

A biographical interview with Huang Rui

Ariane Müller

Huang Rui was pointed out to me as an artist who has played a very important role in the last decades since he started to become, very young at that time, an actor in China's democracy movement of the 1970ies, and a founder of the art and poetry *Stars Group* closely connected to the movement. He has since been affiliated with or just friend to many actors in subsequent underground art movements in Beijing, and a founder of 798 art district, which was, and actually partly still is, a community of non aligned artists within Beijing's complex art system. He is, after spending some years in Japan in the Eighties, also an internationally exhibited and collected gallery artist. I was explicitly asking him more about his biography than about his current work but shortly after we had had this conversation he was off to Shanghai to open a show at Danysz gallery.

Having stayed in Beijing for three months, different impressions of an immense art market with its high production value art, alongside the insistence that art still bears a political responsibility—which at first glance becomes visible through a very opposed usage of the city in Beijing's art villages—had left me with a lot of questions which Huang Rui was so very nice to answer.

Huang Rui: The cultural revolution started in 1966. At that time I was 13 years old. We were living near the Forbidden City, in the center. My father was the owner of a furniture factory, my mother was a housewife, but since 1956 the government was calling educated women to work, so my mother became a teacher in primary school. My father was a rich guy. Of course in the cultural revolution that stopped. The factory, the compound, was taken away for socialism in 1956 to 1957, and my father was sent to the storage of the factory, to work there. In the beginning of the cultural revolution they forced my father to write his biography and they found my father was a liar. He had said he never was a member of the National party. But they found that not



All photos except p. 102: *Stars 1979*, Exhibition at OCAT Institute, Beijing

being a participant but just through university he had been a part. I remember when they took him to prison, where he was but only for half a year. So my mother had to support all of us. Six children. Not easy.

Ariane Müller: So you were in school. What did you want to become? Were you thinking of becoming an artist?

HR: Of course. The first time I made a painting I was three years old. I still remember. Because my mother, going to school, brought back the pastels. I

used pastel to write out something, copy some manga, to write on the floor.

AM: During the cultural revolution, what was the position of art?

HR: At that time in primary school I started to learn Chinese ink painting from my neighborhood. From my classmate's father. The policy of the government was that this should be thrown away. So my teacher was sent not to jail but to the countryside. He died in the countryside soon afterwards. We had no idea at that time. In

school I learned to make drawings and to copy portraits of Mao. This was the only art.

I had many opportunities to see Mao before the cultural revolution, when I went to Tiananmen square.

Just in that time in 1966—while going to Middle school—middle school education stopped. The students should start the revolution.

AM: How did you think about it, the revolution? I mean it was about young people?

HR: I had no choice. At that time it was good and bad. The good thing was, I could do it my way, not only as one of a group of students. The good thing was I came back home. I remember one day when it became clear to me: I don't want to go to school again. Because in school you would just fucking read Mao's books.

I had a culture shock. Because at that time it was forbidden to listen to classical music. Luckily I had a record player in my family. But the whole family

members kept that quiet. Don't touch the record player! But I was sixteen. I played it to listen to Tchaikowski. I liked it, immediately. So I decided to not go back to school. To stay at home. Go about, see friends and family, exchange records, listen to music, Beethoven.

AM: Nobody said you have to work?

HR: My mother, she was so busy, always in a state of panic. She covered up for me. She has a really wide heart. In the last year of school I should go to the countryside, 18 years old was the limit. I decided to go early, with 16. At home everything was nervous. My mother had to take care of my sisters. My older sister was sick. So I was going to the countryside.

AM: Were you thinking of yourself as an artist at that time?

HR: No, I don't know. I learned, I was reading a lot of Russian literature, through Russian to French to English, which you got from friends.

AM: Was there something like a youth culture at that time?

HR: A subculture (underground); of exchanging books, but only young kids could do that. They did not understand the trouble so they had the courage.

AM: Were you sent to Mongolia?

HR: You could chose where to go. From Beijing they sent you to either Inner Mongolia or Shaanxi province. So I chose, and there was this opportunity of going to Inner Mongolia, so I thought it is maybe better.

AM: Was it better?

HR: I don't know. It was very hard. There was nothing. It is a very hard life.

AM: What were you doing?

HR: Mao was thinking that everywhere you put food, you get food. In Inner Mongolia normally it is free nature, animal herding. Something below farming. But this was a central project, we had to make agriculture there. The people really fast became even poorer. The people used to have something in the family but that didn't last for long. Before we went there, they could earn money, like one day more than one Yuan. First year after I arrived it went down to half a Yuan. The second

year it was only 0.3 Yuan, the third year 0.2.

I stayed there six years, very long. It became better in the end. I stayed in a really small village. Our village was maybe 150 or 140 people. We were four youths from Beijing. They were all coming from good schools, older than me. We did something, though. The land is so dry. You need water but the water comes from the Yellow River. If you pour water there it just vanishes. After the water was gone, nothing ever grew. It is a really bad idea. It was impossible to have a harvest. So we changed and decided we would not go for food, instead, maybe in the fourth year, we had the idea to change to cultivate natural medicine. Its named Gou qi or Go-Yi. The English name is Wolf Berry. Go-Yi don't care, it's just ok there. With Go-Yi we were really successful. So in the second year in the village with Go-Yi, people liked it. One day you could earn again something like one Yuan, then more than one Yuan, then more.

AM: How were the people?

HR: The people there were so nice. Very pure. To some degree it was very free. So I could listen to classical music. It was a start to really learn art with books I brought from Beijing.

Then I came back to Beijing.

One year later I went to a leather factory. In 1975. I stayed there around three years.

AM: How was that?

HR: Very boring.

AM: How long did you work every day?

HR: I didn't work every day. The workers helped me. They protected me. I only came in the afternoons. It is a government system. They give you work. You should make so and so many belts, the holes and the fixtures. They give you the job. In one day you have to finish six-hundred belts. So I would go in the afternoon, make it really fast, and then was gone.

AM: You can make six hundred a day?

HR: Yes.

AM: Wow! How was Beijing at that time?

HR: It was very broken.

You know I am the friend of a very famous poet. Bei Dao.

Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Mang Ke. They are now very famous. Bei Dao is three years older than me, the others are younger. We exchanged books.



THE ANSWER

By Bei Dao

Debasement is the password of the base,
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.
See how the gilded sky is covered
With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead.

The Ice Age is over now,
Why is there ice everywhere?
The Cape of Good Hope has been discovered,
Why do a thousand sails contest the Dead Sea?

I came into this world
Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow,
To proclaim before the judgment
The voice that has been judged:
Let me tell you, world,
I—do—not—believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
Count me as number thousand and one.
I don't believe the sky is blue;
I don't believe in thunder's echoes;
I don't believe that dreams are false;
I don't believe that death has no revenge.

If the sea is destined to breach the dikes
Let all the brackish water pour into my heart;
If the land is destined to rise
Let humanity choose a peak for existence again.

A new conjunction and glimmering stars
Adorn the unobstructed sky now;
They are the pictographs from five thousand years.
They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

1973

Translated by Bonnie S. McDougall

So we had a group. Also I had a young artist friend, a painter.

AM: What about western music?

HR: Later. Because China during all of the 60s and 70s had no exchange with the west. The poets could maybe do some exchange, and I would go to poets salons, in Bei Dao's house. But later his father said this was quite dangerous and he stopped it.

AM: Did you also have the impression it was too dangerous?

HR: I never cared about it.

In 1976 I wrote a poem, I copied it and put my poem on the *Monument to the people's heroes* in Tiananmen square. When Zhou Enlai died, people would be going to Tiananmen square to put flowers and some messages on the statue. So I put this poem. But after a few days, the police came to our factory and took me away. Then after just one day in prison I

was sent back to the factory. In our factory are thousand workers so it had a detention room, inside of the factory, it is not a real jail, but a sort of security cell and two or three months I was there.

AM: But you were not scared?

HR: I was not scared.

I was lucky. My factory was a sector of the communist party. The director of the factory loved Zhou Enlai, so he had the strong conviction of not passing me to the police.

AM: So you were in that small group of poets and artists. Were there women, artists?

HR: Of course.

AM: And you were thinking of yourself as an artist?

HR: At that time I had made the decision to be an artist already. This was the movement the people called *The Beijing Spring*. Which is a

western name. We called it *Democracy Wall*. We were meeting there at the Democracy Wall in Xidan street.

Now it is just the corner of Xidan street and Chang'an Street. In this democracy movement at the Democracy Wall were over a hundred people. We made this literature magazine which was called *Jintian—Today*.

It was published illegally, we were selling it at the Democracy Wall. It was quite popular. Normally we produced 300 copies. We used stencil print machines. There is a limit to it how many you could make. It depends on the paper, sometimes the ink does not work.

AM: Was the magazine about politics?

HR: It was not so much about politics, it was poetry, modern poetry. Bei Dao was like a French poet. The old people were reading classical poetry,



AM: You started the artist group Stars.

HR: Originally it is a Chinese name The Xing Xing¹. This is not like a movie star or some singer star. We said: Stars in the sky. During the cultural revolution Mao took care of the media and it was said that people living in socialist countries—this was maybe similar in East Germany—since they are much better than capitalist countries, live always in bright daylight. So capitalist countries live in the dark. Stars are in the night. So it is the night when we live. Stars were young artists, it brought the avant-garde artists together. We were 23 people who made the first exhibition, outside of the National Art Museum. This first exhibition was mainly painting, poetry and sculpture. For only two days. On the third day the police stopped it and seized all of the works.

AM: So what did you think of public space, all of it was in the public space? Were there exhibition spaces?

HR: The government had artists associations. They had space.

AM: Were these artist associations friends?

HR: The chairman was really friendly to me, in personal communication, but they thought our group was too radical.

AM: What was the main argument? That it was against the government?

HR: No, we chose artwork as anti-government policy. We wanted artistic freedom, meanwhile all the people working in the association had the same themes. We wanted more freedom for us, more experimentations, new styles from the west.

AM: Was there performance, music?

HR: At that time not. It was a painting project. Painting, poetry, and sculpture.

Then after two years China came back. They closed it.

AM: So what did you think?

HR: We thought, ah, this is China, China again...

So everyone went back to themselves, we kept in touch with each other, we did parties together but it was impossible to show work.

I think this was until 1985. In 1985 two very open plenaries came with Deng Xiaoping until 1989. But I moved to Japan in 1984 because I married a Japanese girl.

AM: How did you experience Japan?

HR: At this time China and Japan had good relationships, during all of the 70s and 80s Japan supported China.

In that time China was changing a lot, they opened again. Until 1989 when they closed again. Until Tiananmen square.

I knew about Tiananmen square because I was watching TV in Japan, I wanted to support the students, so I collected money from some friends, who supported me and I took 3000 Dollars to give to the students. Originally I only wanted to stay for five days. Then it happened.

But the real situation was not feeling good. I went to support them. On the day I arrived in Beijing, I changed money and went to Tiananmen square to pass my money to students. I was walking around to see how to give it to them, but I was not feeling good. I had already been living in Japan for five years and it is a very clean country. Meanwhile everything was so dirty there, I forgot at that time, but the whole situation was very ugly (maybe like in Hong Kong now).

AM: So you were estranged to them?

HR: You don't understand that from television. There you only saw the good parts. They were students but they had no idea, and they were violent. I think because at that time I had a different experience with our critical movement, and this had been so different. Some people in Tiananmen square may have been intellectuals but mostly they were not.

In that time the prime minister (Zhao Ziyang) on one day in May went to Tiananmen square to shake hands and talk to students. He said: You should leave Tiananmen square, because it is not important to stay here. Listen to me.

You play with your life, but you have a future, just leave here. On that same day he lost his job. There was a meeting. There was a party meeting and Deng Xiaoping stopped Ziyang's efforts. Zhao Ziyang wanted to change China, he wanted to protect the students. But the chairmen lost their face. Yet, he said: Ok, I try a last time.

AM: The next day the military came?

HR: The military had already come. But they were outside. Then they went inside Tiananmen square.

I left Beijing on that day. But I saw them. It was too much. The soldiers killed citizens, citizens killed soldiers. Only young kids killed each other. So young, they didn't understand, they had no sense. I was really close. We should not go there, so I stayed in the Hutong, where it was safe. Some soldier was running into there, with no direction.

DEDICATIONS: 1972–1973
by Mang Ke

For Life
sometimes I go shout in the valley
and when the valley sends me my
voice
my voice
shocks my heart

For Baiyangdian
oh great land
you arouse my passions

For the Sun
once more you're awoken
hair gone salt and pepper

For a Poet
you are an eagle flying toward the
graveyard

For a Girl
time cannot comprehend humanity
but in a hurried encounter
she gave me something like warmth

For the Night
no woman can make a man giddy
and no man can make a woman
pregnant

For Ping's 18th Year
in the wide eyes of the sickly child
go learn about beauty

For Poetry
the cold but great imagination
is you transforming
the desolation of our lives

For Someone
only the world is enough

For a Friend
these powerless hands
become forceful fists

For Winter
life
lights like a match
to give warmth
to burn
and to be burnt

For my 23rd Birthday
handsome
in health
full of thought

Majakowski, to Apollinaire, Baudelaire,
Lorca, Neruda.

AM: How did the police react?

HR: At that time the police and the party were not in control, there was chaos. Hua Guofeng was very shortly in power, just two years.

AM: Was this a movement in other cities as well?

HR: This movement happened only in Beijing, because Beijing was full of that kind of people, full of clever, brave and brilliant people, passionate about avant-garde.

AM: Were you feeling free at that time?

HR: At that time, yes. But it lasted only before the end of 1979. Then it was forbidden, Deng Xiaoping decided to demolish the wall. He was super clever. You could have posters inside in one space, but you had to go inside of some park. Where nobody would go.



Top: Huang Rui in his office, Beijing 2019. Bottom: Huang Rui giving a speech at the Xidan Democracy Wall before the protest march on 1 October 1979

Gu Cheng

The dark night gave me black eyes,
But I use them to seek the light.
黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛
我却用它寻找光明

The young kids killed him. Used stones, used bricks, killed him. I had a return ticket.

AM: *Were you thinking you would stay in Japan all of your life?*

HR: I stayed in Japan, I was working. I became a gallery artist. Quite good galleries. One is a Tokyo gallery (Ueda gallery). In the 80s I could live from my art. In the 90s they had an economic crisis. They closed a lot of museums. The private museums closed. I was lucky to show in Ueda gallery, it was a top gallery. But in the 90s it was very difficult. You chose to uphold a nut, an individual decision, to make art for yourself.

In 2001 I went back to Beijing. During all of the 90s I wanted to come back and participate in the underground art movement. And I did try but the government took my stamp at the end of 1994 and I was not allowed to come for five years. I tried to come back two times, but the computer finds you.

AM: *So what was this underground movement doing?*

HR: East village they call it. I was very good friends with them. There were ten artists living there. They were very poor. They made performances, some made photos. Living together, sleeping together.

AM: *Were there galleries?*

HR: There was still the mainstream to make system-conforming art. They were outside.

AM: *I heard that until today there are people who are state artists and people outside. But what does it mean? I mean you have a gallery.*

HR: You need to have a gallery, an international gallery. For people who want to be in the system. The system has more opportunities. The official system. Outside it is very difficult, we have a really small percentage of artists that can survive unofficially.

If you look at 798. I discovered the place and made the concept to preserve 798. When I came back, I could not stay in my mothers house in the Hutong. It is very tiny.

AM: *Does it still exist?*

HR: They tore it down, very recently. Half a year ago. For me I wanted to have a space in bigger Beijing, I live quite far outside. But for my mother? She lived there for more than seventy years. It was a shock. I had to lie to my mother. I said, today there's nice weather, let's go outside. Then I took her with the car to the new apartment and had to say: You can not come back. She is 94.

But when I came back to Beijing I only had one idea, to use an old factory space and to make it my studio. I had been traveling around the world, to Soho, to Germany, to Amsterdam, and I had seen how it was done there.

At that time, I rented a space really close by, alone for half a year, but so fast, a friend came, then other artists came. At that time it was very cheap. Before I found this here, which is now 798, I saw spaces with no heating, no light, but here it was possible. Then, I invited the owner of the Tokyo gallery to look at the space and he opened a gallery in 2002. Then Long March Gallery came only months later, then White Space opened a gallery.

AM: *Then the government stepped in and made it an official art village?*

HR: Here should be a part of a city, the inside of what they would call "Electricity City." We made the move in order to preserve the original factory. At that time the factory was part of an urban plan and it was going to be destroyed. I told you I have a lot of experience in how to make these things, you can check that in the internet but we met many people.

AM: *Many people say it is totally gentrified by now. How do you think about all the shops?*

HR: It is good for here, otherwise it wouldn't survive. The party controls it and they just ask you about numbers, about either propaganda numbers or business numbers.

AM: *How many artists are still working here?*

HR: Around ten. In the beginning we were seventy including me. The change came with the Olympics. The Beijing Olympics liked the artists, it was a good opportunity for them to make a „new“ Beijing, a new culture during the Olympic Games. But it was the Factory management who didn't like the artists. They kicked out some and cut my contract. We lost our community and so many people chose to leave.

AM: *And are the artists really leaving, or just going outside of Beijing?*

Normally people don't like to leave Beijing. They chose to go to the outside of Beijing. If you want a challenge, you should stay in Beijing.

AM: *How much do you still think about social responsibilities?*

HR: Shanghai makes it very clever. They deeply cover censorship in propaganda.

Beijing is more violent in front, they demolish all art districts outside the fifth ring road.

Our leaders don't like contemporary art. I saw it so many times, they so often have a promotion of a new cultural policy. They keep on pushing traditional art. But they totally don't understand what traditional culture is. They have no culture. They say they support traditional culture but traditional culture links to contemporary art. Contemporary art is standing in traditional culture. I am working in contemporary art but I am standing in traditional culture. They don't understand.

China is always in time cycles. Open up, go back, demonstrations and contributions, Mao said, who cares, let's just demolish that—they demolished all heritage of Tang dynasty, Ming and Xing dynasty—but Mao said: "without destruction there can be no construction."

He also said, China is poor and blank, just like a piece of white paper, on which beautiful pictures are drawn, and he said: what happened? The people are still working!

And Chinese people are really working hard.

AM: *So it can always change?*

HR: In shortest time, but I have no idea.

1 the „Xingxing Huahui“ (星星画会) is the Chinese name of the Stars Group. (Xingxing in Chinese means literally „stars stars“).