

**WENDA GU: ART FROM MIDDLE KINGDOM TO BIOLOGICAL MILLENNIUM / Edited by Mark H. C. Bessire.—Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, September 2003.—230 p.: ill.—ISBN 0-262-02552-3 (cl., alk. paper): \$25.00.**

As the first substantial publication on the Chinese diasporan artist Wenda Gu, this ambitious book doubles as monograph and exhibition catalogue. Previous publications – a handful of smaller exhibition catalogues, journal articles, and exhibition reviews – have routinely treated Gu as part of a larger group of twentieth-century Chinese artists. In his foreword, however, editor Bessire (one of the co-curators of the traveling exhibition; now Director of the Bates College Museum of Art in Lewiston, Maine) proposes to explore Gu's work "beyond a strictly Chinese context." In this aim, the book succeeds at presenting Gu as a contemporary artist engaged with global issues.

The majority of the volume is devoted to Gu's *united nations* series, a sequence of large-scale site-specific installations that have been exhibited worldwide. Each installation is a national "monument" representing a theme from the site's local history. Composed of hair woven into scripts utilizing characters from various languages to form meaningless words, the series draws on Gu's earlier works using calligraphic ink painting and body materials. By conflating geography, biology, and culture, *united nations* signifies the artist's quest for the ideal of a universal utopia. A separate section on the title exhibition, featuring the 20th *united nations* installation subtitled *united 7561 kilometers*, incorporates Gu's other recent and ongoing projects as well as selected early works.

To produce the most comprehensive publication on Gu to date, Bessire has assembled texts that, as a whole, survey the artist's oeuvre. Gao Minglu, the pioneering art historian of the 1980s Chinese avant-garde movement, contributes a critical essay on the *united nations* series, and Gan Xu, arguably the foremost expert on Gu, provides an analysis of Gu's pseudo-character paintings to flesh out the early phase in this career overview. Also included are two essays by the artist: a commentary on the infamous Interpol incident that has seen print before in unauthorized edited versions, and a revised artist's statement on the *united nations* series. (Gu's penchant for writing exclusively in lowercase, edited elsewhere in this volume, hinders reading of the *united nations* piece.) The interview by David Cateforis, an associate professor of art history at the University of Kansas who has published primarily on modern American art, reveals few new insights, largely synthesizing and reiterating information found in other publications on Gu. The chief shortcoming of the book's textual content, resulting from the editorial decision to isolate Gu from a Chinese framework, is that the focus on Gu's personal worldview neglects to place the artist in any external context at all. Although these authors effectively convey Gu's interest in universalism, it will be up to future publications to situate his work in the sphere of international contemporary art.

Overall, the book is well written and produced. Reproductions consist of 125 chiefly color illustrations, though several of the numerous full-page plates have a grainy quality. Appendixes include an exhibition history (the *united nations* history appears twice, once preceding the section illustrating each installation in the series and again in the appendix) and a selected bibliography of books and exhibition catalogues.

Although accessible to a broader readership, the specialized subject matter will appeal more to the targeted academic audience. (The exhibition schedule comprises three college art galleries – University of North Texas, Kansas City Art Institute, and Maine College of Art – and the text contains some scholarly concepts and jargon.) *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium* is appropriate for art and research libraries, especially those collecting in the area of contemporary art.

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