

## ***A Theater—In Absence***

by Felix Ho Yuen Chan

In September 2017, the Guggenheim Museum in New York announced that it would pull three works involving the use of animals from its much-anticipated survey, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*. Among them, Sun Yuan's and Peng Yu's video *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* entered the most heated realm of controversy [Figure 1]. Having first been staged as a 5-minute performance in 2003, this work is no stranger to controversy. Sun Yan and Peng Yu had tried to restage the performance in the 2004 Gwangju Biennale but were only able to exhibit an edited video due to the constraints of resources and the fear of backlash. Nevertheless, American critic Michael Rush instantly slammed the video documentation of the performance as a "snuff film" arguing that the video should be removed "immediately... and confiscated". He concludes his article by "Someone in China is not paying attention."

(*Report from Gwangju 2004* in [artnet.com/Magazine/features/rush/rush10-19-04.asp](http://artnet.com/Magazine/features/rush/rush10-19-04.asp))

Since then, this piece – this theater – has remained silent for thirteen years while Chinese contemporary art has slowly risen as a global player until it reappeared in the announced checklist of Guggenheim's ambitious, large-scale exhibition. This time, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* stirred a tsunami of reactions on the international stage. The controversy not only spirals out of the ethical practice surrounding an artwork but also extends into the characterization of a nation's modernity. The outraged voices unanimously pointed out the exploitation of animals as a glorified mode of art-making, claiming that it should have no place at an exhibition in the United States. *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* incited an immense wave of anger from animal rights organizations and netizens; according to the museum, many threats were even issued against employees of the museum, indicating that harm would visit them if the piece should remain in the exhibition. The museum ultimately decided not to display it, merely signalling its absence by its white-on-black title shot included in the exhibition.

What has been missing in the Guggenheim controversy and its aftermath is a thorough investigation of the origins of *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* and the journey of Sun Yuan's and Peng Yu's commentaries of a cross-cultural dialogue on globalism. The artist duo has consistently used socially conscious art forms as activism for the past two decades and

the specificity of this piece needs to be worked through in order for us to understand the crisis it brings to “global art” as a legitimate curatorial premise.

### **The Emergence of Sun Yuan and Peng Yu**

Since their debut, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu have used deliberately controversial, discomforting materials to call forth an unfiltered analysis of humanity and social realities. In retrospect, their creative progression is not one of increasing indulgence of ethical transgression; instead, the duo has scaled their spectatorship as they expanded their activity on an increasingly globalized platform.

Around 2000, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu emerged with a younger generation of performance artists following the famed “Beijing East Village,” a performance-oriented collective that arose in 1992 and abruptly ended in 1995. Like their predecessors, Sun and Peng engaged with the body, specifically body mutilation and animal carcasses as allegories for hyper-suffering and violence. Upon graduation from the oil painting department of Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, Sun and Peng, like many of their peers, immediately disassociated themselves from traditional academy pedagogy to produce confrontational installations and performances, which at the time were still considered to be inferior art forms among Chinese academies. The duo’s first credited collaborative work was *Body Link* [Figure 2], presented at the group sculpture exhibition *Indulge in Hurt* curated by Li Xianting at CAFA in 2000.

To commemorate their recent decision to get married, Sun and Peng sat next to each other and simultaneously transfused 100cc of blood from their bodies into the corpse of Siamese twin babies that they managed to acquire through connections of a friend at a university hospital as a medical sample. To date *Body Link* remains the duo’s first and last performance to present themselves as the subjects of the work. With such a shocking debut serving as their artistic manifesto, they went on to conduct unfiltered analyses on the brutal truth of the human conditions and relationships. Their conceptual exploration would later expand to encompass a wide range of media. Many of these projects constituted studies of specific materials and exploitations that exhaust or distort their physical properties.

In Sun and Peng’s oeuvre, works featuring dogs as analogues to human existence appeared early in their career. The first was created for *Fuck Off*, an exhibition organized by artist Ai

Weiwei and critic Feng Boyi at Donglang Art Gallery in Shanghai in 2000. Taking advantage of a relatively liberal city, *Fuck Off* marked a collective effort to announce the oppositional and confrontational nature of Chinese avant-garde artist. Many works in *Fuck Off* displayed the grotesque brutalization of bodies in intimate portrayals of torture and violence. Sun and Peng contributed *Soul Killing* [Figure 3], a sculpture installation that constituted a physical and spiritual investigation of the death. The piece featured a large convex lens, a 500W signal lamp, and a dog that had been bought from a food market and taxidermied. Dramatically lit on top of a white table by an industrial lamp in front of a red curtain, the dog's bruised and bloody but taxidermied body is held by a metal stand. Stuffed in such a way to maintain an aggressive stance, a ferocious canine dynamically lunges, with full force at an unknown enemy. The dog's vicious profile is enhanced by the smoke arising from its head, the result of the high voltage lamp placed above it scorching its head through a convex lens. This, according to Sun, is "soul-killing"—the high-intensity beam of light terminates the soul that escaped from the dog's skull. In their catalog statement, the duo declares an ambiguous, koan-like objective: "If the physical body of a dog dies, you must also kill its soul in order to make death permanent."

### **2003: An Overlooked Ignition Point**

The year 2003 marked a conceptual departure for the duo, as they formed the clear focus to spectatorship and began to consider the idea of a theater – an audacious, yet not unprompted move. Notably, the timeline of their creative expansion matches that of the nation and the dystopic energy that the world displayed through many apocalyptic events.

In 2003, Sun and Peng staged two large-scale installations using live animals, exploiting their aggressive nature as a proxy for the theater of the human power dynamic under capitalism. One installation was *Paper Tiger*, in which they caged an Asian Tiger at a dangerously close though safe distance from the viewers. The other was *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, commissioned by Today Art Museum as a performance piece for its exhibition *Secondhand Reality*, curated by veteran curator Gu Zhenqing. Of the same generation as Hou Hanru (one of the three curators of Guggenheim's *Theater of The World*), Gu had successfully organized *Man and Animals*, a series of radical performance art that took place in 2000 throughout public parks in China, by using guerilla-tactics. Then, in 2003, he secured a venue at Today Art Museum, a new private museum in Beijing.

By now, it is well known that the so-called “honeymoon” phase between 1979 and 1989 when a reforming China showed much tolerance toward unofficial avant-garde art was ended traumatically by the Tiananmen Square incident of June 4, 1989. However, by 2003, Chinese contemporary art had been legitimized in public spaces thanks to such exhibitions as *Fuck Off* in 2000, along with *Post-Sensibility* curated by Qiu Zhijie and The First Guangzhou Triennial curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Guo Xiaoyan, both in 2002. Even though the organization of art exhibitions was still heavily controlled by the cultural authorities, Gu intended *Secondhand Reality* to herald an “entrance into people’s halls and homes” (登堂入室, *dengtang rushi*) for contemporary Chinese art. He recalled, in my phone conversation with the curator in February 2018, that with this exhibition he wanted to acknowledge not only contemporary art’s entrance into the public consciousness but also its growingly active engagement with society. That is to say, it was his ambition to assert the efficacy of contemporary art as an uncompromised, investigative tool of social realities.

Notably, in curating *Second Hand Reality*, Gu made commissions central to the exhibition, encouraging the participating artists to conceive site-specific performances and large-scale installations that best addressed contemporary social issues. He worked with the artists to select the best projects from their proposals while trying to secure sufficient funding for their productions. Through his past collaborations and correspondence with Sun and Peng, Gu had a good understanding of their confrontational and transgressive approach to social topics which would fulfill the exhibition’s premise.

In Gu’s reckoning, several violent events informed the exhibition’s pressing social agenda. One such domestic event was the SARs virus episode in 2003, when the deadly epidemic broke out around the world, especially in Southeastern Asia. The death toll reached thousands in China and caused a large-scale panic in all major cities. Despite the severity of the epidemic, the Chinese government heavily censored the coverage of the crisis, especially the deaths, for fear of social unrest. In the same year, on the international front, the United States launched its eight-year invasion of Iraq under a vague pretext of discovering weapons of mass destruction. The invasion utterly destabilized the Middle East region. The severe lack of transparency in information only amplified the widespread apprehension felt among Chinese citizens. Although the arrival of the Internet age promised democratic exchange of

information and knowledge, the Chinese authorities responded to it by exercising draconian censorship over all media outlet.

However, some positive changes were taking place, as China transformed itself from a socialist economy to a major player in global economics and politics in the new millennium. In 2001, China won the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics and joined the World Trade Organization in the following year. These two events signify an unprecedented role of China in the world that would demand responsibilities from the most populous country which now received global attention and scrutiny. In this context, Gu hoped the radical art forms he intended for *Secondhand Reality* would at once reflect on China's socialist legacy as well as interrogate the impact of globalization on contemporary China.

### **Dog as Subject**

It was in just such a paradoxical and volatile time that Sun and Peng's work began to change. The duo decided to revisit the subject of dogs, this time to delineate not only the interiority of human existence but to tackle the façade of harmonious social order. In planning a project for the exhibition, *Secondhand Reality*, they looked at the taboo tradition of dogfighting. A blood sport banned in England and America, dogfighting was very much alive in China's underground gambling scenes. The violent history of dogfighting had the potential to call forth the truths of uniquely localized situations.

Monica Villavicencio's informative essay "A History of Dogfighting" for *NPR* (July 19, 2007), explains that, in the West, dogfighting dates back to 12th-century Britain, where dogs were trained for a popular event named "baiting." A prototype of dogfighting, baiting was a kind of blood sport where trained dogs went head-to-head against a chained bear or a bull, to the point where the larger animal either got severely wounded or killed. When the British parliament banned baiting in 1835, dogfighting became a legal alternative. Trainers began crossbreeding dogs in order to create "a fast, agile, and vicious animal capable of brawling for hours at a time." Dogfighting quickly spread to the United States shortly before the Civil War. Through crossbreeding of British fight dogs and local species, the American pit bull terriers were created as the ultimate fighting canine. It has since become a favorite breed and spread to Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

In China, dogfighting dates back to the Song dynasty. It can still be seen today in some areas. However, since gambling on dogfights is banned and severely punished, this bloody, inhumane tradition has gone underground, spawning a vast and clandestine gambling network that is popular in Beijing suburbs and Guangdong. Among various breeds, American pit bull terriers are imported from overseas to fight against each other, or with other combative species such as the Tibetan Mastiff. To maximize their profits, dog owners often hire trainers, buy treadmills, and even introduce illegal substances to boost their dogs' fighting abilities. In preparation for their *Secondhand Reality* project, Sun and Peng made several field visits to the training sites and eventually decided to repurpose the typical treadmill training sequence.

The Chinese title they chose was 犬勿近 (*quanwujin*), borrowing from the phrase commonly found in public parks and zoos that warns spectators and visitors to stay away from the animals. Its literal translation is 犬 (dogs) + 勿 (no) + 近 (near), or “don't come near dogs,” wherein “dogs” stand-in for various animals in the parks and zoos. Calling their project in English: *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, the duo appropriated this literal sense and gave an ironic twist to this phrase.

Despite the many challenges associated with producing the performance, including the large physical space the work required, potential legal threats that it might face, and a large production budget, the duo managed to stage three live performances in the museum's recently-restored warehouse site on the opening day of *Secondhand Reality* on October 8, 2003. After the performance, Sun and Peng kept the performance set up as the relic of the project, along with an edited video they created from the three stagings as part of the work, for the duration of the exhibition.

The edited video begins with a crowd walking into a spacious white hall in anticipation of the performance [Figure 4]. Among them were quite a few Western faces, foreign journalists, and renowned scholars and collectors from China and elsewhere. Sun Yuan appears in the beginning, giving instructions to the videographer and taking still photographs himself. Eight bull terriers are on individual treadmills, which had both been borrowed from dog trainers. They are aligned in two rows of four, with the dogs facing one another only a few feet apart but initially separated by opaque screens. Behind each dog is a trainer standing close by. With the ring of a bell, the screens are removed and the dogs are revealed to each other. The

canines immediately lunge at their opponents, each running on a treadmill while held in place by a harness and a chain leash.

The remainder of the video cuts between the three performances, with rhythmic switches of camera angles enhancing the intensity with which the dogs furiously and futilely run towards each other. Many shots were low-angled, focusing particularly on the rapid rotation of the treadmills' wheels and the intense, heavy breathing of the dogs. With the bulldogs' barks filling the white hall, numerous camera flashes come from viewers — many of them showing great excitement for documenting what they see. As each dog continues to frantically sprint toward its opponent, the dog trainers clap and yell, "*Pao, pao!*" ("Run, run!") to encourage their aggression toward each other. Eventually, Peng Yu rings the bell to signal the end of the 5-minute performance. The screens are placed back between the treadmills and many dogs instantly ceased their running and hostility. After the exhibition, this video has since widely been circulated and become the basis to interpret the performance project.

Nothing short of being exploitative and cruel, the live theater of *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* is easily misconstrued as repulsive by many. Yet, for Sun and Peng, the violence and the human consumption of such brutality precisely mirrored what they perceived as a much crueler world, which constituted the "firsthand" reality. The installation took full advantage of dogs' loyalty to their human masters and their human-trained aggression toward each other. Under Sun and Peng's wicked *mise en scène*, the canines are left with no option but to unleash their aggression and exhaust themselves. Yet, this cruel construction is at best a "secondhand," or derivative, reality. The reality that is truly brutal lies not in the construction of Sun and Peng *per se* but in an ominous foreshadowing of the actual carnage: once unleashed, the pit bulls will release every ounce of their aggression and do what they are trained and engineered to do – to fight each other until the last of their breaths for the sake of human entertainment and capitalist desire.

In the video, we can see that the Chinese audience on site shows no visible shock toward the performance because they were familiar with pit bull terriers and knew that this American species was imported for dogfighting. When we understand this, the historical and cultural complexity of the dog breed reveals itself as a critical locus of Sun and Peng's transgressive inquiry on globalism as the new governing order of world politics.

As their largest installation to date, Sun and Peng strategically and self-consciously extended their critique to broader cultural demographics beyond China, demanding us, even in 2003, to read it in multiple ways. The American pit bull terriers used was not only a foreign species but also artificial products of a complex breeding that culturally and historically mirrored the inherent aggression of humankind. Ironically, this American dog breed, created to serve in such blood sports as bull baiting and dog fighting, has since been domesticated and beloved by Euro-American households, while its use in dogfighting – and indeed, dogfighting itself – has largely been forgotten in these countries. This alone complicates the reception of the work, especially in American and other Western contexts. Sun and Peng were also aware that indigenous dog breeds still represent a source of meat in many rural areas of China, as in other non-Western rural and impoverished communities. For those people outside the Euro-American context, American pit bull terriers would moreover appear a particularly foreign and vicious animal. Such an immense cultural gap dictates that the reception of the piece will range from anger to amusement to indifference.

In this light, transporting an exercise routine of fight dog training to a fine art museum context becomes an institutional critique of sorts. The piece questions whether an art installation is capable of creating unfiltered, raw reality, or merely just producing a perception of it, which is a secondhand version of reality. Ultimately, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* reveals itself as a theater that portrays the existential crisis of China and its inhabitants, entering into and wrestling with the complexity of globalization in politics and economics. *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* is a grotesque but faithful allegory of the dystopic force in the world at large. It is a theater of the world.

### **The Guggenheim Backlash**

Fast forwarding to 2017, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* was intended to be part of Guggenheim's landmark survey exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* [Figure 5]. The difficulty the work might face had been foreshadowed by Michael Rush's bitter criticism from 2004, touched upon at the beginning of this essay. Indeed, removed from its specific social and artistic context, the work's portrayal of brutality seems inarguably vile to many viewers.

Sun and Peng were among 71 artists and collectives in Guggenheim's exhibition roster. Positioning its exhibition as an up-to-date analysis of Chinese contemporary art, the museum



emphasized conceptualism over the span of three decades: from 1989 to the present. A project by a major art institution that exerts significant influence, the exhibition was clearly intended to explore ways in which these works could be catapulted into a global audience, as its press release (#1498, dated September 21, 2017) asserted. The question remains: Did the museum succeed in their mission?

Sun and Peng's video *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* was to occupy the final rectangular gallery at the Guggenheim, following the upward spiral of its rotunda. Walking up the streamlined corridor, viewers would have experienced a complex array of multi-media works, which were individually visceral and powerful but, placed next to one another, served rather as caricatures of each turbulent episode of China for the last thirty years. The works were neither arranged in a successive timeline, nor grouped in geographic regions, nor categorized in shared formalist elements. They produced an exciting cacophony, yet failed to coalesce as a story. In the final gallery, which Guggenheim curators often use to create a memorable coda, it felt as though the timeline was inexplicably shuffled again due to the coexistence of Sun and Peng's *Dogs* and Gu Dexin's *2009-05-02*, a 35-panel installation featuring continuous listings of heinous crimes written in the same Communist propaganda font in simplified Chinese, punctuated by the same sentence opener, "We have..." [Figure 6].

At face value, both *Dogs* and *2009-05-02* could coexist as two visceral critiques of "China." In reality, such a pairing compromises the meaning of both pieces due to a fundamental difference of their targeted audiences. *2009-05-02* is an introspective monologue that solicits curiosity for outsiders but punches the gut of insiders. For those who do not understand Chinese, the banner merely reads like an "exotic" font that evokes the Mao era and suggests collectivity. For those who are literate in Chinese however, the sentence opener "We have" and the association of ghastly crimes implies the literate viewers' agency in all these actions, thus augmenting possible feelings of shame and concealment for the Chinese audience who had no choice but to participate in this haunting narrative. This includes the massive death tolls during the ten-year Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, a party-led initiative that mobilized the participation of the entire society, and the mass dislocation of urban populations during the 2008 Olympics, which many citizens witnessed on a daily basis and felt mostly powerless to resist against injustice.

Sharing little to no formal or conceptual similarity with *2009-05-02*, the introspective criticism found in *2009-05-02* is exactly what Sun and Peng have sought to deconstruct and animate throughout their entire career. In the decade that followed the creation of *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, Sun and Peng continued to grapple with the global conflicts and unrests unfolding in the 21st century. As of 2017, the duo had ceased using any animals in their work, the last being the fighting dog performance in 2003. Most notably, Sun and Peng have adopted industrial materials such as barbed wires and cranes as manifestations of humanmade aggressions informed by the violent undertone that persists in our day and age. For example, the 2013 performance *Seeing Is Not an Option* featured twelve men, all blindfolded, continuously assembling and disassembling real AK-47s.

In the 2008 installation *Freedom* [Figure 7], the duo suspended a rubber water hose midair in a steel cage, letting it thrash wildly against the floor and the wall as water burst out of the hose. The piece is widely viewed as an allegory to the Communist regime's political suppression of its citizens. Sun and Peng's goal has always been to create a challenging but unfailingly accessible display of not just a certain cultural audience but of humanity as a whole. Instead of illustrating Sun and Peng's consistent yet progressive modes of production, or by pairing with the two works, it appears that the curatorial team somehow expected two equally controversial yet conceptually opposite works to form a synchronized viewing experience. After the backlash over their piece's ethical violations and the Guggenheim's subsequent decision to take the work down, the monitor features a black screen, displaying only the title *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* and the date "10, 2003."

In the exhibition, there simply were too few resources provided for viewers to understand Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's evolving identities from an underground avant-garde duo to active figures wrestling in the global art arena. Although *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* was created in 2003 and no longer necessarily reflects the duo's current ethos, it would have supposedly demonstrated the poignant criticism of China's increasing agency in its gradual adoption of the globalized model of cultural and political diplomacy. Hoping to settle the controversy, the curatorial team issued the following statement (press release #1498, dated September 21, 2017):

Reflecting the artistic and political context of its time and place, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* is an intentionally challenging and provocative artwork that seeks

to examine and critique systems of power and control. We recognize that the work may be upsetting. The curators of the exhibition hope that viewers will consider why the artists produced it and what they may be saying about the social conditions of globalization and the complex nature of the world we share.

The Guggenheim's terse defense did very little to appease public anger and unrest but instead raised a key question for the institutional parade of globalism, which is now a legitimate curatorial methodology: Do Western geographic surveys of art from non-Western backgrounds have the ability to import notions of modernity from the period and locale of "the other". The critical irony of *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*'s absence from the Guggenheim show lies in that this is the rare work that aims to puncture the optimism of globalism as an equalizer of the oppression and hegemony belonging to the history of imperialism and colonialism. It seeks to question the premature celebration of globalism that consequently motivates institutions to conduct general and regional "artistic" survey exhibitions intended as value equalizers of all notions of artistic modernity in the "postcolonial" era.

In 2017, however, this critical work from 2003 finds itself in an exhibition that functions more like a clumsy ethnographic, rather than artistic, exploration of Chinese art in the 20th and 21st centuries. Without rigorously restating the contemporaneous urgency of works such as *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, the Guggenheim failed to offer crucial contextualization, revealing its self-perception as a Western art venue of intrinsic cultural and political dominance. With its meandering analysis of thirty years of China's artistic history, the museum seems to seek affirmation for their mere ambition to include Chinese contemporary art – through the lens of socially-aware artworks – yet offers hardly enough of a framework for the audience to absorb its nuances. In this light, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* finds itself entering a wasteland, having to satisfy an abstract desire to establish a certain representation of a region as a cultural remnant, rather than a work with continuous potency and relevance. As avant-garde artists, Sun and Peng had taken the brave initiative to engage with a time and place beyond their own, with or without the aid of a Western institution. However, as a radical conceptualist piece created in China in 2003, its intimate link with a specific complex age of China is lost in translation, in the prosaic prescription "post-1989." This prescient work will remain as a global theater in absence until being

critically reinserted into a framework that expresses genuine interest in its transgressive display of the avant-garde and its cutting-edge diagnosis of globalism.

## Figures



Figure 1. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, 2003. Performance at *Secondhand Reality*, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China, 2003



Figure 2. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Body Link*, 2000. Performance at *Indulge in Hurt*, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China, 2000



Figure 3. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Soul Killing*, 2000. Installation view at *Fuck Off*, Donglang Art Gallery, Shanghai, China, 2000



Figure 4. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, 2003. Compilation of video stills

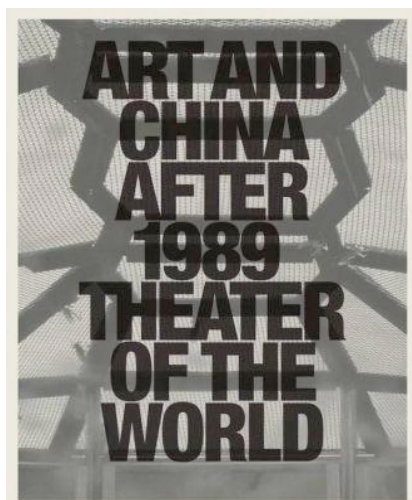




Figure 5. Guggenheim Museum, *Theater of the World*, 2017. Exhibition poster



Figure 6. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, 2003 and Gu Dexin, 2009-05-02, 2009 (above). Installation view at *Art and China After 1989 Theater of the World*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2017



Figure 7. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Freedom*, 2016. Installation view at *What about the Art? Contemporary Art from China*, Qatar Museums (QMA), Doha, Qatar 2016