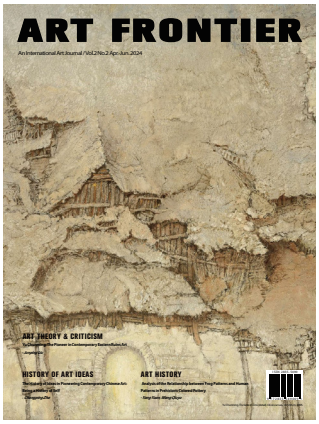


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Spring Snow for the Countryman: Yu Zhenli and Contemporary Art in Dalian

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Abstract

Since the passing of Yu Zhenli, many artists have reviewed his artistic career, especially his constantly changing creative practice and the studio transformation of art into 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 sentences of depression and excitement are the presence of many of his existence. The top is painted with a huge and scrawled pentagram, and there are some star-studded small pentagrams on the wall, as well as some handwriting and symbols that are not fully recognized. They are scattered and not ' rules ', but this should be his rules - full of contradictions and resistance. After his death, many people reviewed his artistic course and communication, praised the " negation of negation " in his creative achievements, and discussed his behavior of " life is art. " But outside the text, we often feel that he can not control the dilemma between strong and small.



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

1. Persistence Amid Negation

The development of contemporary art in some regions of China is not balanced, and many factors determine the present situation of a certain region today. Different from the first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai with special geographical advantages, regions such as Dalian do not have particularly open and diverse external cultural resources, and the humanistic

ecology is basically based on regional geographical culture. And such as contemporary art, such as the emphasis on avant-garde culture of the first queue, in some small and medium-sized cities have not even appeared, more difficult to become the climate. Many art practitioners will rush to a handful of big cities to warm up, from professional colleges to art parks, the circle of Peiji is always the soil of contemporary art. However, there are also some ambitious people who are tired of the circle order and study the humanities of their beliefs alone in some slightly barren areas.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 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. 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 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. The formation of this contradiction, in fact, is not contradictory, because between his own requirements and the reality that he actually grasped, the rest is the foundation and fantasy that constantly let him enter the next stage. In creation, it is the ups and downs of the brush strokes that have long been accustomed to, and it

is also the five-pointed star on the back eaves wall, ' red flag ' and other basic marks that run through each stage of his creative career ; in life, it is the attachment to the sea. It is not only the hometown, but also a kind of expectation for oneself, which reflects the sentence he quoted Nietzsche 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, it was the 100 th anniversary of Mao Zedong 's birth. Many artists who had not yet finished their work in the trendy art chose to make a commemorative creation on this day and reiterated their rebellious scripts engraved on their lives. A grand commemorative event also took place in Dalian. In Zhongshan Square in Dalian, Zhu Lingbo and Zhu Xikun planned this public art event - *Wrapping Zhongshan Square* (also known as the *Red 100 Action*), and Yu Zhenli was also one of the implementers of the event. The activities of the day not only included all kinds of giant balloon installations and song performances, but also the*Portrait of Chairman Mao* exhibition organized by Zhu Xikun. It is difficult to speculate on Yu Zhenli 's state of mind when he participated in the event. He should have mentioned the event in the undisclosed *Handwritten Diary* material, but there was no description of the event in his memoirs and resumes. Perhaps it was because his state at the time was more resistant to participating in large-scale events. Perhaps it was because he had a certain reluctance to redraw the leader 's image. People familiar with his works should be aware that after bidding farewell to posters, his creation no longer involves any elements with distinct ideology. Propaganda and criticism are not in line with his experience of art itself. One year later, on this day, he chose to go up the mountain. Yu Zhenli has an inescapable deep feeling about Chairman Mao 's birthday, because his initial achievements have a direct relationship with the era guided by the leader, and all of his later artistic rebellions have a complicated connection with the label of that era. Therefore, Yu Zhenli also believes that this is his ' birthday ' in a sense. Not only that, every *Handwritten Diary* after he went up the mountain chose to record from this day ; many ' 8 + 1 ' art exhibitions sponsored by him opened on this day many times in the later period. Almost every year, he chooses to carry out all important activities on this day, which may be full of some sense of destiny.

In addition to the change of painting and the behavior of building life up the mountain, the communication between Yu Zhenli and Dalian contemporary art is a special case. There is no doubt that he is a pioneer guide, but he is full of contradictions and difficult to give up.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. 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 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 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 & Graduate Team* held at Dalian Urban Art Museum, December 11-14, 2020.

Yu Zhenli did not choose to participate in the art circle of big cities, but retreated into another narrative way of artistic life. Dalian not only represents the land where he was born and raised, but also the sea is the direction of his spirit. He has always been deeply concerned about and even funded the development of local art, and opened up a wide angle of humanity presented to the outside world. Standing on the Great Black Mountain, you can see the Yellow Sea and Bohai Sea, and you can listen to the tsunami. After Yu Zhenli 's death in 2022, the critic Li Xianting 's handwriting couplet ' the young man with strong true feelings quitted, and Yi Gaodankuo made waves all his life '.His collector and close friend Shang Chengguang set out to build in Zhenli Art Museum, carry out protective collection of all his works, carry out protective restoration of his former residence in Zhenli Studio, and set up a research team to sort out and study his materials and works.Looking back at that wall, there are a few somewhat faded and cluttered phrases at the bottom, which might be arranged together: "下一次 (Next time),""讓我們 (Let's),""期待 (Look forward to)"…

May 17, 2024

LI YANG is the executive editor of *Art Frontier*. His research focuses on Chinese contemporary art history and art criticism.

ENDNOTES

1. Yi Ying, "Wild Wind: A Commentary on the 'Northeast Contemporary Oil Painting Exhibition'", *Northwest Art* 2, (1994): 7.
2. Yu Zhenli, "The Choice of Ocean Consciousness," *Art Magazine* 1, (1987): 53.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Sun Zhengning recalled an interesting story about Yu Zhenli: "Before the 89 Modern 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.