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Spring Snow for the Countryman: Yu Zhenli and Contemporary Art in Dalian

Li Yang

Abstract

Since the passing of Yu Zhenli, many people in the art community have reviewed his artistic journey, particularly his continuously evolving creative practices and his studio transformation that integrated art into everyday life. However, his contributions to the local art ecosystem as a native artist from Dalian are equally worthy of study. This article begins with the lesser-known handwritten walls of Yu Zhenli studio and, by examining his creations, life, documents, and social interactions, reviews the social contributions of his artistic activities.

Key Words

Contemporary art, aesthetic sociology, Dalian, Yu Zhenli, 8+1

At the back of Yu Zhenli studio, a rear wall with eaves about five or six meters high. It can be accessed via a narrow path, but to fully see the fragments he seemingly intended to half-conceal, one must climb the slope behind the path. These fragments include messages like “太累人，再不跟藝術家浪了！ (Too exhausting, no more messing around with artists!)” “NO! 永不屈服！ (NO! Never surrender!)” “I HOPE...” “長的太胖了！畫不好 (Too fat to draw well!)” “勝利在望？ (Victory in sight?)” and so on. These alternating sentiments of dejection and exhilaration are part of the many presences that constitute his being and the various instances of his Dasein. A large, roughly drawn pentagram is at the top of the wall. The wall also features scattered small pentagrams and some barely recognizable writings and symbols. These elements are scattered and irregular, but this randomness likely represents his rule—a rule full of contradictions and resistance. After his passing, many have looked back on his artistic journey and social interactions, praising the “negation of negation” within his creative achievements, and delving into his behavior of “life as art.” However, beyond words, there is often a sense of lamentation about his inability to navigate the dilemma between greatness and insignificance.

1. Persistence Amid Negation

The development of contemporary art in certain regions of China is not uniform, and multiple factors determine the current state of a particular region. Unlike first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which have special geographical advantages, regions like Dalian lack open access to diverse external cultural resources. The cultural ecology here is primarily dominated by regional and geographical cultures. As for avant-garde cultural movements like contemporary art, they have hardly emerged in some small and medium-sized cities, making it even more challenging to thrive. Many art practitioners tend to flock to a few major cities for opportunities, from prestigious art schools to art districts. The nurturing environment of these circles has always been the fertile soil for the emergence of contemporary art. However, there are also dedicated individuals who grow weary of the hierarchical circles and choose to study their humanity alone in less prosperous regions. Part of the reason for this may be their deep, unbreakable bond with the land, much like “The Choice of the Sea Consciousness,” Yu Zhenli’s contemplative statement in 1987, which suggests that his flowing river of creativity



Figure 1. The rear wall of Yu Zhenli studio, photographed by Li Yang, November 6, 2023.

might find a more effective path by merging into the sea of his hometown.

Yu Zhenli was born in 1949 in Jinzhou District, Dalian, during the period of the Soviet military presence. In 1965, he attended Dalian Normal School, where he began receiving systematic art training; however, in his second year, he encountered tumultuous political movements. Due to youth movements at the time such as the Great Link-up, Yu Zhenli had the opportunity to visit and study at art academies and museums in Beijing, Wuhan, Shanghai, Tianjin, Jinan, Nanjing, and other places. Through these self-initiated learning experiences, he grew and became known during the decade-long movement. In 1972, he began accepting commissions for political propaganda posters from major publishers. By the late 1970s, more than eighty of his propaganda posters had been published, earning him a reputation comparable to the Dalian worker woodcuts, exhibited nationwide as ideological models. Moreover, he also

served as an instructor for many worker-artists. His propaganda posters often served as models for art students to copy, even though he was only in his twenties. Although some teachers from the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts did come to Lvshun, Dalian to provide lectures and guidance in the 1970s, Yu Zhenli's primary art education mostly consisted of a few brief periods of professional training and several unique study trips. More importantly, it was his keen perceptiveness, talent and, most crucially, his independent reflection amidst the constantly changing and unpredictable political movements, in which no one could remain unaffected, which enable him to maintain skepticism towards certain matters that were subject to negation.

After the advent of the reform and opening-up era when propaganda posters, as ideological tools, became obsolete, Yu Zhenli unhesitatingly applied the insights he had long been familiar with to his artwork. This led to numerous challenges he faced during some exhibitions.



Figure 2. Yu Zhenli. *Landscape No. 1*. Gouache on paper, 38.5×21cm, 1972.

Various visual experiments of modernism began to appear in his creations, culminating in the mature expressionism of *Women at Wedding Reception*. However, this transformation was not thorough enough for him. He gradually abandoned the figurative essence in his previous paintings, moving towards complete Chinese abstract morphological expressionism, yet one could still identify the traces and markers of the various stages in his artwork—red elements, calligraphy, geometric shapes, Taoist philosophy, and the rough strokes akin to a bricklayer’s technique. In 1993, Yu Zhenli’s *Birthday Memo* series was exhibited at the *93 Northeast Contemporary Oil Painting Exhibition* and won an award. Regarding Yu Zhenli’s works in this exhibition, Yi Ying wrote the following review: “For Yu Zhenli, the visual effect is not his primary pursuit. He values the process of action more. By solidifying expressive brushstrokes through the creation of texture on nearly monochromatic gray surfaces, he externalizes certain psychological crises from personal experiences. Yu Zhenli regards the setting of the process of action as a disruption to established norms, affirming unconventional daily behavior as a response in art. He has already reached the edge of non-painting; all norms of conventional art do not apply to him. Eventually, he will move towards non-painting conceptual art.”¹ On December 26, 1994, Yu Zhenli moved alone onto Dahei Mountain, beginning a period of arduous and challenging

artistic creation. After settling on Dahei Mountain, he compressed his life into a self-imprisoned artistic experience, building houses, creating large installations, writing *Handwritten Diary*, and producing abstract paintings on the mountain. His daily actions became art, and he approached life with an artistic perspective, moving towards “non-painting conceptual art.”

In 1987, Yu Zhenli wrote in his article “The Choice of Sea Consciousness”: “In earlier years, people crowded into a stagnant bay playing ‘mahjong,’ causing art to lose its brilliance. When I realized that the ever-changing surging waves and the sparkling sea spray had not lost the essence of the sea, as an artist, wouldn’t it be more meaningful and true to oneself to jump out of the exhausting muddy pit and seek a broader field of creativity?”² Playing mahjong in a stagnant bay was his way of mocking his achievements from the 1970s. When friends advised him “not to stray from his original path,”³ he knew that his path was not to cling to that stagnant labor but to remain dedicated to the art he believed in because “I must become a ‘sea’ driven by an inner vital force! Otherwise, I would drift with the current, allowing myself to be controlled by ‘ethics’ and ‘rules’, and end up in an inescapable, rigid, hypocritical, and slave-like state.”⁴ After the reform and opening-up era, when humanistic art began to re-emerge and waves of artistic thought surged across the country, examining his works from that period reveals that he never missed



Figure 3. Yu Zhenli. *Grasp Revolution and Promote Production, Work, and War Preparedness to Improve All Aspects of Work*. Propaganda poster, 77×214cm, 1976.

an opportunity to abandon his past self. Engaging in such dedicated pursuits meant embarking on a unique and unrepeatable path. When others move forward or celebrate, turning around can also be a form of progress.⁵

He could not be precisely content with the comfort he had achieved; his obsession with repeatedly negating the past and grasping for possibilities within impossibilities drove him. Amid his hesitation, he often regretted the past in his conversations and writings. This contradiction is not contradictory because the gap between his high expectations for himself and the realities he achieved became the foundation and vision that continually propelled him into the next stage. In his creations, the already familiar undulating brushstrokes and the symbols—like the pentagram and the red flag on the rear wall under the eaves—are marks that run through every stage of his artistic career. In his life, his obsession with the sea represents his hometown and his aspirations. This reflects Nietzsche's quote he cited in his article: "Man is a polluted river. One must be a sea, to receive a polluted river without becoming unclean."⁶

2. Another Narrative from the Opposite Bank

On December 26, 1993, the centenary of Mao Zedong's birth, many artists who still felt the residual warmth of avant-garde art chose this day to create commemorative works, reasserting the rebellious scripts etched into their destinies. A grand commemorative event also took place in Dalian; in Dalian's Zhongshan Square, Zhu Lingbo and Zhu Xikun organized *Wrapping Zhongshan Square* (also known as the *Red 100 Action*), a public art event, with Yu Zhenli being one of the implementers of the event. The day's activities included various giant balloon installations, musical performances, and a *Portrait of*

Chairman Mao exhibition organized by Zhu Xikun. It isn't easy to speculate on Yu Zhenli's mindset when participating in this event. He likely mentioned this incident in his unpublished *Handwritten Diary*, but his memoirs or resume do not describe it. This might be because he resisted participating in large-scale events at the time, or perhaps he had some unspoken aversion to painting portraits of leaders again. Those familiar with his work will know that after abandoning propaganda posters his creations no longer involved elements with distinct ideological connotations; both propaganda and criticism did not align with his understanding of art itself. A year later he chose to go up the mountain on December 26, 1994. Yu Zhenli had an unavoidable, profound feeling about Chairman Mao's birthday because his initial achievements were directly related to the era led by this leader, and all his later rebellions in art were intricately connected to the labels of that era. Therefore, Yu Zhenli also considered this day his "birthday" in a certain sense. Additionally, every volume of his *Handwritten Diary* written after going up the mountain starts from this day; many of the 8+1 art exhibitions he sponsored and organized later also opened on this day. Almost all his important activities each year were scheduled for December 26, perhaps filled with a sense of destiny.

Aside from his transformation in painting and his decision to move up the mountain to build his life, Yu Zhenli's interactions with the contemporary art scene in Dalian present a unique case. Undoubtedly, he was a pioneering guide, but his involvement in these interactions was filled with contradictions and was hard to let go of. His early years of "Accepting Alms" left him with numerous "debts." From the moment he moved up the mountain, he entered an exceptionally difficult situation, often relying on assistance from family and



Figure 4. Yu Zhenli. *Old Oarsman* (《老槳》). Oil on canvas, 161.5×160.5cm, 1987.

friends to sustain his life and artistic endeavors. This was especially true for the constant reconstruction of his studio, where friends donated many building materials. He frequently settled the costs of a few bags of cement or sand through bartering with his paintings. He reflected after gifting the entire *Rainbow Portraits* series to friends who had helped him in 2000: “In gratitude for the various forms of assistance from friends who have selflessly supported me over the years, I dedicated a year to create, offering my work as a way to repay the debt of gratitude owed in every moment. This act can be seen as ‘to bestow upon fate’, and in doing so, I also welcomed

new ‘debts’. Moreover, as individuals, we owe our existence to our parents; everything acquired after society bestows that. Therefore, the care and criticism from friends are also a form of ‘debt’. I consider friendships and the like as debts to be repaid through my lifelong work.”⁷ These interpersonal interactions led him to continuously give back to his family and friends whenever he was financially stable. However, he was not good at socializing and even offended many close people. Those familiar with him could sense that Yu Zhenli, who was straightforward and outspoken, genuinely wanted to do better but often felt powerless.



Figure 5. Yu Zhenli working in his studio in Dahei Mountain, 1995.

Many of the stories he frequently recounted were about his failures in communication. He often reflected on this: “Of course, I may have been influenced by Lu Xun for many years, with his direct criticism of ‘unforgiving’, which offended many people, especially when I lost my temper with friends. My lack of gentleness in interactions is something I deeply regret. Why couldn’t I interact with others in a harmless and peaceful manner, like a leisurely wanderer on the tidal flats? Alas!”⁸ “Caustic words harm oneself and others—I’m not sure why, but I often forgive or laugh it off whenever I hear ordinary people say something wrong. Yet, when I encounter those in power, my caustic remarks slip out occasionally. If I could curb this fault, perhaps I wouldn’t face external criticisms.”⁹ The anecdotes between Yu Zhenli and his friends and family are enough to portray him as a genuine person who often found himself an “outsider” unable to control his circumstances.

Yu Zhenli’s move to the mountains did not completely sever his interactions with the art world; many people believed he merely made a superficial retreat from society. Considering the many years he spent reconstructing

his studio, it was clear he could not realize his various ideas on his own. He was unwilling to abandon his simple, rustic lifestyle or lofty artistic ambitions. His way of repaying debts was through labor, and the only way he could exchange value was through the artistic work he was familiar with.

3. A Wide-Angle View of the Region

Before moving up the mountain, Yu Zhenli hoped for a wealth of artistic knowledge and achievements and a comfortable and stable life. But is it satisfaction with these expectations that we yearn for? Not really. What interests us more is how these expectations evolve; however, when each idea fails to materialize, the gap between expectations can lead us into a rebellion against life. Through a series of negations, it seems that the power that was about to be lost will emerge from a residual disappearance.¹⁰ After experiencing various difficulties in the 1990s, Yu Zhenli, from the beginning of the millennium, began to give back to society in his way. He vigorously promoted the phenomenon of a distinctive



Figure 6. Yu Zhenli. *Idiom: Turning Stone into Gold No. 01* (《成語·點石成金 01 號》). Mixed media, 90 × 90cm, 2003.

regional contemporary art community in Dalian, which can be attributed to his societal efforts through artistic endeavors.

8+1 is an important label for the phenomenon of the contemporary art community in Dalian. It encompasses ten themed group exhibitions and multiple art sponsorships. Apart from the first *8+1 Dalian Modern Art Exhibition* held from July 9th to 16th, 2002, which received capital funding from private sources, this project was mainly sponsored by Yu Zhenli through selling his artworks. The participating artists in the first 8+1 exhibition included Yu Zhenli, Li You, Mou Daqi,

Sun Guowei, Song Yi, Xu Changjian, Yang Maoyuan, Yang Hong, and Zhang Wan. 8+1 was also named after this exhibition. There are several reasons for this explanation. For example, the participating artists consist of eight young artists and one elder artist. The exhibition venue is also located near Bayi Road in the Xigang District of Dalian. Considering Yu Zhenli's consistent leadership and later involvement, the more convincing "1" is his role as the only elder artist among them.

The subsequent exhibitions continued under the banner of 8+1 and included:

· *The Second 8+1 Art Exhibition* held at Yu Zhenli studio, Jinzhou



Figure 7. Yu Zhenli Studio. Photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 5, 2023.



Figure 8. Exhibition poster for 8+1 displayed under the basketball hoop at Yu Zhenli Studio, July 1, 2021.

District, Dalian, August 19, 2010.

- *Zero Altitude-Looking Up—The Third 8+1 Art Exhibition* held at an abandoned Japanese-owned towel factory building (729 Art Space), on the west side of Canon Nan Hongyun Building, Jinzhou New District, Dalian, December 26, 2011.

- *The Fourth 8+1 Art Exhibition* held at Guanglu Island, Dalian, August 4-5, 2012.

- *Post-Abstract After—The Fifth 8+1 Art Exhibition* held at Dalian No. 15 Middle School Art Museum, December 26-31, 2013.

- *The Sixth 8+1 Art Exhibition—The First Photography Art Exhibition* held at Yu Zhenli studio, Dahei Mountain Photography Art Space, Dalian, July 15-16, 2014.

- *The Model Effect—The Seventh 8+1 Art Exhibition*, a touring exhibition held at Dalian Peninsula Art Museum, Dalian Port Square, Zhongshan Square, People's Square, and Xinghai Square, December 26, 2014 to mid to late January of 2015.

- *The Eighth 8+1 Art Exhibition: Three Knife Words—Cheng Shaoqin, Wang Lianyi, Yan Chengfu Black and White Print Exhibition* held at Dalian Zhongshan Art Museum, August 8-20, 2017.

- *The Wasteless Era—The Ninth 8+1 and Document Exhibition* held at Dalian Urban Art Museum, December 26, 2019 to January 11, 2020.

- *The Tenth 8+1 Theme Exhibition—Coexisting Divergence-Dalian New Youth Art Exhibition* held online on December 26, 2020.

In 2014, Yu Zhenli donated one million CNY to establish the 8+1 Art Fund. This fund, established by individuals and reviewed by experts, is a public welfare fund open to society. It aims to support young artists and 8+1 art exhibitions. Additionally, exhibitions sponsored under the name of 8+1 include:

- *Solitary Blossoms—Jiang Jimin's Painting Exhibition* held at the Shengzhi Space Art Center in the 798 Art Zone, Beijing, April 2-11, 2014.

- *Principles of Narration—Xu Changjian's Contemporary Abstract Art Exhibition* held at the Shengdian Space in 798, Beijing, December 3-9, 2014.

- *2014 Yu Zhenli Notes + 8 Project Art Exhibition* held at the Songzhuang International Art Museum in Beijing, December 26, 2015 to January 26, 2016.

- *Visuals—The Second Image Art Exhibition* held at Yu Zhenli studio, Dahei Mountain Image Art Space, Dalian, June 13, 2015.

- *Imprints—The Third Image Art Exhibition* held at Yu Zhenli studio, Dahei Mountain Image Art Space, Dalian, July 16 to September 16, 2016.

- *Mag III—Flower Shadows and Poetry—Art Education Group Dahei Mountain Poetry Meeting* held at Yu Zhenli studio in Dalian, May 18, 2018.

- *8+1 Tenth Parallel Exhibition Both Ends—Art Education Group*



Figure 9. Yu Zhenli's daily work scene photo, December 28, 2021.

Art Exhibition, when they were collecting works, Lao Yu brought a tricycle full of his works. However, before he reached the committee's entrance, he remembered the exhibition's logo, which featured a 'No U-turn' sign. So, he turned around and went back. This self-fulfilling act achieved a personal transcendence—he avoided joining the hype.”

6. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, trans. Qian Chunqi, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2007), 8.

7. Yu Zhenli, “Rainbow Portraits: Yu Zhenli Speaks,” *Yu Zhenli Art Museum* (WeChat Public Platform), December 26, 2022.

8. *Yu Zhenli Birthday Notes: 2014 Edition* (Hong Kong: China Today Art Museum Publishing House, 2015), 140.

9. *Ibid.*, 491.

10. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 580.

下里巴人的陽春白雪：于振立與大連的當代藝術

李洋

摘要：在于振立逝世後，諸多藝術界人士對他的藝術歷程進行過回顧，特別是他不斷變革的創作實踐，以及藝術融入生活的工作室改造。但他作為大連土生土長的藝術家，對當地藝術生態的公益貢獻同樣具有研究價值。本文從于振立工作室一面不常被關注的手書牆壁講起，結合他的創作、生活、文獻及社會交際，回顧他藝術行為的社會貢獻。

關鍵詞：當代藝術，藝術社會學，大連，于振立，8+1