



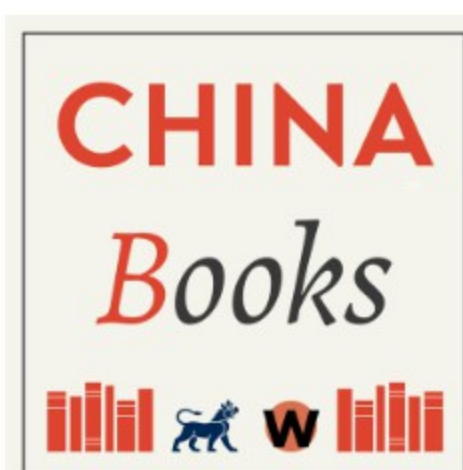
PODCAST

Ep. 12: China's Evolving Art Scene

Contemporary art from China took off in the 1990s, and became a hot commodity in the 2000s. The China Books podcast asks an expert how the scene changed since then, and where it is today.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — AUGUST 23, 2024

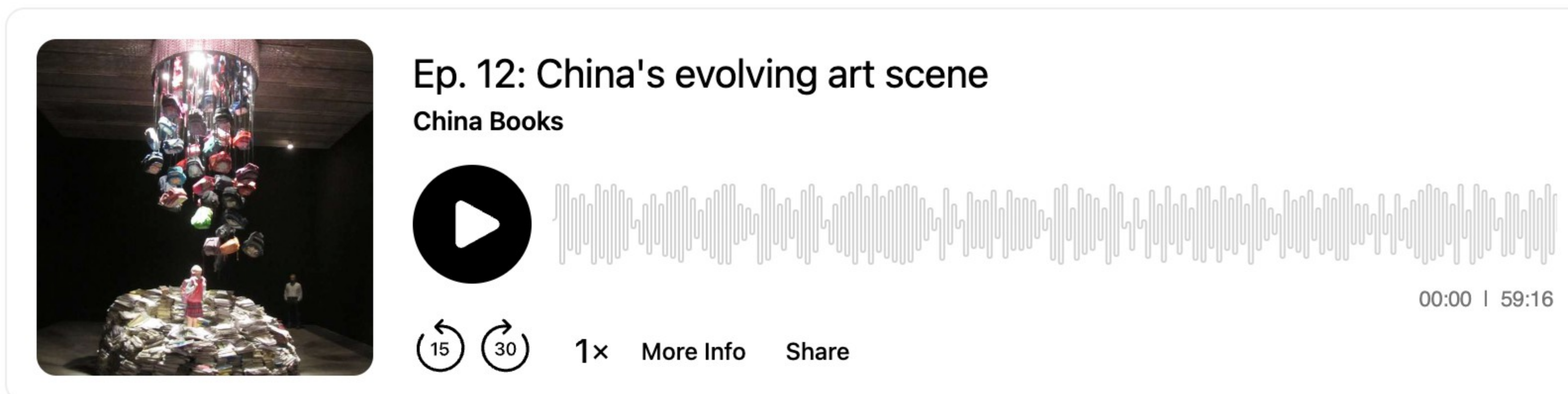
ART



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China's edgy contemporary art scene took off within China in the 1980s, exploded into global view in the 1990s, and continued to develop over decades of economic growth. Gone were the days of Mao Zedong insisting that art had to “serve the people” — by which he meant the Communist Party — with socialist-realist propaganda. Freed from those constraints after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, successive generations of contemporary artists in China worked through political trauma, explored Chinese identity, and experimented with the styles of modern masters in other parts of the world. They found their own voices, in ways that drew global attention and drove a hot art market in the early 2000s and 2010s.

How did that all play out, and what's happening with Chinese art now, under Xi Jinping's [reassertion](#) of the idea that art should serve the Party's interests? In this episode, Barbara Pollack, an art critic, curator and author of [Brand New Art from China: A Generation on the Rise](#) (I.B. Tauris, 2018) who has focused on contemporary Chinese art since the late 1990s, shares some of what she's learned from talking with more than 100 Chinese artists, and seeing contemporary art evolve on the ground in China and in the world over the past quarter century:



Guest



Barbara Pollack is an award-winning writer, art critic and curator, and a respected voice on contemporary Chinese art. She is the author of [Brand New Art from China: A Generation on the Rise](#) (2018) and [The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China](#) (2010). Her curations include [Mirror Image: A Transformation of Chinese Identity](#) (Asia Society Museum, New York, 2022), and [Multiply: Strength in Numbers](#) (Modern Art Museum, Shanghai, 2024). She is also cofounder of [Art at a Time Like This](#), a nonprofit organization that provides platforms for artists and curators to respond to current events and social crises.

“ It’s no longer East versus West, or a bridge to the West, or any of the clichés that were used to describe Chinese art in the 1990s. It’s now really a third identity. ”

— *Barbara Pollack*

Transcript

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Artists are on the cultural frontlines as a society changes. They mark the change, and sometimes, they provoke it. That’s been true in China since soon after the Mao era ended almost half a century ago, and a more permissive environment – in relative terms – allowed more free creative expression. What was being expressed, and how, and with what impact, changed with each micro-generation, as China’s economy grew and people grew more prosperous, the population shifted from mostly rural to mostly urban, and culture evolved. China’s contemporary art scene has evolved too. And as it has, one award-winning American writer, artist, art critic, and curator jumped in early to understand all that was happening. She has spent a fair bit of the past quarter century helping others understand that too. And she’s here to share some of what she’s learned, with you.

(Music up)

This is the China Books podcast, a companion of the China Books Review, co-published by Asia Society and The Wire China. I’m Mary Kay Magistad.

And it turns out, Asia Society played a role in getting my guest, award-winning writer and curator Barbara Pollack, interested in contemporary Chinese art in the first place. It started when she attended the Asia Society Museum’s 1998 exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. That, and:

(01:40): **BARBARA POLLACK:** In the ‘90s, there were many people in New York, Chinese artists, who had left China after Tiananmen Square. And I met them and began interviewing them for the Village Voice. And they had fascinating stories and fascinating histories. I always joke that when you interview an American artist, basically the story is that their parents were doctors or lawyers. They went to Yale, and now they’re in New York and they have a studio. And these guys had stories about being sent to the countryside and living through political upheaval.

(02:16): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Barbara went on to interview more than a hundred Chinese artists, many in-depth and over time. She has become a highly respected voice on contemporary Chinese art, and has curated several shows of it, including the Asia Society Museum's exhibition in 2022, *Mirror Image: A Transformation of Chinese Identity*, and *Multiply!!!: Power in Numbers*, at Shanghai's Modern Art Museum in March to May 2024. Barbara has written extensively on contemporary Chinese art for The New York Times, The Village Voice, Vanity Fair, ArtNews, and others. Her books include *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China*, which came out in 2010, and *Brand New Art from China: A Generation on the Rise*, which was published in 2018. Its paperback cover has a blurb from renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, calling the book "frank, honest, and full of passion... a rare and precise insight." A third book, *My Generation: Young Chinese Artists*, was published by the Tampa Museum of Art, with the same title as the show Barbara curated there in 2014. It's a beautiful coffee-table book with full-color photos of the works of the art, and essays by Barbara, and by Li Zhenhua, a multi-media artist, curator, and director at the time of the Beijing Art Lab. More recently, Barbara co-founded "Art at a Time Like This," a non-profit organization that provides platforms for artists and curators to respond to current events and social crises. More on that later in this episode. First, here's our conversation about how Chinese art has evolved with the times in recent decades – starting with Barbara, talking about her first visit to China in 2004:

(4:00): **BARBARA POLLACK:** So I went to China, and realized that this was a country going through so much rapid change and urbanization and reorganization. And I really got curious about what impact this would have on the creative people there. You know, many of the factors going on in Beijing in the early 2000s paralleled changes that took place in Paris in the early 20th century, mass migration, urbanization, reconfiguring the city, economics changing, outside interests and influences. And I thought, okay, something big is going to happen here. And I began covering the rise of that art scene for numerous publications. It seemed like China was a Petri dish for what was going to be the art of the 21st century.

(05:00): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, so you actually wrote in your book, *The Wild, Wild East*, that when you were first talking with Chinese artists in New York, that you thought, okay, so they're doing interesting work, but this work can't be done in China.

BARBARA POLLACK: And then I went to China and saw that even more interesting work was being done in China, because those artists didn't have as much of a burden to be ambassadors about their situation to the West. Instead, they could do whatever they wanted, and they did do whatever they wanted. And that was something that really excited me a lot, to see people really crossing lines and breaking boundaries, some of which wouldn't have even been tolerated in the States in terms of nudity and using animals and all kinds of things. And then by the early 2000s, digital came in, and Chinese artists, video artists, were really at the forefront of using new media and new materials to make the work. And that, again, was very exciting.

(06:10): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, So I want to get to some of the details of artists that you followed over the course of the time you've been coming into China. But I also just wanted to ask first, you've written candidly and with humor about knowing what you didn't know, that you were coming at Chinese art as an artist and an art critic and not as a China specialist and not as a speaker of Chinese. In retrospect, now, and with 25 years of experience focusing on art from China, what do you think were the advantages of that? And what were the challenges?

(06:40): **BARBARA POLLACK:** The advantage, that I feel very strongly about, is that I had a thorough knowledge of Western art history, and of contemporary art through theory and through history and through my own practice of what was valued, in some ways, around contemporary art. I came in very open-minded. I didn't come in saying "I'm going to impose my Western values on them." What I found, though, was that as opposed to people who were coming to it through classical Chinese training, who were looking for things like scroll painting or brush painting as evidenced in contemporary art, or trying to find some connection between the contemporary and the dynasty era, I came seeing that a lot of Chinese artists knew about Duchamp, and I could recognize that, or knew about surrealism, and I could recognize that in their work. And there weren't that many people who were seeing it in the work at that time. So I could come in with a fresh perspective. And many of the artists really appreciated that I could discuss contemporary art with them rather than their lineage, the lineage of 5,000 years of Chinese art. You know, I wasn't picking it apart in terms of whether it was authentically Chinese or not. I was looking at whether it was authentically contemporary or not. And that was the basis of my good friendships, with a lot of the artists that I met and interviewed from the beginning.

(08:15): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, and interesting that you mention that, because that was certainly a theme or an issue that some artists, when you first started going to China, and even before, were wrestling with themselves — what does it mean to be an artist in China? How much do I draw from Chinese identity? How much do I have a responsibility to reflect 5,000 years of Chinese civilization in my art? And of course, the painting, the series *Bloodlines, Big Family* (by Zhao Xiaogang) was one of the big breakthrough paintings that started the Chinese art boom. How were you grappling with that as you talked to Chinese artists and heard their thoughts about how much am I a Chinese artist and how much am I an artist, reaching a bigger audience?

(09:02): **BARBARA POLLACK:** When I went to China in the early 2000s, I saw that there was a confidence that artists had from China that was different than I had seen from artists in other countries of the world who wanted to be recognized internationally. Chinese artists had much less of a feeling that they had to be recognized internationally, because there was such a big audience within their own country for art. But, no artist only wants to be understood within a geographical boundary. So they were very interested in talking to me about how they could make connections with the West, and how they could hook up with curators from international institutions. And I felt very honored and privileged to be in a situation where I could bring their work to a broader audience.

(09:55): For example, one of the artists I wrote about from that first trip was Ai Weiwei, who in 2004 was not a world-renowned artist. He was mainly known as an architect in Beijing. What I did get from him was that he was an essential linchpin in the Beijing arts scene, and that he definitely already was connecting with certain curators of Documenta, and Uli Sigg was bringing his work out. I wrote one of the first pieces in the United States about Ai Weiwei. And at the time, my editors thought, 'well, we don't even have art to look at here.

Why is this an important character?' And I explained it in terms of him being a liberating force for all the Chinese artists around him, which he'd already begun doing.

(10:50): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** You've gotten to know him quite well over time.

BARBARA POLLACK: Yes, I haven't been in touch with him the last couple of years, but we have been very close at times. But, in terms of them struggling with being a Chinese artist, they were more struggling with being only a Chinese artist, and not recognized as international artists. There were other artists who already were recognized as international artists, but many of them had moved to New York or Paris, like Chen Zhen, or Cai Guo-Qiang. And those artists in the '90s in the West, really felt some kind of burden of being ambassador of China to the world and needing to bring their heritage with them.

(11:37): What I saw in the early 2000s with younger artists is that they were in the thrall of a much more open society, where Western brands were coming into the country for the first time, McDonald's and KFC was there, soon Starbucks was in the Forbidden City. And that collision of cultures is what fascinated them and they made work out of. And some of them felt like it's a struggle between Western values and Chinese values, but many more of them felt like, 'we're on the cutting edge of what globalization has done to the world. We're on the cutting edge of what's happening to the whole world, only it's most obvious in China. And so we have something to say that artists in the West might ignore.' I mean, artists in the West might not see what globalization is doing. But when you were in Asia, you definitely felt the impact of that. And in fact, the whole world was changing due to globalization. And Chinese artists really had their finger on the pulse. You know, they really felt it viscerally.

(12:50): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** You also write about, and I experienced it as well, living in China over that time, and talking with Chinese artists at least once in a while, that some of the younger artists in the early 2000s and maybe early 2010s, were acting partly in reaction to, or in dialogue with, the changes that were happening in China in their lifetimes and their moment as artists, but also kind of in reaction to earlier generations of Chinese artists, where they, not all, but some, were getting kind of tired of the focus on the Cultural Revolution or Tiananmen or the Cynical Realists of the 1990s. It just didn't feel like it had as much relevance to them. And in part, that is because they didn't really grow up hearing about it. It wasn't part of their lived experience, nor was it part of what they were taught, except quietly in family conversations. As you were talking to different artists from different generations, did you feel like there was an amnesia going on there?

(13:55): **BARBARA POLLACK:** I mean, of course, there was an amnesia because it was written out of the history books. But I really felt like the difference between the artists I met in New York in the '90s, and the artists I met in China in the early 2000s was as if they had grown up in two different countries in two different centuries. I mean, it was that profound. What went along with that amnesia was artists being sick and tired of Western curators showing up looking for something authentically Chinese. I mean, I have to say people in the West, even editors I dealt with, wanted artworks that reeked like that from a football field away, you could tell was Chinese. That's what they wanted for the cover of magazines. So I often was in struggles between what they wanted and what I felt was really going on. And even when I curated a show at Asia Society of young Chinese artists, who are even younger than the ones I met in the early 2000s, I have to say this. One day I was leaving the museum and a patron of the arts, I'll just call him that, walked out going, "I thought this was an Asian museum. I thought they showed Asian art." And I was like, "everything there was made in Asia." And he said, "no, you know what I mean — Asian art." And I know he was looking for a Buddha, or calligraphy, or something like this, and was not happy to see photography, digital art, performance art — the contemporary art that was being done in Beijing and Shanghai, post the early 2000s.

(15:35): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So this was the show "Mirror Image, A Transformation of Chinese Identity" in 2022.

BARBARA POLLACK: Yes.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And how did you approach putting that show together to reflect what you had been seeing in terms of the changes in Chinese art in the previous decade or more?

(15:57): **BARBARA POLLACK:** My approach in recent years is, instead of trying to define what is Chinese, I'm looking at this third identity, a kind of transnational identity that's emerging from all over Asia, including China, and this notion that you're not held or defined by geographical boundaries. You're not held back or defined by cultural boundaries or by the family unit, even, anymore. And you are traveling in the West. Many are being educated in the West. And so there's this new combination of influences, which really represents what the world is like today. It's no longer East versus West, or a bridge to the West, or any of the clichés that were used to describe Chinese art in the 1990s. It's now really a third identity. And it's interesting that a lot of the artists not only see themselves as transnational, but they see themselves as transsexual and fluid in their overall identity, because they no longer identify with some cultural definitions of who they can be. They feel like they can define themselves entirely, in every aspect of what identity is, which is why I wanted to do this show about a transformation of identity.

(17:23): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What were some of the pieces that to you, really provoked viewers who were seeing them, who might have had other ideas of where Chinese art is at, at the moment?

BARBARA POLLACK: Okay, for example, one of the big pieces when you walked in was a living room of IKEA furniture. And it was made by an artist named Nabuqi. And Nabuqi had originally made this work in Shanghai and Beijing, where there is an Ikea. And so, she had bought furniture from Ikea, images printed on paper and cloth of famous sites throughout the world, the Parthenon and the Pyramids of Egypt and all of this, strewn over the furniture. And it all took place on an ersatz Oriental rug. And she was like, "This is what life is now." This came straight out of pop art for her. She talked about the impact of pop art on her work. Well, people walked in and they were like, "What does this have to do with China?" I said "it has to do with like what life is when you're living in Beijing and there's an Ikea down the street. You no longer have a family passing down authentic Chinese rugs, woven rugs, silk rugs. You no longer have Ming Dynasty furniture. And most of the furniture in IKEA is made in China, and then shipped all over the world. So what is more Chinese, is what the artist was asking, than IKEA? It's all made here. But people came in, and they were confused about whether it was art, and whether it was Chinese.

(19:00): The other piece that definitely disrupted people was there was a very loud, very large video, made from a performance that had taken place in Beijing, a 12-hour performance that was reduced to a 9-minute video. And it was by a performance artist named Chen Tianzhuo. He worked with a group of international performers. And what he did was take movement from Buddhist rituals, Tibetan rituals, rave concerts, hallucinatory images — taking bits and pieces of what spirituality is evoked all over the world. And then he put it together to really loud techno music. And people were nude in it. And I ran a clip of it on my Facebook page, and it got me permanently kicked off of Facebook. But I thought that piece, which is called "Trance", goes back exactly to what I'm talking about in terms of inventing your own identity. and taking bits and pieces from all over the world, instead of thinking what is culturally authentic anymore.

(20:14): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** You use the term "post-passport" to talk about the way that some young Chinese artists approach their global identity.

BARBARA POLLACK: I did. In my latest book, I said, post-passport. But that was written just before COVID. And obviously, after COVID, passports became very, very important, and ability to travel all over the world got cut down tremendously. And so now I'm seeing some of the effect of that. But yeah, I felt like by 2018, many young Chinese artists did view themselves as post-passport. They were living in Berlin. They were living in New York. They would visit China to see their families. But they no longer felt like what their first foot forward was, was being a Chinese artist.

(21:04): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So, of course, the book you're talking about, your 2018 book, was *Brand New Art from China, A Generation on the Rise*. And one of the artists you focus on in really interesting ways in it is Xu Zhen, who deals with identity in myriad ways.

BARBARA POLLACK: Xu Zhen, for example, made himself into an international corporation and registers himself.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Called "MadeIn".

BARBARA POLLACK: The MadeIn Corporation. He has a factory outside of Shanghai, to the south of Shanghai, where every floor of this factory is a different medium being done.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And you were saying he had about 30 assistants who are working with him on this?

(21:40): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Yeah, there were about 30 assistants. Some were making paintings by using cake frosters, and just shooting out paint, like little meringues across the canvas. And they would do that all day long in different sizes and different colors, very much like Andy Warhol using the soup can over and over

and over again. Or, there were sculptures that were made by compiling molds of ancient Greek sculptures and ancient Roman sculptures with Hindu sculptures and Buddhist sculptures, so that you'd have like the multi-armed character, but Zeus would be the head. Or, he made these tapestries, which I really, really loved a lot, where there would be references from all over the world, political cartoons, Middle Eastern designs, all these bits and pieces from all over the world woven together. And so he had one floor, which was just people weaving fabric together to make these tapestries that looked every bit as authentic as the jacquard, you know, the unicorn in the garden at The Cloisters (in New York City). They were making these beautiful, beautiful tapestries, but it was all this clash of cultures going on in that.

Xu Zhen was very funny. He himself doesn't travel. He's afraid to get on a plane. So he would be better known in America and Europe if he traveled more. But he does have representation all over the world for these artworks. And he's proven that being a corporation is the authentic identity of a Chinese artist. After all, many Chinese artists have assistants, and China is best known for its manufacturing. So he is taking what is usually seen as a slur against Chinese artists, that China's good at manufacturing, but not creativity, and he's embracing it to show how creative you can get as a corporate artist. It's very much like Murakami or Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst. He's like the Damien Hirst of China.

(24:00): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** He would play with questioning people's attention spans, questioning the importance of different things. You had a passage in *Brand New Art from China* where you said that Xu Zhen has a complex approach to truth and reality in the Chinese context. And I'm quoting here: "In a country where censorship still plays a dominant role, and where many artists self-censor to avoid controversy, this artist seeks to make works that cannot be accepted at face value. He challenges viewers to sort out for themselves what is real and what is fabricated, what is truthful and what is deception. And that includes the received notion of the East-West divide, or of strictly bipolar ways of thinking, and realism in art." So there are a lot of things there to think about. And you go on to say, "Instead of critiquing the political system directly, Xu Zhen goes deeper, investigating the roots of absolutism, which lies in the misconception that an individual's beliefs are reality. A mistaken belief in the real, whether it is from a Chinese perspective entailing an absolute acceptance of government-sponsored information, or from the West and its confident expectations of a difference, is Xiuzhen's actual target."

(25:15): **BARBARA POLLACK:** One of the things that artists (are) struggling with, and now it's coming up in America a lot because of a Trumpian era of like, whose truth do you believe? And instead of saying, this is my truth, and it confounds your truth in a black-and-white way, how do you set up a situation where people begin thinking about what are the underlying subtexts to their notion of truth? And how do you gain tools to question what's put forth as accepted knowledge? And again, he's challenging a lot of things about what we think an artist should be. He's not making the work himself. He's not making "message art", necessarily, when you see it. You're left to try to pick apart whether he's critiquing the West, or whether he's embracing the West. But I think that starting with Duchamp's urinal, artists begin questioning, what is a work of art? And Duchamp's answer is, anything that the artist chooses to call a work of art, is art. Xu Zhen starts from there, and goes right into his own working conditions in China, and uses the techniques that he's developing and that he directs his assistants to do, to question all of these other things that are accepted in a way of life in China.

(26:45): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So on the one hand you have artists like Xu Zhen who is saying what is identity? What is reality? What is the role of an artist? And — this isn't directly necessarily one of his questions, but one that other Chinese artists are grappling with is kind of what do I owe China? What is my responsibility as a Chinese person? How much can I break with 5,000 years of tradition, with the concept of being part of the Chinese nation? And meanwhile, the Chinese government is saying, you can't, you are Chinese. And this is the moment when we have one dream, and that is to make China great in the world. That's kind of the moment that we're in. And what is surprising, I guess, to me in your book, in *Brand New Art from China*, and also in what you were able to show in *Mirror Image, A Transformation of Chinese Identity*, is how many artists are able to find ways of working around that, of being able to still function and make meaningful statements through their art, despite increased censorship within China, despite the government using more active oversight of all forms of free expression.

(28:02): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Well, I definitely felt, a little earlier than this year, that in some ways the censorship gave a kind of frisson to the work of Chinese artists. It gave them something to rub up against and hone their skills with. And the truth of the matter is that there was a lot of art that was supported in an earlier period than today. The art scene was growing. It was becoming a big industry in China. And it was really helping tourism to China. A whole new group of people were coming to China in order to see the art there, and the government noticed that and thought this was great soft power. So a lot of things were ignored or supported. Like, what was going on in galleries was not necessarily supervised as carefully as what was going on in museums, and a lot of things were kind of let slip through. So artists were really pushing the envelope.

(29:00): This year, I'm hearing stories that concern me in terms of like, what is the penalties for pushing the envelope. So far, there hasn't been one big case, but there's like numerous incidents of artworks being taken

down from museums. And it's hard for the artists themselves to pin down, what line can't you cross? Visual art, contemporary art, is not supervised to the same degree as the movies are, or television is, or the internet is, because these reach a large audience. I mean, not that many people observe contemporary art or even go to museums of contemporary art. And even when they do, they don't necessarily know what to make of it. So it doesn't give them like a narrative that would make them rebel against the government the way a posting on the internet might.

(29:55): But the people that are pleased by contemporary art are very influential people. So it's a mixed bag of like, whether we can turn back the clock or not. I still see artists like Sun Xun, one of the ways he addresses exactly the question you're asking me about, so I finally get back to the question, is that he uses brush painting. He's a master at brush painting. But he does it to paint these allegories, and make these animations, that are filled with animals or talking megaphones or moving, running movie cameras, old movie cameras, and they all stand for politicians. So if you watch it — like a child could watch it and just be entertained by it. But if you watch it with some minor degree of knowledge of what's going on in China, you can see them as metaphors for a lot of the political situation. And he's still in Beijing doing his work. He's working on a feature film right now. You know, I get worried about him sometimes. But so far he's been able to do it because in a way, the art looks like stuff that the government approves because it looks like ink painting.

(31:10): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And then there's someone like Zhao Zhao, who worked with Ai Weiwei for seven years, who did a number of interesting artistic endeavors, including he put like a little additional stone — he glued something to Tiananmen Square.

BARBARA POLLACK: Yes. At the very beginning of his career, gluing a stone that people could trip on in Tiananmen Square to create a kind of pause moment, something to disrupt the sense of sheep following the master, that happens if you're standing in Tiananmen Square and it's crowded and everybody's looking up at the Mao painting.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Stop and remember what happened here.

BARBARA POLLACK: Stop and remember what happened here. He also did a piece where he dressed as a police officer and stood in Tiananmen Square.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: For two hours, and nobody stopped him.

(32:07): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Nobody stopped him. Yes. The piece that I got to know him on is, after Ai Weiwei was arrested in 2011, Zhao Zhao, he made a towering image of a policeman and then...

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And this was about eight meters high, about 24 feet?

BARBARA POLLACK: Right. And then toppled it so that it would break up in pieces along the gallery floor. And this piece did not get away from the censors. The censors allowed it to be shown in a gallery, but then when it was going to be shipped to a museum show in America, the piece disappeared in Customs and he's never gotten it back.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And he was fined.

BARBARA POLLACK: He was fined.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And then wasn't able to show his art again in China, at least for a while.

He found where the line was. The line moves around. But at least at that moment, that's where...

(33:02): **BARBARA POLLACK:** He definitely hit a line. And it was also because Ai Weiwei was getting international attention. So this was something that perfectly fit the moment. Photographs of it went all over the world, but the piece itself can never be shown again. A lot of people don't realize that Customs is a big way that censorship goes on, because every piece you ship out of China has to be approved by the Ministry of Culture, and every piece that's coming into China has to be checked. But there's a big concern by the government now of representations that shed negative light on China.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Without defining what that means, huh?

BARBARA POLLACK: Yeah, without defining what that means. It ranges from images of gay couples to images of poor people.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: That's always been a sore point, going back to the films of Zhang Yimou. I mean, the government was like, why is he focusing on villages and poor people and not on the progress we've made?

(34:02): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Right. But on the other hand is artists like Liu Xiaodong, who emerged in the '90s, who's still making work that's — he goes to places in the world with, it's a war zone or conflict, and he paints portraits of the people there. And he still teaches at CAFA (the Central Academy of Fine Arts, in Beijing). And he's made work about Xinjiang and the Uyghurs and all kinds of things. And yet he's considered

like a foremost realist master in China. So — it's not black and white. It's not one thing or the other. And a lot of it has to do with timing and circumstances and where it's going to be shown, and what the size of the audience is going to be like, and how much international attention it would get. It's interesting.

(34:50): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So you have written about how you think, and maybe financially this is true, that the peak of the Chinese art bubble was in 2008. So I'm wondering whether you still feel that, or whether like some of the air went out of the bubble, but then there was a regrouping. And I think one of the artists you talked to said, it's actually fine because it'll get the schlock out of the system — I think he used a different word — and more serious artists will have to reconsider their focus and work harder.

(35:18): **BARBARA POLLACK:** I think that certain things that I declared as reality in the first book changed by the time I was researching the second book that came out in 2018. But today, I would say the peak was around 2016. I think an interesting thing has happened which is, there was a period where there were a lot of group shows of Chinese contemporary art, a lot of effort to bring groups of Chinese artists to the West. And that definitely has dissipated. But what I do see now is that every major gallery in the world has a Chinese artist, you know, and even smaller galleries in New York have Chinese artists. So maybe this is the health that, that guy predicted, that artist predicted, which is, now they're seen as individual artists, and they're promoted as individual artists, not so much as a trend coming out of China. The market in China, the domestic market in China, is still very, very strong. But the international group, the foreign collectors have kind of dropped out of that market.

(36:32): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Why have they dropped out?

BARBARA POLLACK: Part of it, we've caused that, because the U.S. has imposed such high tariffs on bringing things in, including artworks from China, that it's become kind of impossible to — the days of going to China and meeting artists in their studios and picking up work for very little money and bringing it West are long over. And even if you go to China and you make a deal with an artist or whatever, then getting it shipped to the United States has become a whole enterprise. So that's one of the things. And "two" is, the work from China does not have as much value in the West, because there aren't as many Western collectors pursuing it. Like, for example, when Gagosian (art gallery) had an opening for Jia Aili (in 2021), they flew in a planeload of collectors from China to the show in New York, okay? That's because they thought it would be worthwhile to do that. Everybody wants the Chinese artist to have international presence and be shown in the West. But the collectors in the West are worried about whether it will retain its value anymore.

(37:43): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So, how much do you think that money kind of distorted the kinds of art that was being produced in China in the first decade of the 2000s? Like in other words there were a lot more artists who were producing, and you write about how they could just kind of do whatever they felt like doing and it would find a market. And then also, even artists who have staying power were aware of the ability to sell some of their works for millions of dollars. It's true anywhere, but maybe even more so in a place like China, where poverty was something that many people had experienced in living memory. And then suddenly there's this boom.

(38:25): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Certainly for the artists who came up in the '90s and still had careers going on in the 2000s, money was very important to them, because they had lived through the Cultural Revolution and real poverty. And so I saw how some of the artists began reproducing what they had a success with over and over and over again, because that was a money-making machine. But in terms of market, I always say, you know, it's not like artists in New York are not influenced by the market.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Sure.

BARBARA POLLACK: You know, I think artists all over the world are concerned whether they will eventually be able to support themselves from their art-making or not. Right now, I'm involved in a project where I'm interviewing a lot of Chinese artists who are now in New York, young artists, and they seem oblivious of their own privilege. They're opening their own galleries. They've gone to graduate school. They're going for an O-1 visa, the "exceptional" visa. And all of this costs legal fees, and living expenses, and rent for gallery spaces. And they're pretty oblivious to the sense of struggle that the earlier generation had.

(39:45): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Hmm. Do you have a sense of what kind of impact their art is having within China?

BARBARA POLLACK: That, I don't know. But, again, when you're talking about artists who struggled between a Chinese identity and a Western identity, that issue is not in the work at all, anymore. There's a lot of abstraction, that could be coming out of calligraphy, but it's not obvious it's coming out of calligraphy. And a lot of these artists have been educated thoroughly, more than I have been, in Western art history. *That's* what's influencing their work.

(40:23): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So what do you personally see as the most interesting thing happening in Chinese art right now?

BARBARA POLLACK: What's very interesting to me is the work that queer artists are doing, because it's definitely underground, because you're not allowed to show representations of queer relationships in TV or movies in China now. And yet they're doing some of the most interesting work in terms of trying to figure out a way of getting past male versus female, East versus West. And the artist that I'm thinking of is Lu Yang, who created the character Uterus Man.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: That's how you open *Brand New Art From China*, talking about Uterus Man.

(41:11): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Talking about Uterus Man. He is definitely not male or female. He's asexual. And I mean, it looks like a young boy, basically, but his superpowers come from using elements of the female reproductive organs. So he has an electric umbilical cord that he ties up his enemies in. Or he can change the DNA of your enemies, or he rides around on a sanitary napkin that's like a boogie board. So the way to win the game is you have to learn how the female anatomy works. I always thought this is brilliant because it's young men who are usually playing video games and all of the stuff that they don't want to know about, they have to learn in order to win this game. But Lu Yang is doing work now with the character called Doku that comes from a Japanese phrase for "I'm born alone and I die alone." And in it, he is mixing references from Tibetan Buddhism, and those notions of reincarnation, with absolutely cutting-edge AI and movement imaging. Because what Lu Yang says is that now that we have our presence on the net, we don't need reincarnation anymore because we're never going to go away.

(42:38): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** (*Laughs*) And that's either something to celebrate or something to be very afraid of.

BARBARA POLLACK: Yes. Yes.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Depending on what's being saved. There's also — you wrote a fair bit about women artists and how their concerns and points of view are represented in Chinese art and how that's being received in China. What are you seeing happening there?

(43:02): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Well, what I saw happening was that for a long time, women artists were not included in the rosters at all. It was definitely like a boys' club with a couple of women who emerged such as Lin Tianmiao.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Who's like the best-known female artist in China.

BARBARA POLLACK: Like the best-known female artists in China. And then in the more recent crop of artists, there's a lot of women, really a lot of women, definitely changing the notion of who can be an artist in terms of Chinese mentality.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Ma Qiusha told you in May 2016 how hard it was for her when her parents pushed her to become an artist.

(43:42): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Who's now showing all over the world. At the time that I met her, she made a video recounting being raised by a tiger mom, who was like, 'If you're going to be an artist, you have to go to drawing class five days a week after school. You have to learn to draw perfectly.' She would rip up her drawings and make her repeat drawing something like a cabbage over and over again, because that's what's on the exam to get into art school in China. The pressure on her to get into art school and become an artist made her nearly suicidal. And that was very, very interesting. Because it was a woman who took the camera, talked directly at the camera, and did not hide secrets or worry about whether she came off genteel enough. It was very much like a Tracy Emin-type move. And since then, she's made a lot of work examining how women were portrayed in Chinese pop culture through the '60s and the '70s.

(44:53): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And at the end of that video, she removed a razor from her bloody mouth, showing how physically difficult it was for her, how painful it was for her to share this personal story.

BARBARA POLLACK: Yes.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: One of those really startling things that happens in Chinese art from time to time.

BARBARA POLLACK: Yeah, it can be — earlier on, it can be very, very visceral.

(45:17): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So about Chinese art, you had said, in *The Wild, Wild East* book that you were thinking, as you got deeper into talking with Chinese artists, you said "now I can explore whether art can change a society." Do you think art has changed Chinese society?

(45:38): **BARBARA POLLACK:** I think in some ways it has. I think that the notion that you can be a creative person and an artist not serving an emperor, or a government, has infiltrated Chinese society at this point. You have generations now of people who have pursued individual art careers and creativity. And it's

going to be a lot harder to tell people they can't be creative anymore, they have to paint pictures of Xi Jinping. And I think that has changed Chinese society a lot. And I think they have an art market that is not going away, a domestic art market that's so big that it's not going away. So more and more people view going to see art or collecting art as part of their aspirations for their life.

But I think I was naïve in thinking that the government had changed so much that it was going to continue to change. Because it just seems like a visual oxymoron to see what's on the streets of Shanghai or Beijing, and think it's all controlled. But it is. And, you know, the White Paper rebellions were very effective.

(46:59): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** This was at the tail end of the COVID lockdowns where people, young people, especially were out with blank sheets of white paper, basically saying, you know, if I write anything, you're going to arrest me, but I'm bringing this out to express my frustration at how much this whole thing has just been a nightmare.

BARBARA POLLACK: So I saw that as a really hopeful note that people might rebel now. My students in New York, who all come from wealthy backgrounds — I brought the issue of the White Paper rebellion into class, and they all denied that it was happening. They all said, "we know that's outside agitators. We know who's doing that," meaning the CIA. You know, many support the Party, because they have benefited so well from capitalism with Chinese characteristics.

(47:51): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. You taught in China, at Shandong University, and you talked about some of the attitudes you heard from your students about art. What were you hearing?

BARBARA POLLACK: What I was hearing from them, and I know this is a strain in Chinese society, what I was hearing from a lot of them is that they completely accepted what they were being taught, which is that art serves the people, art serves the society, and that contemporary art was full of Western influences, which corrupts you. But I showed them a lot of Chinese artists, and some of the students came to me and were really happy, because they did not know that this was going on in their country. But the Party line that was being taught — this is not a sophisticated art school, this is pretty much a middle-of-the-road university — what they were being taught was that art should represent and continue 5,000 years of Chinese heritage. And they couldn't get their mind around stuff that looked different than that.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: What year was this, that you were teaching?

BARBARA POLLACK: I was teaching there in something like 2012, 2014.

(49:05): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And you were saying that young people you were interacting with in Beijing and Shanghai had a very different perspective.

BARBARA POLLACK: Definitely. They had a very, very different perspective, and wanted to be international, wanted their work to be seen as good quality contemporary art. And frankly, all of this has changed how we in the West study art history. The history books have changed. Chinese art, when I was getting educated, was a few pages in the one chapter about world art in Janson's. Now, we have a much more global approach to contemporary art, where artists from all over the world are included in the dialogue. And that, I think, is a tremendous change.

(49:52): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So tell me about Art at a Time Like This, which you started, you co-founded, at the beginning of COVID.

BARBARA POLLACK: At the very beginning. A friend called, a friend who I went around to see shows with, but we did not know each other even that well, called and said, "The museums and galleries are going to be locked down on Tuesday. We have to launch a website." This was on a Friday. In three days, we launched the website "Art at a Time Like This." She said, "What should we call it?" I said, "We should do an opening show called. "How can We Think of Art at a Time Like This?," which was a challenge to artists not to give up, but to rethink what art should be in the middle of a crisis. This is an issue I've thought about throughout my career, how does art respond to crisis? And we got, within just a few days, many major artists from around the world. Ai Weiwei sent us pictures of Wuhan. William Kentridge sent us work about what he was working on in isolation and how isolation is affecting his work. We had political artists from all over the world.

(51:00): And since then, we use the website, first and foremost, to give shows to artists who are in countries where they don't have freedom of expression. So one of the shows we did came from artists in Hong Kong in the aftermath. That was a very moving show. Interestingly, they called us this year and said, 'You have to take it down because we're going to get in trouble', because of the encroachment of Beijing on activities and the amount that the internet is being surveilled.

We've also done major public art projects within the U.S., focusing on the mass incarceration crisis and the climate change crisis. So we've grown a lot. It's unbelievable. It's still going on. We're going into our fifth year. And it's changed my life. It's very, very exciting. It comes from things I've learned in China. But I always had an attitude of seeing things globally. That's what brought me to China to begin with. And challenges that I saw

for artists in China got me very super-aware of challenges that different artists are facing in different parts of the world, depending on their governments and economic situation. It's a thing that I've done that I'm proudest of. We've reached so many people and brought Americans' attention to so many issues that they usually don't pay attention to.

(52:26): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And bringing this full circle, last question, knowing what you know about Chinese artists and the Chinese public and how it's been interacting with art and the current political moment in China, how would you answer the question of "how can you think about art at a time like this," in China?

BARBARA POLLACK: Well, I've never been able to think for the Chinese artists. They're always several steps ahead of me. But I think that, it's a very difficult challenge to cast upon Chinese artists right now, to rethink how to address the crisis that they're in right now, in terms of the domination of the Communist Party. What many of them are doing is returning to abstract painting as a way of bypassing the issues that might get them censored. It's very hard to censor an abstract painting. I always am hoping that I'm going to see a new bunch of artists take on the idea of freedom and creativity, despite the restrictions that now are coming down. And I haven't yet seen a trend of that, either in China or in the U.S.. I would tell people to pay attention not to the painting — artists who are making paintings now are aspiring to market presence — but to more, where I'm really seeing this come about is in video games, and AI pieces, and digital videos, 3D animation. There, I see people beginning to make things about conformist societies, and rebelling against a conformist society — like creating worlds where other things can take place than what's happening in their immediate present. And they can send that out and deliver it to people much more easily than shipping paintings or sculpture. That's where you see more of this experimenting with rebellion.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And considerable creativity and agility just in thinking about how do I, how do I share this?

(54:35): **BARBARA POLLACK:** Yeah, yeah. Well, I would say that a primary thing for many Chinese artists was how do we share this with the world? How do we get it out of China and get to share it with the world? As I said, nobody wants to be considered that their artwork is only appreciated in one place. So how do we spread the word? Chinese artists were way ahead of many artists from around the world in terms of being able to do that.

(Music up, then under)

(55:06): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** That's Barbara Pollack, award-winner curator and writer on contemporary Chinese art.

And this focus on China's evolving art scene feels like a fitting way to round out a full year of China Books podcast episodes, an even dozen, that started with a look at how Chinese fiction in China's heady Reform & Opening Up era both reflected and influenced cultural change. Since then, the China Books podcast has explored human rights issues, for Chinese women, for Uyghurs, for the many Chinese who value freedom of expression for themselves and accountability for their leaders. It's looked at what makes China's growth engine run — at its role in global trade, how it got its lead in green energy, and what economic challenges it now faces at home. There have been some fun fiction episodes — on short stories by Chinese writers in Beijing, on a former BBC China correspondent's shift to writing about China in different ways — in spy novels and a real-life narrative thriller about saving art treasures from the Forbidden City. The podcast has looked at how American correspondents in China have covered China's many changes over time, and at how one Chinese idealist and revolutionary, whose life spanned a century, changed his own mind about what kind of leadership and society was best for China. If you've missed any of those episodes, you can always check them out, along with transcripts, at chinabooksreview.com, or wherever you get your podcasts.

This is my final episode of the China Books podcast. It's been such a pleasure sharing with you, insights from deeply knowledgeable guests, about different ways of thinking about and understanding China — and all that makes it tick, as the rich, complex and sometimes contradictory place it is. I can say, after 15 years of living and reporting in China for NPR and for the U.S. public radio program "The World," and a decade since of visiting and writing about China often, most recently as part of Asia Society, that it's never been boring. I can also say, it's never been more important to make an effort to understand China more deeply — and by China, I mean, not just the government and its policies, but the people, the place, the history, the dreams and the fears, the very real accomplishments of recent decades, and the challenges and opportunities now. Arts and culture — and books — all give you a window into all that, and the China Books Review is a great place to see what's coming out from and about China, to read engaging and insightful essays, excerpts, reviews, and more. In fact, if you're interested in visual art and visual representation of all kinds, check out the China Books Review's recent feature on new photography books about China. And stay tuned for a new season of the China Books podcast — available on the China Books Review, and wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music up)

The China Books podcast is a companion of the China Books Review, which is co-published by The Wire/China, led by David Barboza, and by Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations, where Orville Schell is director, and I'm wrapping up as a senior fellow, and producer and editor of the China Books podcast. Going forward, you can reach me at mkmagistad@gmail.com. The China Books Review's editor is Alec Ash – you can reach him at editor@chinabooksreview.com — and the Review's assistant editor is Taili Ni.

That's it for this season of the China Books podcast. Goodbye from me, with thanks to you for listening. ■

Header image: A sculpture in the 798 Art Zone in Beijing in 2012. (Mary Kay Magistad)



Mary Kay Magistad is a senior fellow at Asia Society's Center on US-China Relations. An award-winning journalist, she lived and reported in East Asia for more than two decades, including in China for NPR (1995-99) and PRI/BBC's *The World* (2003-13). She has created two critically acclaimed podcasts, *On China's New Silk Road* and *Whose Century Is It?* She is host and producer of the China Books podcast.