

Time and Tides: Xiao Lu's Recursive Art, 1989-2019

The inescapable focus of any commentary on the art of Chinese-born female artist Xiao Lu is the action of her firing a gun into her installation *Dialogue* 对话 (1988-89). That event took place on the opening day of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* at the China National Art Gallery¹ in Beijing on February 5, 1989, four months before the Tian'anmen Square Massacre. It is as if Xiao Lu herself was killed too on that fateful day when she was 26 years old. Her later artwork has received little critical attention, overtaken by a meta-narrative written in 1989 which, it must be said, she has been complicit in enabling through her silence. Fifteen years after the gunshot event, Xiao Lu challenged her own mute stance with an explosive revelation about the deeply personal circumstances relating to the creation of *Dialogue* and the shooting action. Her declaration called into question a powerful storyline that had developed around the work and its authorship which lessened, and in some instances removed, her agency from the shooting. Dominant male voices in the Chinese art world (emanating from art academies, art criticism and arts bureaucracies) had privileged grander claims of socio-politically inflected intent.

¹Known today as the National Art Museum of China. See *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, Asia Art Archive.

Since 2003—the year Xiao Lu spoke out—she has created a series of powerful artworks, many of them performance pieces. She is one of few Chinese artists who have persisted with the form. While she has moved forward in her artistic practice, she has continually been drawn back into the complex orbit of 1989, a watershed period in recent Chinese history that remains unsettled and contested to this day. Her ongoing reference to the events of 1989, driven by an obsessive desire to correct the historical record, arises from her determination to seek art world recognition for her work and her actions. Despite the notoriety that Xiao Lu has accrued as a result of the work, *Dialogue* and the related shooting action have also proved a difficult legacy for the artist and those associated with her to negotiate.

In her recent art Xiao Lu has confronted sensitive issues including the difficulties of communication between the sexes, gender inequality and individual justice within Chinese society. At the same time, she often returns to the gunshot—the moment that changed her life—an action that has been forever linked to the bloody suppression of pro-democracy protests in 1989, a highly sensitive topic which remains off-limits for investigation in mainland China. This essay re-positions Xiao Lu's art as a significant strand of contemporary art practice that is intended to unsettle the viewer. It begins with a detailed account of



Xiao Lu, *Tides* 弄潮, 2019, performance documentation, Stanwell Park, Sydney, 18 January 2019.
 Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney.
 Photograph by Jacquie Manning. Courtesy the artist.

Xiao Lu's 2019 work *Tides* 弄潮, performed at daybreak on the beach at Stanwell Park outside Sydney at high tide² on 18 January 2019. It is followed by contextualising sections designed to provide interpretive lenses through which to understand the work further. As with the majority of Xiao Lu's performance works, *Tides* was developed in response to an invitation, in this case a commission to create a new work for the artist's first retrospective exhibition, *Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue* 肖鲁: 语嘿, at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney.³ The essay argues that Xiao Lu's art may best be understood as a recursive practice informed by cyclical time and the feedback loop of 1989 in which she and others closely involved in the gunshot event, remain caught.

Action

Making her way to the shoreline of the beach at Stanwell Park as the sky begins to lighten, Xiao Lu gazes out at the Pacific Ocean. The photographers make their preparations. Cirrus and cumulus clouds catch the sun's first rays; the ocean delivers slow, surging waves. It is a beautiful morning. Without giving any sign the performance is about to begin, Xiao Lu picks up a bamboo pole from the pile of 30, turns and makes her way down to the shore. Using one of the bamboo pole offcuts, she digs a hole in the sand and plants the first bamboo stake, making sure it stands upright. In the cool silence of the early morning, the only

² On Friday 18 January 2019 high tide at Stanwell Park was 1.56 metres at 6.29am. First light was at 6.07am and sunrise at 6.33am.

³ *Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, 19 January–24 March 2019, formed part of the author's Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellowship research project 'Reconfiguring the World: China. Art. Agency. 1900s to Now' (FT140100743). The exhibition was co-curated by Claire Roberts, Mikala Tai and Xu Hong. The exhibition and associated public programs were supported by the ARC, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, and the Australia-China Council.

noise is the sound of the incoming tide. In the low light it is not possible to make out the artist's features. She appears as a silhouette against the ocean's waves, silvery and glistening at first light; a dark, rounded figure carrying a staff. The scene is monochrome, as if rendered in brush and ink.

As the sky becomes lighter a flock of seagulls comes shrieking and careening, flying close to Xiao Lu and around the bamboo poles. Xiao Lu continues to repeat the action undistracted. Before long the seagulls find greater interest on the upper beach. At times, in between planting the poles, Xiao Lu stops to gaze out to sea, catching her breath, her palms facing outwards in a gesture of apparent openness. Stillness follows activity. As she continues, the beachside town south of Sydney comes to life. Lights in distant houses turn on, signalling the start of the working day. Surfers arrive to ride the waves at high tide; morning walkers and runners work out, dog-walkers commune with nature before the mundane dictates of life take over the day. Passersby are bemused by the activity. Some stop and ask what is going on, curious that an art happening is taking place in their community; others merely take note of the strange occurrence and continue with their routines. The surrounding landscape gradually takes on colour. A cargo ship anchored out at sea is now visible on the horizon line. As morning dawns it is possible to see Xiao Lu's features more clearly: her dark, crimped hair dyed with a shock of red and cut in a short bob, and her long red silk dress created for the occasion by her friend, female artist and designer Feng Ling.⁴ The intensity and brilliance of the reds contrast strongly with the earth-coloured sand, glistening white-blue ocean and the dark protective headland.⁵ Midway through the performance Xiao Lu realises the high tide will not be as high as had been anticipated during the previous afternoon's reconnoitre, and she begins planting the poles much closer to the incoming waves. The distance back to the pile of poles is now greater and requires her to climb up two low banks of sand. The process is tiring and her face reddens. She stumbles and falls, her progress encumbered by the long silk designer dress, now heavy with the weight of water and sand. She injures her hand on the sharp diagonal edge of the bamboo offset being used as a digging aid and continues by 'winding' the poles into the sand, securing their positions with her bare feet. Her toenails are painted bright red. As she winds the poles deep enough into the sand to stand upright, they oscillate in space creating invisible diagonal lines. All the while, Xiao Lu battles incoming waves which increase in intensity, destabilising her footing and that of the poles. Head down, body bent, using both hands and feet, it takes all of her energy to wield the poles into position. Focused on the task, her face is rarely revealed to the cameras. The long kimono-like sleeves of the dress billow in the wind while the wet dress clings to her legs, at times appearing translucent against the brightening ocean and sky.

Part way through the performance one of the bamboo poles moves and then begins a slow, elegant fall, passing from an upright position through a series of diagonals as it topples onto the sand. Rolling into the sea, it is later washed up on the beach and achieves a state of repose. Another pole succumbs to tidal force and is pulled out to sea. Xiao Lu continues with no apparent consideration of its plight. Played with by waves, then caught in a rip, it seems that the pole might well be taken out to sea, but it too is given up by the ocean and deposited back on the beach.

⁴ Feng Ling is a graduate of the Harbin Institute of Art (BA, oil painting) and the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (MA, oil painting). In 2003 she established the Feng Ling Art and Design Studio in 798 Art District, Beijing. Xiao Lu and Feng Ling were among the artists included in the exhibition *Sworn Sisters, Vermilion Art*, Sydney (2018).

⁵ In Chinese culture red is associated with the age-old desire for happiness and good fortune.



Xiao Lu, *Tides* 弄潮, 2019, performance documentation, Stanwell Park, Sydney, 18 January 2019.
Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney.
Photograph by Jacquie Manning. Courtesy the artist.

After planting the last of 30 poles, Xiao Lu stumbles while climbing to the upper level of sand. Exhausted, she pulls herself up and turns to face the ocean, her arms outstretched. She signals that the performance has ended. It has lasted for one hour and ten minutes. The 28 bamboo poles that remain standing are silhouetted against the sand, sea and sky like lines inscribed on nature; their nobby nodes ensuring that they are more than just straight lines. Out beyond the waves, male and female surfers who had entered the water soon after Xiao Lu began the performance are perched on their boards waiting for the next wave. The container ship on the horizon line is in a queue to come into dock.

Process 1

The conceptualisation of *Tides* involved a process of refinement and negotiation. An earlier proposal titled *Ebbing Tide* 退潮 involved a 30-day performance.⁶ Each morning the artist would collect debris from the strandline of a beach in Sydney—shells, stones, seaweed kelp and rubbish—and place it in a mound on the beach. Over time the daily accretions would form a small mountain. Wu Yanmei and Zhengze Yangping, two young artists who lived in the same artist compound as Xiao Lu in Beijing, would assist. Wu and Zhengze had documented Xiao Lu's earlier performance work *Coil* (2018), filmed in her home-studio and would be in Sydney as artists-in-residence. The final proposal, *Tides*, retained the symbolism of the number thirty and the idea of

⁶ Xiao Lu, Performance art proposal, *Ebbing Tide* (provisional), 19 July 2018.



Xiao Lu, *Tides* 弄潮, 2018, performance concept, brush and ink on paper. Courtesy the artist.

durational performance, but over one day rather than thirty days. The proposal was communicated by email and then an image sent via WeChat.⁷ The sketch in brush and ink on paper adopted a horizontal format, unfolding from right to left like a Chinese handscroll. It began with the title 弄潮 or *Tides*, written in a vertical line, echoing brush strokes that gave form to a sparse grove of poles. A series of gently curving horizontal lines suggested a shoreline; short dashes animated a roiling sea and waves with white caps. Wandering through the scene was a figure facing the ocean, head down, walking in a long gown pulled taut by the weight of water and sand. There was nothing to indicate that the figure was necessarily a woman; it could be an ancient sage, a hag, a shaman even. The sketch had a timeless quality. The brushstrokes varied in intensity, some heavy with wet ink, others dry and ethereal as the ink on the brush depleted in the process of painting. The rhythm of wet and dry consistencies appeared to echo the artist's breath, suggesting the repeated action of returning the brush to the inkstone to replenish it with ink. Painted in Beijing in September 2018, the sketch had an autumnal chill suggesting the difficulty of imagining the scene on a beach in Sydney in high summer. Despite her art school training in oil painting and drawing inspired by French academic and Soviet models, Xiao Lu has come to prefer the subjectivity of calligraphy-and-ink painting, drawing on the remembered practices of reading and writing and the visualisation of the image in the mind's eye. She has developed a regular practice of calligraphy and routinely uses ink sketches to give form to her performance concepts. Ink and calligraphy feature prominently in Xiao Lu's works.⁸

As with all of Xiao Lu's performances, the work would not be fully known until the performance was completed. While the brush-and-ink painting conveyed her mental image of the work and was used by the organisers to support the realisation of the performance, at each point in the process of discussion and preparation Xiao Lu insisted on being free to change the work at any time. Used to channelling energy from her surroundings, she insists on keeping open the possibilities inherent in chance occurrences.

Context I – 30 years

The 2019 exhibition *Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue* at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney marked the 30th anniversary of Xiao Lu's arrival in Australia. It was her first retrospective exhibition.⁹ It coincided with the 30th anniversary of what proved to be the turning

⁷ Xiao Lu, email to the author, 8 August 2018. The initial proposal refers to 30 blue-coloured poles.

⁸ See for example, *Quiet Contemplation* (1986), *Dialogue* (1988), *Love Letters* (2009–10), *Menopause* (2011), *Skin Paper Room* (2013), *One* (2015), *People* (2016), *Yin Yang Calendar* (2013–14), *Suspended* (2017). See also: Guest 133–151; and Gladston and Howarth–Gladston, 120–129.

⁹ For details of the exhibition and associated public programs see "Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue," *4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art*. For an analysis of a day-long workshop held at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in conjunction with the exhibition; see also Alex Burchmore, "The China/ Avant-Garde Exhibition and Xiao Lu: 30 Years On."



Xiao Lu, *Dialogue* 对话, 1989, documentation of installation and shooting, *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, National Art Gallery, Beijing, 5 February 1989. Reproduced courtesy of Wen Pulin Archive of Chinese Avant-Garde Art and Xiao Lu.

point for Xiao Lu—the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, a large and sprawling survey of experimental art in Beijing in 1989.¹⁰ Xiao Lu was one of the youngest exhibitors then and one of only a few women artists whose work was selected. On the opening day of the exhibition on 5 February 1989, the eve of the Lunar New Year, Xiao Lu famously fired a gun into her installation *Dialogue* 对话 (1988-89). She had completed the work the previous year as part of her graduation portfolio for the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. The provocative act of submitting an installation for her graduation from the oil-painting department was indicative of the defiant spirit of the times.¹¹ She was the only woman in a class of 11 students. A readymade, *Dialogue* comprised the facades of two telephone booths, separated by mirror glass and a plinth on which was placed a red phone, the receiver dangling off the hook. Photographic portraits of a woman and a man, viewed from behind and seemingly talking into the phone, were affixed to the interior of the booths, the *mise-en-scène* suggesting the impossibility of dialogue.

After the shooting, Xiao Lu and Tang Song attempted to flee the scene. Xiao Lu slipped into the crowd and left the gallery. She later turned herself in to the police. Tang Song, a male student in the brush-and-ink painting department at the Hangzhou art academy, whose work was not included in the exhibition, and a friend of Xiao Lu's, was arrested and taken into custody.¹² After their release a public statement was prepared denying that the 'shooting incident' was politically motivated, which was what the authorities most feared. The statement, signed by both Xiao Lu and Tang Song, formally linked Tang Song to the shooting

¹⁰ The exhibition had been developed over a number of years by a large group of curators, art critics and art editors including Gao Minglu, Fan Di'an, Fei Dawei, Hou Hanru, Kong Chang'an and Li Xianting. Earlier attempts to stage the exhibition had been thwarted by the government's Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation campaign of 1987.

¹¹ In order to satisfy departmental criteria Xiao Lu finally submitted *Dialogue plus Red Wall* (1988), a competent realist oil painting depicting two Tibetan women standing against a weathered red wall. The subject derived from an academy painting trip to Tibet and was typical of work submitted for assessment at that time.

event, and by association to Xiao Lu's installation *Dialogue*, which in the process had been transformed into a stage for what was understood to be an avant-garde art happening.¹³

Four months later, the People's Liberation Army brutally suppressed the student-led protests in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, in a tragedy widely known as 'June 4' or the 'Tian'anmen Square Massacre.' A nationwide crackdown on dissent followed precipitating the departure of many people from China, including Xiao Lu whose gunshots would later be described as a prelude to the massacre. They "transformed the entire *China/Avant-garde Exhibition* into one big, chance happening that underscored the opposition to the official line and the political sensitivity of the Chinese avant-garde..." wrote Li Xianting, one of the curators, for example.¹⁴ The unimagined brutality of the crackdown on dissent and strictures placed on experimental art further overlaid the work with activist intention, associating it with a defeated idealism. In Li's words: "The fate of the exhibition was a precursor to the fate of the student movement at Tian'anmen, in the sense that the *China/Avant-Garde* show became the final demonstration of 80s avant-garde art, marking the conclusion of an era and also the end of its ideals."¹⁵

Xiao Lu left China in December 1989 and found refuge in Australia. She would live in Sydney for seven years. She was eventually joined by Tang Song.¹⁶ They would return to China together in late 1997. Gao Minglu, the principal curator of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, later observed that with Xiao Lu and Tang Song's removal of themselves from the Chinese art world, a situation resulted in which '[n]ormal art historical research [into the shooting event at the China Art Gallery] became completely impossible.'¹⁷

Context II – Asserting agency

In 2003 Xiao Lu and Tang Song separated acrimoniously, prompting Xiao Lu to finally break her long silence about *Dialogue* and the 'shooting incident.' At the age of 41 she found herself unmarried, childless and in the difficult situation of being on her own. In a series of emails, online posts and performance artworks she claimed that the act of shooting the gun was an integral element of *Dialogue*.¹⁸ Her determination to present her version of events led to a semi-fictional autobiography titled *Dialogue* 对话 published in 2010 in Chinese and English by Hong Kong University Press.¹⁹ In a foreword, Gao Minglu, who had since relocated to the US, describes Xiao Lu's shooting action as "no dogmatic sociology or random act of conceptualist significance, but, on the contrary, a long-term build-up of oppressions dating back to Xiao Lu's youth." Xiao Lu's story, he wrote, is "a female tragedy within the specific system of Chinese socialism."²⁰

Xiao Lu insisted that the installation and the shooting arose from a complex personal crisis, following a much earlier episode of sexual abuse that occurred while she was a minor studying at high school in Beijing and involving a senior male artist who was trusted as a guardian figure. Xiao Lu described the complex and multi-layered trauma as representing "the death of my body" and "my illness."²¹ In aiming the gun at her image reflected in the artwork, Xiao Lu had staged a virtual suicide. The bitter separation from Tang Song 15 years later amounted

¹² In video footage of the shooting filmed by Wen Pulin and released much later, after Xiao Lu had fired the first shot, Tang Song can be heard shouting "what about another shot." See "Interview: Xiao Lu" by Carol Yinghua Lu, 14 March 2006 for *Asia Art Archive* (AAA). This interview records in detail Xiao Lu's recollection of the creation of *Dialogue*, the shooting incident and her relationship with Tang Song. See also copies of the Arbitration Notices issued to Xiao Lu and Tang Song, detaining them for five days (Xiao Lu was released after three) for unlawfully carrying a firearm, dated 6 February 1989, in *Li Xianting Archive/AAA*. With thanks to Genevieve Trail for assisting with access to these and other related materials.

¹³ Tang Song's understanding of his involvement in the 'shooting incident' was conveyed in a letter to Hans van Dijk, dated 10 March 1989, *Hans van Dijk/AAA*. See also Borysevicz, "Tang Song (1960-2022)" in *Artforum*, 15 July 2022; and Weng Zijian, "Tang Song fang tan (Interview with Tang Song)" recorded at Tang Song Studio, Hangzhou, on 27 November 2009.

¹⁴ Li Xianting xix. See also Gao Minglu viii.

¹⁵ Li Xianting xix.

¹⁶ In May 1991, after living in a resettlement camp in Hong Kong for six months and without any prospect of soon obtaining a visa for Australia, Tang Song stowed away on a cargo ship bound for Australia. On arrival in Sydney, Tang was arrested as an illegal immigrant and spent seven months at Villawood Detention Centre. In his artistic biography, he describes the journey as "a unique example of performance art." See *Tang Song, Curriculum Vitae*, Xiao Lu in a fax communication with the author, June 28, 2002.

¹⁷ Gao Minglu viii.

to a double wound and prompted her decision to finally speak out. The motivation for Xiao Lu's symbolic act of self-annihilation came from a deep, dark, personal space. Her revelation of it was as shocking as it was brave.

For those in the Chinese art world who linked the shooting to Tang Song and attached larger artistic and socio-political meanings to the event, Xiao Lu's belated explanation proved difficult to accept. Her attempt to correct the historical record provoked disbelief and anger. It amounted to an undoing of the heroic narrative of the avant-garde and caused humiliation and loss of face for many people, herself included.²²

Xu Hong, a leading Beijing-based female art critic, supported Xiao Lu's claim of agency, citing qualitative differences in Xiao Lu's and Tang Song's approaches to art-making among other factors. While Xu Hong criticised Xiao Lu's earlier silence as "a kind of acquiescence," she took aim at the persistent "dictatorship of ideology" operating in Chinese art criticism at the time that devalued the expression of emotion in art. In her 2006 essay on Xiao Lu and *Dialogue*, Xu Hong drew attention to the denigration of women's creative practice in art world discourse in China (mostly written by men), "perpetuating the myth of male greatness and female insignificance."²³ In the end, Xiao Lu won the moral battle over authorship through market recognition.²⁴ In 2006 a still photograph of Xiao Lu shooting her installation and a facsimile that she had made of *Dialogue* (the original work was lost or destroyed in the tumult after June 4, 1989) were listed under Xiao Lu's name and sold at auction by China Guardian. The installation, which sold for 2,310,000 yuan, was acquired for the Taikang Art Collection, owned by Chen Dongsheng's Taikang Life Insurance Co. Ltd. and managed by female curator Tang Xin.²⁵ Ten years later, *Dialogue* was borrowed for the *SHE: International Women Artists Exhibition* (2016) curated by Wang Wei, the powerful female director of the Long Museum, a private art museum she established in 2014 with her husband Liu Yiqian in Shanghai. In a significant breakthrough, the exhibition juxtaposed the work of Chinese and international artists. *Dialogue* was placed in the final section of the exhibition titled *Self-expression*, which also included the work of international artists Jenny Saville, Tracey Emin, Bridget Riley, Miriam Cahn, Shirin Neshat, Ulay and Marina Abramovic, and Ana Mendieta.²⁶ In the catalogue entry for *Dialogue*, the significance of Xiao Lu shooting a gun into her installation is summed up as having pushed performance art into extreme dialogue with legal and social systems and at the same time raised debate about the discourse of power between the sexes. The exhibition at Long Museum (West Bund) positioned *Dialogue* as an influential work in the development of women's art.²⁷

Context III – Becoming a performance artist

Since 2003 Xiao Lu has fired a gun at her own image (*15 Gunshots... From 1989 to 2003*); staged a mock funeral/wedding in which she marries herself (*Wedlock*, 2009); asked members of the public 'what is love?' (*What is Love?*, 2009); invited strangers to drink red wine with her, becoming so intoxicated she was rushed to hospital (*Drunk*, 2009); had her head shaved (*Bald Girls*, 2012); sought sperm donors in an exhibition in Yan'an that commemorated Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (*Sperm*, 2006); ran naked from the Museo

¹⁸ After a chance encounter and conversation with Gao Minglu in Beijing, Xiao Lu formally wrote to Gao who, since 1991, had been living and working as an academic in America. She also wrote to Li Xianting. The details of their exchanges were later published online and included in a dossier of material relating to *Dialogue* that formed part of the performance *Dialogue about Dialogue* (2004). In that work Xiao Lu stood in front of a replica of the *Dialogue* installation, read out a poem explaining her actions in 1989, and then proceeded to a cut a lock of her hair, which had not been cut since 1989, placed it on a dossier of documentary materials and handed it out to audience members, one after another. The lock of hair was intended as a sign of sincerity and truth. See references to the communication with Gao in Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 205. See also Carol Lu's "Interview: Xiao Lu."

¹⁹ The English language edition was translated by Archibald McKenzie.

²⁰ Foreword, *Dialogue* xiii.

²¹ *Dialogue* 1-2.

²² See Gao Minglu xiii.

²³ Xu Hong, "Ta, Tamen, Ta, (Her, Them, He)" 16. The essay was written in response to discussion at the Second Shenzhen Critics' Forum, 30 November 2005. Xu Hong was the only female among 29 critics from across China. See also Xu Hong, "Zouchu shen yuan (Walking Out of the Abyss)" 17. Xu Hong was a participating artist in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*.

²⁴ For many years Tang Song continued to list the 'shooting incident' in his Curriculum Vitae. Tang Song's work *Crime Scene* (*Fanzui changjing*, 2013) included in his online solo exhibition on Artshare.com alludes to his ongoing pre-occupation with the incident. See "Kuangre jiqing de siyu (Whispers of Raging Passion)," Artshare.com.

Diocesano di Venezia exposing her mature body and jumped into the Grand Canal (*Purge*, 2013); doused herself with a bucket of ink and then water (*One*, 2015); accidentally severed a tendon while using a sharp knife to cut her way out from within a tower of ice, when she was rushed to hospital and underwent emergency surgery (*Polar*, 2016); rolled around drunk and wailing in Piazza San Marco in Venice after consuming cup after cup of white spirits (*baijiu*), (*Holy Water*, 2017), and once again ended up in hospital.²⁸

These works have been motivated by an unwillingness to accept the status quo and a determination to ask questions as well as to seek recognition as an artist in her own right. No longer content to hide, Xiao Lu has unflinchingly confronted details of her messy and at times traumatic private life. In the process she has challenged stereotypical attitudes towards women and drawn attention to issues of gender inequality and injustice in the Chinese art world and society more generally. Placing herself in awkward situations and making audience members part of the structure of the dynamics of viewing and experiencing, she works with intuition and feeling, living on her nerves. Her art is informed by a raw, disruptive aesthetic that draws on deep emotion, extreme action and chance.

The work *Tides* (2019) reflects on Xiao Lu's life over the past thirty years, including the seven years that she spent in Australia—a complex and little remarked upon period of displacement and life experience that is nonetheless central to understanding her artistic formation. It links the histories of Australia and China; connections that have been forged over time by people from both countries crossing the Pacific Ocean for trade and enquiry, opportunity and refuge. Oceans connect land masses and islands. Shorelines are liminal spaces, ever-changing, with no strict boundaries or edges. The constant ebb and flow of water, fluid and yielding, wears away rock; what is soft is strong.²⁹ The fluctuation of tides, the ocean's breath, reminds us that our being and our actions are influenced by forces that are beyond our immediate control.

Tides joins a series of powerful works that reference the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, notably *15 Gunshots... From 1989 to 2003* (2003), *Dialogue About Dialogue* (2004), and *Wedlock* (2009).³⁰ What occurred in 1989 was larger than any one individual could anticipate or control. The achievement and significance of *Dialogue* (1988-89) is its ongoing resonance as a work of art generated by complex sets of conditions and circumstances that have in turn created multiple readings and interpretations. It has generated powerful new works that arise from its instability.

Process II

Originally for *Tides* Xiao Lu proposed to use poles harvested from a thicket of trees close to her home in Beijing, but the Australian government's customs and quarantine regulations made that difficult to realise. Bamboo was therefore a material of compromise. It is native in China and there are three species that are native to northern Australia.³¹ It is evergreen and flourishes in winter making it an emblem of longevity in Chinese culture. Historically, bamboo is a subject favoured by Chinese brush-and-ink artists who see in its uprightness and tenacity

²⁵ *China Guardian Auctions Co., Twenty Years of Contemporary Chinese Art (Zhongguo dangdai yishu ershinian, Zhongguo Jiade 2006 qiuji paimai hui)*, 22 November 2006, items 260 and 261.

²⁶ The accompanying publication, by Wang Wei (ed), is divided into four chronological chapters. The first chapter *Self-annihilation* was reserved for historical works by Chinese artists; the second *Self-liberation* included the work of one international artist, France Leplat; the following chapter *Self-introspection* included works by Jenny Holzer, Maya Lin, Yoko Ono, Kiki Smith, Mona Hartoum, Louise Bourgeois, Marlene Dumas, and Joan Mitchell.

²⁷ Wang Wei 224, 246.

²⁸ For details of works see Xiao Lu's website *Xiao Lu Art*.

²⁹ This idea alludes to the words of the ancient writer and founder of philosophical Daoism, Laozi, in the *Dao De Jing*, chapters 43 and 78. See *Dao De Jing*, Chinese Text Project.

³⁰ The works were commissioned to mark the 30th, 15th and 20th anniversaries of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* respectively.

³¹ For an analysis of the biogeographic implications of Australian native bamboo, see Franklin, *Taxonomic interpretations of Australian native bamboos*.

the human qualities of integrity and plainness combined with elegance. Along with the plum blossom, orchid and chrysanthemum, bamboo is known as one of the 'Four Gentlemen,' representing the four seasons and four aspects of ideal male character. It is a material freighted with cultural meanings and gendered significance.

The Chinese title of *Tides*, *Nongchao* 弄潮—literally 'riding the tide'—contains allusive meanings that run deep in the culture of modern China.³² The character *chao* 潮 which can mean ocean tide, (social) current or trend, appears in the compound words *sichao* 思潮 meaning trend of thought, *xinchao* 新潮 meaning new wave, and *gaochao* 高潮 meaning high tide, upsurge or climax.

Having acquired 30 bamboo poles and carried out the necessary logistical preparations, the 4A support team travelled with Xiao Lu to the beach at high tide to discuss the performance, filming and photography that would take place the following morning.³³ Xiao Lu walked up and down the beach, which was strewn with bluebottles (*Physalia physalis*), those brilliant blue marine hermaphrodites that periodically wash up on Australian beaches in summer, carried onshore by winds and warm ocean currents, and sting. A location for the performance was decided upon and safety procedures worked out, including the possibility of bluebottles. The pile of 30 three-metre long bamboo poles would be placed in position before daylight. Xiao Lu would plant them one by one along the shoreline, her passage to and fro creating a series of lines radiating outwards from the pile. The end of each bamboo pole was pre-cut on a diagonal to create a pointy end and the interior diaphragms of the nodes in the lower section removed to make it easier to drive the poles into the sand. Xiao Lu practised planting a couple of poles. The bamboo offcuts proved useful for digging holes in the sand. The two videographers, David Ma and Zhengze Yangping, and two still photographers, Jacquie Manning and Wu Yanmei, discussed their respective positions and approaches. An arc would be drawn in the sand to indicate the photographic no-go zone. Xiao Lu did not brief the photographers, preferring that they find their own way to record the performance. Only Xiao Lu, Jacquie Manning and David Ma would enter the water. The photographers would wear thick socks to minimise the impact of any stings from bluebottles. Zhengze Yangping and Wu Yanmei, who could not swim, were asked to stay well away from the shoreline. If Xiao Lu got into trouble—she also cannot swim—there were procedures in place to go to her aid.³⁴ Xiao Lu insisted that no matter what happened, the cameras must keep rolling. The performance would end when she gave the signal.

Setting out from the hotel at around five in the morning on 18 January 2019, the crew set up a base for equipment and supplies immediately behind the performance site, protected by a sand dune. The bamboo poles, tied into bundles of ten, were carried from the van and placed in position. It was pitch black. Torches and mobile phones provided light. The topography of the beach appeared to have altered significantly overnight. It was more undulating, with two steep rises appearing from the shoreline to the beach like steps. The reconfigured topography would make for a more strenuous performance and potentially create a more dynamic visual effect as the incoming waves forced their way up and onto the beach.

³² See Geremie R. Barmé, "Tides *Chao* 潮." With thanks to Geremie for drawing this essay to my attention.

³³ The support team comprised Mikala Tai, Michael Do, Kai Wasikowski from 4A, and Claire Roberts.

³⁴ Mikala Tai, Director of 4A, distributed a document outlining procedures and safety instructions for all those present at the performance.



Xiao Lu, *Tides* 弄潮, 2019, performance documentation, Stanwell Park, Sydney, 18 January 2019. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. Photograph by Jacquie Manning. Courtesy the artist.

In conceptualising the performance it was impossible to know if any of the 30 bamboo poles would remain standing, and if so, for how long. During the course of the performance one pole succumbed to the onslaught of the sea, toppling over—its fate determined by the churn of waves. Another pole was swept out to sea and finally washed up on the beach to form part of the strandline. Separated from the ragged line of poles by some 50 metres and abandoned by cameras that were trained on the artist, it served as a reminder of the role played by chance in Xiao Lu's art, and of the unexpected events that are part of the heave and pitch of life.

Coda

In 2021 Xiao Lu returned to Sydney where she currently lives and works. Tang Song passed away in Shanghai in 2022. The same year she discovered she had a serious heart condition and underwent an operation to install a defibrillator to prevent a sudden heart attack. Her doctor has advised against the kind of strenuous physical and emotional activity that past performance works such as *Tides* have demanded.

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