways in his works, building on a theme of mortality—the fleeting nature of existence—that has been a recurring theme in his oeuvre since *Massacre*. His approaches to it range from the specific to the general, from the historical to the personal. *Testament*, created for the 1991 exhibition, "Exceptional

6. A flag created in 1999 with a print of the artist's proposal for the Jiu Jiu Feng International Artists Village superimposed upon the project's original blueprint.

7. **CRYING LANDSCAPE (THE PENTAGON)**, 2003, from a set of five paintings, ink and mineral colors on paper, Xuan paper, three panels, 300 x 500 cm overall.

8. **TOMORROW CLOUDY SKY**, 2005, ink and mineral colors on paper, 185 x 100 cm.

9. (Detail) **3000 NEEDLES**, 1991, needles, hair, blood, calcium oxide, canvas, dimensions variable.

10. **WE ARE GOOD AT EVERYTHING EXCEPT FOR SPEAKING MANDARIN - PRD**, 2005, flag, neon, video screen, dimensions variable. Installation view at the Guangzhou Triennial, 2005.

Passage" at the Museum City Project in Fukuoka, Japan, refers to the *Vyaghri Jataka*—the story of one of the early incarnations of Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha), in which he throws himself off a cliff and offers his flesh to a tigress so hungry she is contemplating eating her cubs. *Testament* consists of a sealed pottery urn placed below English and Chinese text printed onto the wall, reading: "One day I die an unnatural death, then one should feed me to a tiger and keep its excrements [*sic*]." The work suggests a continuation of existence through transformation of matter. It also brings to mind the sacrifice of the innocent in the context of the Tiananmen massacre, catalyzed by the self-preservationist willingness of the Chinese state to devour its young.

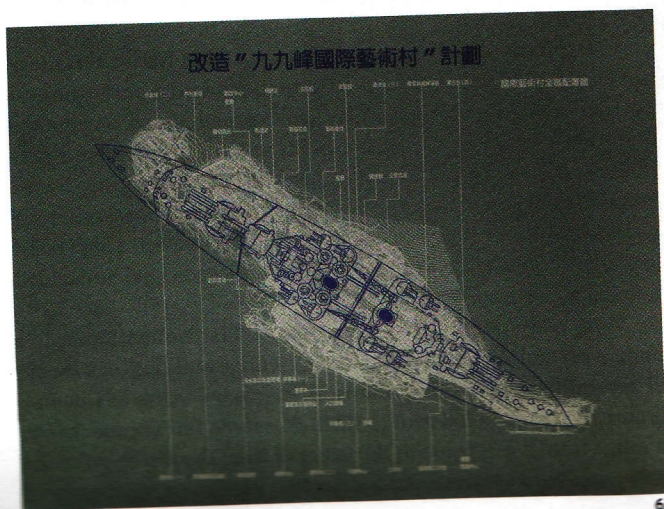
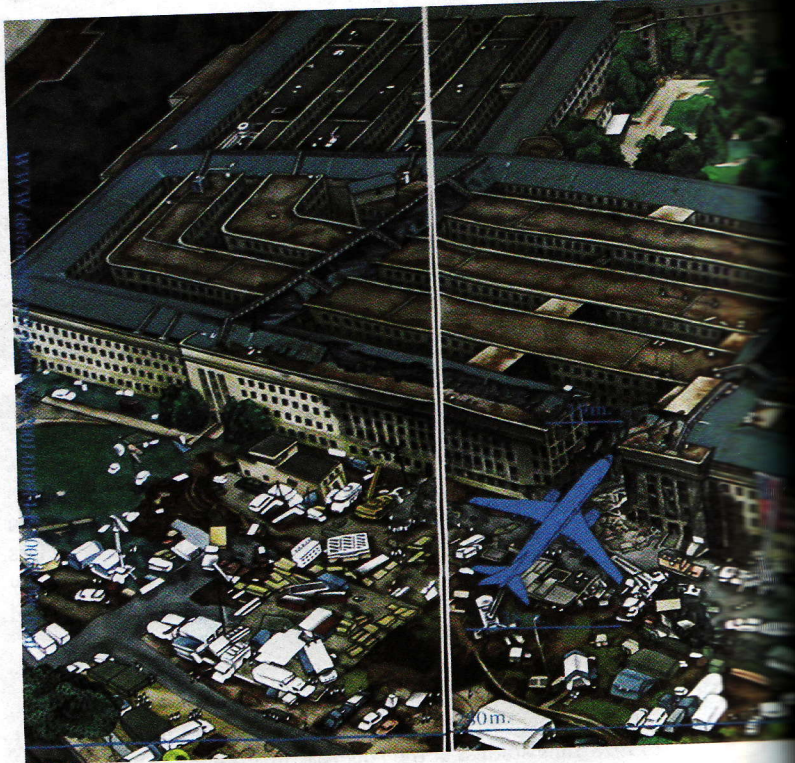
Yang commemorates the events of June 4 every five years, creating works which often depicts human bones, variously rendered in ink on paper, embroidered on silk and, recently, in porcelain. The earliest of these, a set of small ink paintings made in 1994 and 1999, were originally entitled *I Still Remember - Still Life*: the term "still life" becomes ironically literal when applied to images of human bones, and even more so with the French, *nature morte*. On one painting Yang inscribed in Chinese, "The Communist Party didn't pay the bill"; other inscriptions read "underground flowers" (i.e., bones) and "Where is the soul's resting place?" These paintings are powerful statements of resistance to the ethos pervading China, where the Tiananmen "Incident" is rarely mentioned in public.

When invited to exhibit at overseas venues, Yang often engages with local histories and politics, directing uncomfortable truths to the organizations and institutions that host him, or to individuals close to such organizations. In 1990, Yang participated in the exhibition, *Chine Demain Pour Hier*. One of the first exhibitions of site-specific Chinese art, it consisted of works installed around the city of Pourrières, France. Yang placed an abstract ink painting in a medieval chapel opposite an earthen pillar that he had constructed from earth taken from nearby graves and containing remnants of human bones. After a week seeds sprouted from the earthen pillar, shading the brown form green: although not explicitly referring to the Tiananmen massacre, the suggestion of rebirth was nevertheless poignant coming so soon after that shattering event.

In addition, Yang proposed an unrealized performance piece, *Trading Insults*, to take place in the contemplative space between the pillar and painting. The performance was to involve one person

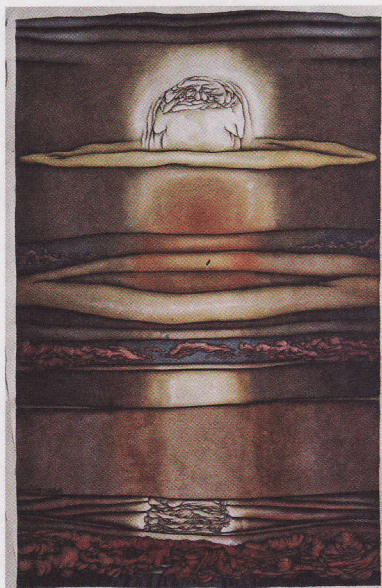
viciously insulting another for five minutes, while the listener remained unmoved; afterwards, the roles were to be reversed. Originally Yang selected the exhibition's curator Fei Dawei and organizer Michèle Cohen to realize the work because of their strong disagreement over aspects of the exhibition. Unsurprisingly, that proved impossible, so Yang proposed that the Taiwanese performance artist Li Mingsheng perform the piece with him. That also did not work out, due to concerns over possible reactions to such staged animosity between representatives of mainland China and Taiwan. The fact that the work failed twice to be performed underscores the fraught nature of human relationships, at times framed by political tensions. The performance's basic format—figures facing each other across a small space—was similar to that of Yang's first performance piece, *Speech, Communication, Humankind* (1987), conceived and enacted with curator Hou Hanru and art critic Chen Tong. As Hou smashed a plate of glass suspended between him and Yang, Chen destroyed most of Yang's experimental, organically shaped pottery production, while Yang remained passive. As *Trading Insults* would have done, *Speech, Communication, Humankind* generated and expressed interpersonal tension, but through the destruction of fragile objects rather than name-calling.

Invited to participate in the Chinese Museum Project at the Artists' Museum in Lodz, Poland, in 1992, Yang discovered that there was little local awareness of the fact that Lodz was the site of the country's biggest Jewish ghetto prior to World War II. He determined to produce a work that would call up a universal visceral response, regardless of the viewer's cultural background, a work that would evoke the historical tragedy of the Nazi eradication of





7.



8.

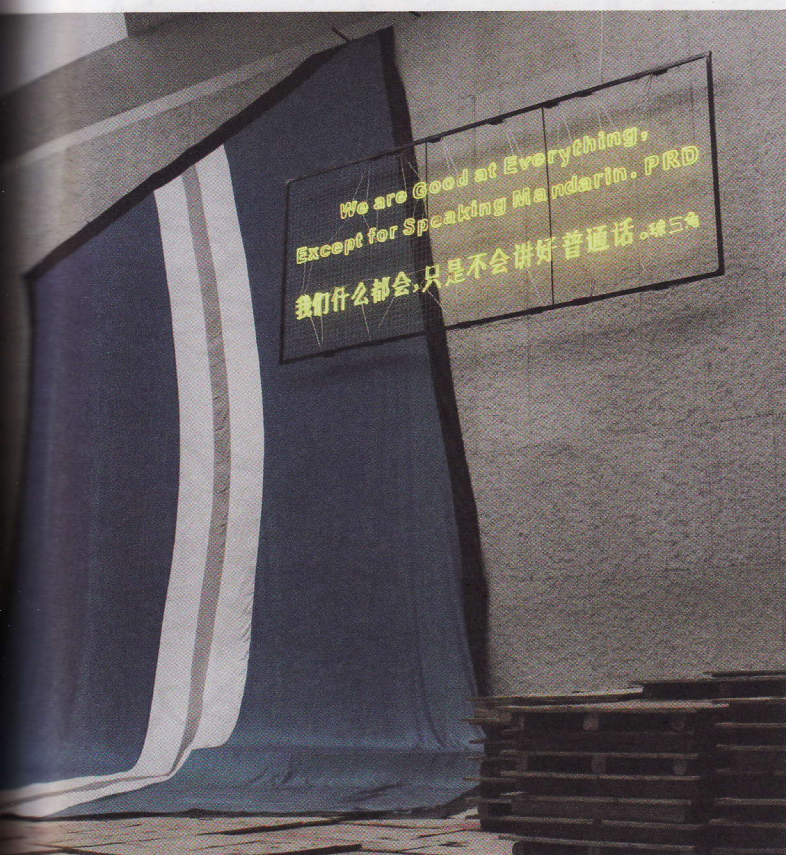


9.

Lodz's Jewish population. To produce the installation, *3,000 Needles* (1991), the artist used his own blood to attach strands of his own hair to 3,000 needles stuck into a canvas. In a room adjacent to this work, he placed large, oblong bags made from the hides of a recently slaughtered pigs and filled with human hair from local barbershops and beauty parlors. A door and a smashed window joined the two rooms, linking the objects he had created, separately redolent of self-sacrifice and ignoble destruction.

During the late 1990s, the Ministry of Culture in Taiwan announced a plan to build the largest and best-funded artists' village in the world, Jiu Jiu Feng International Artists Village, in Nantou County. Yang was invited to the construction site in 1999, as one of more than a dozen Asian artists who were to create site-specific works. Arriving there via a new four-lane highway leading into a pristine rain forest, he concluded that the project was an ecological disaster aimed at garnishing the reputations of local government functionaries. At the time, Yang learned that the Taiwanese military was to decommission two battleships, and proposed that an alternative artists' village be constructed on one of the ships, which would preserve the rainforest while providing artists with a mobile base. He promoted his proposal by setting up a blockade across the road to the construction site and adorning it with flags that showed the blueprint of his project superimposed upon the original plan. While his proposal met with widespread approval within the arts community, the Ministry of Culture turned it down. A year later, an earthquake rendered the new highway impassable, effectively putting a stop to the ill-conceived plan.

While invitations to overseas venues have led Yang to investigate local circumstances and interject an outsider's perspective that may nevertheless be considered transgressive, in creating *We Are Good at Everything, Except For Speaking Mandarin - PRD* (2005), he addressed issues characterizing his native region of China. Created for the 2005 Guangzhou Triennial in response to one of the event's themes, "Facing Globalization: Migration and Borderline," the work as originally presented consisted of a yellow neon sign spelling out the work's title (in both English and Chinese), a Cantonese flag designed by the artist (its design humorously, or even subversively, based on that of a rectangular purse owned by his wife), and a performance at the opening by the Pearl River Delta (PRD) One Day Band, made up of local rock stars and a friend of Yang's from the United States, playing reggae- and electronica-inflected jam



10.

Yang Jiechang working on the painting **DRIFTING METROPOLIS**, 2009, in his studio in Paris.

rock variations on a traditional Cantonese tune. The *faux* flag, along with the neon statement of the fact that residents of the Pearl River Delta have resisted switching from Cantonese to Mandarin, was tantamount to a declaration of separatism: Guangdong has historically eluded control by Chinese central governments, and its huge economy and cultural vitality and distinctiveness render it a perennial irritant and threat to national unity. The issue was so touchy that the neon sign was not turned on until the conclusion of the triennial's private opening for local dignitaries.

Although most of Yang's politically or socially charged works are site-specific installations, his paintings—such as the one inscribed with “The Communist Party didn't pay the bill”—can carry equally forceful sociopolitical messages. *Tomorrow Cloudy Sky—Red Yellow Blue* (2005) belongs to a series of paintings of atomic explosions. Originally, the subject was conceived as a provocative response to an invitation by curator and director of Hanart TZ Gallery, Johnson Chang Tsong-zung, to participate in an exhibition at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. However, whether or not the work would have been accepted is impossible to determine, as the show was canceled upon the resignation of the museum's director Alireza Sami-Azar. The artist's response to the invitation was typical, as was his approach to the subject, rendering the explosions, a symbol of humankind's cataclysmic “progress” and the ever-present potential for instantaneous doom, in refined *gongbi* technique. Yang had previously employed *gongbi* brushwork to similar effect with his image of the destruction wrought throughout Europe by a huge storm in late 1999, *Eye of the Storm* (2000), and his monumental “Crying Landscape” (2003) series. These works depict sites symbolic of humankind's degradation of the earth, ranging from direct physical impact (the Three Gorges Dam) to indirect consequences resulting from political or economic structures (the Houses of Parliament in London; casinos in Las Vegas), including an image of an intact Boeing 757 lying on the crash site at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. A panel of calligraphy ironically reporting a dismal weather forecast of high temperatures, strong winds and possible precipitation accompanies the painting component of *Tomorrow Cloudy Sky—Red Yellow Blue*.

Yang Jiechang's experiences as a young adult afforded him extended exposure to two expressions of art production as a locus of social interaction: the benign example he observed in his teacher's studio and the highly fraught example readily apparent in the context of the Cultural Revolution. Since then, he has devoted considerable energy and thought to analyzing the power struggles threaded through every aspect of the art world and of society, from the governmental level to the institutional, all the way down to the personal. As a student, he was not permitted to present a scathing indictment of society as his graduation piece, the *Massacre* and *Fire* diptych. Now his platform as a prominent international artist affords him a much greater degree of latitude as he pushes the envelope with his incisive and unsettling messages. Inevitably, however, some of his most unsettling messages are universally applicable: those alluding to the mortality of the individual or of the human race.



