

Research-Based Exhibitions: Between Curatorial Spatiality and Space as Method

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/1qhdu48fdxcf>

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Abstract

Analyzing the exhibition “Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety” as an exemplary response to the OCAT Institute’s call for research-based curatorial projects, this essay compares the curator Chen Shuyu’s proposition of “curatorial spatiality,” situated in the lineage of artistic research, with the historiography of experimental Chinese art from the 1980s. The latter has been studied extensively by art historian Wu Hung, who also serves as OCAT’s Director, and explains research-based exhibitions evoking his own curatorial endeavors on Chinese art. This juxtaposition of interpretative frameworks aims to reveal the shared questions of space and approaches toward totality, despite diverging historical and artistic contexts. Besides the two directions focused on, this essay also considers the plurality of knowledge systems, experimental methods, and archival potentials by examining the relationship between research and exhibition.

A Kafkaesque burrow, walled by sleek mobile panels, converses with an imaginary colony, transported from a fifth-century Chinese literary classic at the OCAT Institute Beijing. Sensory experience and bodily knowledge explore “curatorial spatiality,” a method proposed by the Malmö-based curator and architect Chen Shuyu.^[1] “Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety: From the Burrow to the Peach Colony” was a winning proposal from OCAT’s 2019 “————” (research-based curatorial project) that came to fruition in 2021 after the Covid-19-induced delay. Separated by walls, folding screens, and a lifted balcony, each exhibited work was in dialogue with the others in the exhibition, resembling the dynamic closing and opening of borders. Theatrical and architectural clues filled the space as visitors navigated their way through the exhibition. The curator also envisioned a “mutual construction” between body and space, emerging in spatial instead of temporal vectors.^[2]

What is considered a “research-based” exhibition? On what grounds did OCAT devise such a category? These questions are posed to the institute, participating artists, and curators, art critics, and visitors alike.^[3] The Chinese and English phrases, “————” and “research-based” stop short of an accurate translation. “— xing,” meaning a form or type, again differs from “— xing,” which denotes an attribute, usually originating from an inherent quality. Therefore, ———— is literally “an exhibition in the form of research.” Is it then reasonable to ask what the research aims are, as well as the background and methodologies for this category of exhibitions? How does the exhibition disclose its methodology, as is common in other forms of research? This inquiry posits a tentative link between research and exhibition, increasingly so in organizations that, similar to OCAT, resist categorization as a

museum or research institute.

Likely popularized through the academic prominence of OCAT in China, several other private art museums have adopted the Chinese term “——” for their exhibition program. Recent examples include the mission statement of the A4 Art Museum (Chengdu) and the highly anticipated exhibition of Ryuichi Sakamoto at M Woods (Beijing).^[4] However, neither museum attempts to define the term. In contrast, M Woods uses “survey exhibition” in its English statement, whereas A4’s translated text omits the term entirely. Such ambiguity and inconsistency echo the historical debates on writing about art in China, with “avant-garde,” “conceptual,” “contemporary,” and “experimental” used as competing terms. While obfuscated translations and terminologies deserve a dedicated study, this essay centers on OCAT’s use of “research-based.” On the one hand, because the semantic structure of this nascent phrase in Chinese appears ambiguous and its usage remains rare, sometimes unintentional; on the other, “research-based” implies a process and readily offers associations with other contemporary practices, which warrants further consideration.

Bases of Exhibition

I would like to consider “research-based” in relation to other comparable terms in contemporary art. “Computer-based art” refers to making art by using a computer, and is often used interchangeably with digital and software-based art. It closely relates to “time-based media,” a more popular term today, especially preferred within conservation initiatives and school curriculums. Usually defined as art that unfolds over time, what it refers to is less straightforward and contains an implicit promise of the use of technology, partly to distinguish it from performance art and avoid confusion in that most artistic materials be it paint, canvas, and even bronze or limestone change over time and potentially create new meanings. “Community-based” art and art education offer another trajectory, in which communities are often the targeted audience, participant, and cornerstone of the work. In such cases, this bracketing already presumes a participatory, contextualized way of making. When considering the specific requirement of a medium or form, such as computer- and time-based, on the display, interpretation, and archiving of the work, what does research require when generating a “research-based” exhibition? From medium, dimension, to the combination of subject, constituent, and method, the unifying structure of “-based” is that it is, firstly, often settled on for convenience when a practice emerges that defies conventional categorization, and in search of a self-constituting potential as it consolidates and consciously reflects on itself. At the same time, however, evolving practices within or parallel to the existing discipline constantly bring new challenges to the parameters, resulting in elusiveness and instability. And thirdly, multiple alternative terms can co-exist and invite debates, in one or several periods, often with different frameworks or artistic, social, and historiographical agendas in each.

The resonating approaches to artistic research or “practice-led and practice-based research in the arts,” as highlighted in the 2020 Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research and research-based exhibitions also manifest the varying temporal and spatial parameters at their points of contact.^[5] A prerequisite of convergence is divergence, with comparison underlining the different knowledge systems and institutional configurations that shape each project. OCAT’s affiliation with the mega-sized state-owned OCT (Overseas Chinese Town) Group and its network of museums across China, tackles different social, political, and cultural questions. Examples here are Wu’s reiteration of his exhibition at Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art and, in collaboration with PaperTiger, Chen’s theatrical staging based on initiatives performed at art festivals, international theaters, independent spaces, and captured in artists’ books in various forms. Research about a work of art, a group of artists, or a cluster of ideas and practices in a particular period or society, always entails a process of representing, examining, referencing or even relating to, an object. To interrogate “research-based” through case

studies should acknowledge the limitations and eccentricities of the institutionally shaped, socioeconomically constrained, or ideologically driven research and enabled events. The resulting knowledge not only informs, but also acts upon the studied materials, through activities such as cataloging, organizing, storing, restoring, and engaging with the content of an exhibition. This knowledge production process echoes what Julian Klein has emphasized as an “active, constructive and aesthetic process” and a shift from the question “what” artistic research is to “when” it is practiced.^[6]

Space as Method



Image 1: “Canceled: An Exhibition about Exhibitions,” June–October 2016, OCAT Institute Beijing, image courtesy OCAT Institute

Wu Hung, a Chicago-based art historian and the institute’s executive director since 2016, proposes research-based exhibitions to focus on “a paradigm of values, a mechanism of academic study and an alternative approach, oriented by historical research.”^[7] In the 1990s, experimental art, which in essence celebrated new forms, materials, and artistic language, was elevated alongside artists’ and curators’ detachment from the official or state-sponsored and academic art that aimed to resist political propaganda, as well as influences of popular urban culture and the international market under the accelerating globalization of Chinese art.^[8] OCAT’s program implicitly updates this concern, positioning itself among more experimental and canonizing practices, staking a claim for artistic and social significance, and using both historical and historiographical frameworks.

An example is one of Wu’s exhibitions about exhibitions, “Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China” (Smart Art Museum, University of Chicago, 2000; restaged at OCAT, 2016). “Canceled” arises from Wu’s research trip to China in 1999, when he noted the rising interest in exhibitions’ criticality, reflecting on their forms and use of space. Amid the lack of regularized exhibition platforms and the frequent, sometimes capricious intervention of politics in art, newly proclaimed “independent” artists and curators sought to foster a “social foundation.”^[9] At the center of the “Canceled” exhibition is a telling incident: the group show “——” (It’s me) at Taimiao, or Imperial Ancestral Temple, which was abruptly canceled one day before opening. Wu Wenguang, an artist who went to visit the show, ended up filming a scene in which several visitors, mostly artists and their close friends, were denied access to the exhibition by a notice and lingered outdoors in the snow. Another work in “It’s Me” that interests Wu Hung particularly is Song Dong’s site-specific video installation, *Father and Son in the Ancestral Temple* (1998), in its response to the patriarchal history of sacrificial ceremonies at the temple. Wu re-staged

both videos, produced within and outside the canceled exhibition respectively, first in a minimal setup in Chicago and later as part of a comprehensive survey at OCAT; the latter has an additional section of archival documents from a group of twelve independent exhibitions in the 1990s.^[10] The inside-outside reversal extends to a reflexive question about exhibition-making. Visitors inevitably join those ejected from Taimiao and become the viewers who are also viewed.

Wu places an additional focus on the exhibition catalogue in this case, developed over the years until the release of the Chinese-language publication in 2016 considered an integral and equally important output as the exhibition itself. The development from research to exhibitions about exhibitions exemplifies both his concept of “space and total art” in research and constitutive process for a research-based exhibition, which inherits the vision and approach of experimental exhibitions being studied. For Wu’s discussion, and here presumably OCAT’s, “experimental” and “research-based,” therefore draw from separate periods and events but remain fluid and interconnected. Wu’s curatorial approach is reciprocal: the exhibition is both subject and method of research, while research in turn provides the subject and method for the exhibition.

OCAT’s organization of this curatorial project also demonstrates its ambitions within this domain. Launched in 2018, an annual open call invites proposals for research-based exhibitions. Five to seven are shortlisted, allowed several months to develop, and then exhibited for around three months each in a gallery space at OCAT. Shortlisted curators present their proposals in front of a panel of art critics and curators alongside members of the public. One winning proposal is to be selected at last, based on a comprehensive evaluation of the project. This phased trajectory highlights the entire research and curatorial process and, importantly, mandates the display of the working process, such as project sketches, curatorial journal, exchange notes or interviews with artists, plus the original artworks as proposed. The behind-the-scenes processes, including the methods and process of research and curating, become transparent, even a work on their own.

Exhibition as Colony

The whole curatorial work is to construct an “archival space” in collaboration with the artists I have invited to research and to practice around different concepts related to space; to create a multifaceted dialogue between the internal and external, here and there, front and back, of mirrors, labyrinths, folding screens, balconies, which can all be considered as both spatial objects and concepts.^[11]

Chen’s curatorial statement, communicating literary and philosophical texts through “spatial objects and concepts” and incorporating them into the exhibition space, appears as an effort to expand the role of a curator. More precisely, she calls for “encyclopedic” thinking and creative input from the curator and other museum staff.^[12] An exhibition, as Chen notes, becomes a form and medium of art.^[13] This also indicates a fluidity between form and medium, or more accurately, as Niklas Luhmann argues in his sociological systems theory, the two are co-dependent and considered as contingent events.^[14] It is also important to note that unlike Wu’s spatial experiment grounded in the research of experimental art, Chen’s project originates from her engagement in theater, specifically the collaboration with the PaperTiger Studio on *The Burrow*. Based on this generative process, Chen naturally evokes the growing discipline of artistic research, which already spans decades. Chen cites Henk Borgdorff’s distinction of “research *in* the arts,” versus *on* or *for* the arts, and aligns this very approach with artistic research.^[15] The method proposes a reflexive perspective in which theory and praxis, researcher and research subject intersect. Chen further argues for the performativity of exhibiting work in space, in a holistic manner, that produces embodied knowledge, or a felt experience inseparable from active

participation. In general, the conceptual and methodological potential is foregrounded in exhibition-making, which itself acts as an artistic practice.

To situate “Archiving” within the programmatic vision of OCAT and compare it with the framework of experimental art and exhibition outlined above, I propose there are three layers of experiment in Chen’s implementation of “curatorial spatiality”: structural, relational, and theatrical.

Examining the architectural configuration of exhibition spaces while contemplating the structural tensions between the burrow and heterotopia, Chen presents multiple interfaces in the exhibition. A Möbius strip is built at the center, on which various spatial concepts and their explanations are printed out. Six triangular prisms with reflective surfaces enclose a space that anticipates events, not only the performance of PaperTiger but a string of other happenings too.^[16] The reflections reconstitute a viewer’s presence and absence in space, or, from Michel Foucault’s perspective, leads to a heterotopia that represents and counters real sites simultaneously. A mirror is thus a dual metaphor for utopia and heterotopia, as it reflects the viewer beyond their occupied space while affirming a “real” presence by revealing the “unreal” via the mirror.^[17] Chen’s constructed mirror structure therefore invites in, reflects, and interrogates all those present.

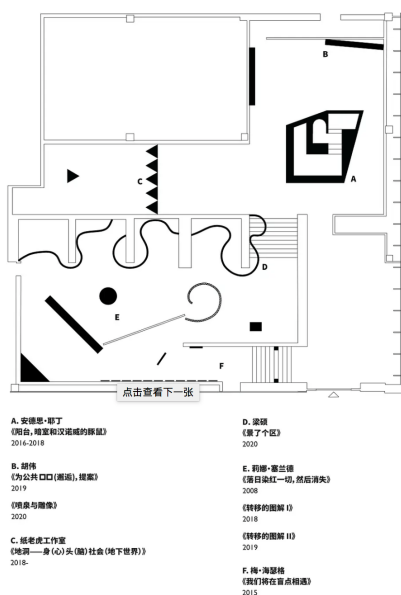


Image 2: Chen Shuyu, exhibition plan, “Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety,” December 2020 March 2021, image courtesy OCAT Institute

A. Andreas Gedin, *The Balcony, the Darkroom and the Guinea Pig in Hannover*

B. Hu Wei, *The Proposal for Public—— (Encounter)*

C. PaperTiger Studio, *The Burrow*

D. Liang Shuo, *Jing le ge qu/The Scroll of Great Mian Mountain*

E. Lina Selander, *When the Sun Sets It's All Red, Then It Disappears, Diagram of Transfer No.1, Diagram of Transfer No. 2*

F. Maj Hasager, *We Will Meet in the Blind Spot*

This dialogue between interfaces is accompanied by a relational spatiality that can be read as a theory for curating as a discipline. Chen insists on a curatorial process that thoroughly engages artists and works, forming a totality that integrates visitors' presence and interaction. This corresponds on the one hand with the effect of a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total art, that unites the arts. The concept was incorporated as a module in the new experimental art curriculum from 2014, led by Qiu Zhijie, of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China; the faculty comprises several of the most recognized experimental artists from the 1990s. On the other hand, Wu Hung's theorization of space and total art, developed in his studies on Dunhuang tombs, is brought together with research on experiments in exhibitions and curatorial methods.

Another aspect of "Archiving" that I would like to consider is the theatrical tactics in the exhibition, which not only give shape to the exhibition but also serve as the support for the integration of performance events. This aspect not only activates the space through a programmed event, but demands a constant work-in-progress state of all exhibited works and visitors' activities. As artists' intense search for legitimate exhibiting spaces in the 1990s gave way to the fully fledged system of museum and gallery exhibitions today, theatrical experiments in the exhibition and as research, speaking to both audience engagement and exhibition-making, may reinvigorate the quest for experiment.

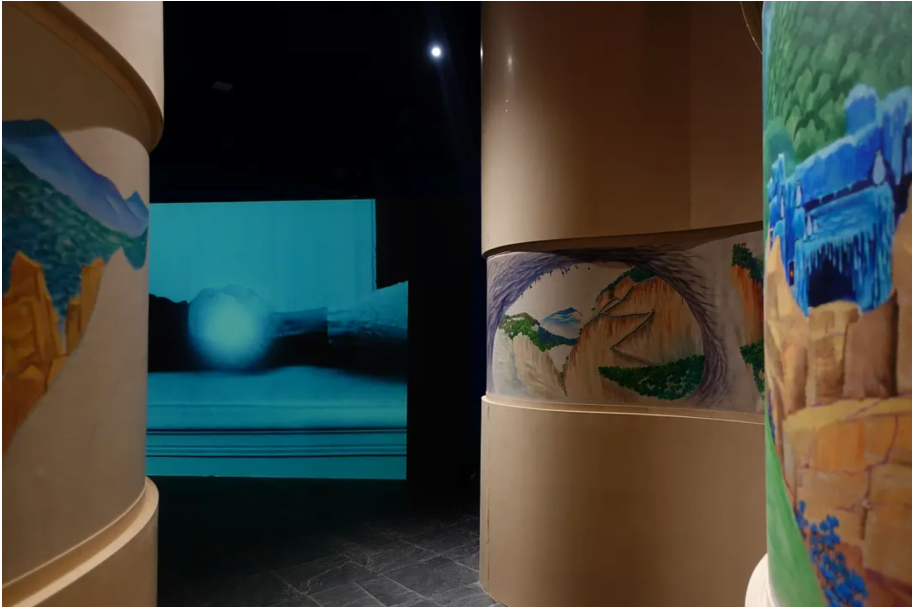


Image 3: Liang Shuo, *The Scroll of Great Mian Mountain*, acrylic on linen, in “Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety,” image courtesy OCAT Institute

The potential of the curatorial space further challenges the professionalization of curators to enable, if not mandate, multifaceted and creative input. Approaching the exhibition space holistically and experimentally, the curator, in this case, works as architect, exhibition designer, and curator of research and public program, inviting collaboration on multiple aspects. Each role envisions the exhibited works and their audience in dialogue. This increasingly popular versatility is distinct from the 1990s emergence of independent Chinese curators, who broke from the official or academic system and took on curating from their position as artists, editors, or art critics.^[18] In comparison, research-based curating now couples art and research in the context of disciplinary experiments that outgrow, regroup, and demand new approaches.

From the burrow to the peach blossom spring in Lin Yutang’s translation, Peach Colony a fictional utopia narrated by the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin dynasty, has circulated as a romantic symbol in the collective imagination since the fifth century.^[19] Like the story’s protagonist who stumbles into a secluded world, timeless and placeless, viewers of Liang Shuo’s thirty-meter-long *Scroll of Great Mian Mountain* in the exhibition meander through the space and in the meantime into the space of the painting. In the many centuries following the story of the peach colony, the imaginary village continues to represent the kind of atemporal, placeless Shangri-La that almost cannily selects and invites its visitors in. How does this curatorial inspiration, then, enable research and produce knowledge about itself, as well as its connection to the viewers, which is not always visible? Chen observes the connection between Foucault’s heterotopia with Tao’s peach colony, in the sense of leaving the old world for a mirroring yet contrasting, utopian community. While this connection is incisive, it is also important to consider the issue of timelessness, where an otherworldly place shelters residents from a linear progression of worldly powers, next to a sense of placelessness within the peach colony and spatial display as such. The sensory experience activated and archived diverges from the historical focus of “Canceled,” while both draw heavily on spatial strategies.

In Tao’s story, villagers explain that their ancestors discovered this place when fleeing the wars of the Qin dynasty where the temporary refugees eventually broke free from the regime and settled in a self-sufficient, self-governing naiveté. When encountering visitors and thereby the presence of other places, the peach colony becomes a field for uncanny anachronisms and lays claim to archiving the space. The ancient Greek origin of

archive, “arkhē,” meaning office or town hall, implies here a desire to govern the keeping of public records, or as summarized by Jacques Derrida, the “sequential and jussive” orders entailed.^[20] This outlined spatial archive, with its endless openings, again evoking Derrida, also hovers between a promised authentic tie to the past while enabling possible, future iterations.^[21] In the constructed journey from the burrow to the peach colony, an archival engine, laden with historical ideas and representations, reaches for its potential. The archival mechanism enlisted for the exhibition performs its historical vision by continuing to write itself into the space, while the space is prepared for events that unravel the memory it holds and the external forms of the archive. How does the spatial ambition of an archive co-exist with its testimonies of time, of the exhibition and the host institution that documents and houses the audiovisual and textual materials? By serving as a base for exhibitions, curatorial research in the examples discussed also reveals the plurality of research methods and aims, knowledge systems, institutional structures, and visions in its different geographical, spatial, and historical realities.

Extrapolating from Chen’s curatorial spatiality and Wu’s concept of space as methodology, research-based exhibitions that expand from a contained space and list of works suggest a totality of research and exhibition. At the same time, as research-based exhibitions devote themselves to publishing catalogues and publicizing exhibition-in-progress material and research questions, the output becomes readily available for and enables future research. These exhibitions tackle a similar dilemma as artistic research, or all forms of research; they inevitably face a dynamic process that individual practices build and rebuild onto existing disciplines, calling for new methods, paradigms, and mechanisms.

Footnotes

1. Chen, Shuyu. “—————“————”——” (Can you misunderstand me right? On “research-based” curatorial project). *The Paper*. May 19, 2020. Available at https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7458190 (accessed 2021-10-12).
2. Chen, Shuyu. “Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety: From the Burrow to the Peach Colony.” Press release. Available at https://www.artforum.com/uploads/guide.005/id26257/press_release.pdf (accessed 2021-09-20).
3. The author’s project, “Viral Transmission: A Medium in Between” was included in the shortlist on of 2020. This article forms an immediate reflection on the curatorial process and aims at a methodical exploration of the potentials and implications of research-based exhibitions.
4. M Woods. “Ryuichi Sakamoto: seeing sound, hearing time.” Available at <https://www.mwoods.org/Ryuichi-Sakamoto-seeing-sound-hearing-time> (accessed 2020-09-20); A4 Art Museum. “A4———” (About A4). Available at <http://www.a4am.cn/basic/32> (accessed 2020-09-20).
5. European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), CILECT/GEECT (International Association of Film and Television Schools), Culture Action Europe (CAE), et al. The Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research. June 2020.
6. Klein, Julian “What is Artistic Research?” *Journal of Artistic Research*. “Reflections.” April 23, 2017.
7. OCAT Institute. “Open call: 2019 Research-Based Curatorial Project.” Available at <http://ocatinstitute.org.cn/en/exhibitions/21/130> (accessed 2021-03-20).
8. Wu, Hung. *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*. Chicago, IL: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. 2000. pp. 11-19. Experimental art, however, was rapidly institutionalized after the

mid-2000s, marked by its primary importance in the pedagogical reform at the Central Art of Fine Arts, China's most prestigious art school. The subject is a major part of the author's current research.

9. Wu, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, pp. 18-19.
10. The OCAT edition was retitled "An Exhibition about Exhibitions: Displaying Contemporary Art in the 1990s."
11. Chen, Shuyu. "Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety: From the Burrow to the Peach Colony." Available at <http://ocatinstitute.org.cn/en/exhibitions/20/167> (accessed 2021-10-12).
12. Chen, Shuyu. "—————" (notes on curating "Archiving the Spaces of Anxiety: From the Burrow to the Peach Colony"). October 24, 2020. Available at <https://www.douban.com/note/739319669> (accessed 2021-10-13).
13. Chen, Shuyu. "—————" (Can you misunderstand me right? On "research-based" curatorial project). By borrowing the Swedish phrase "missförstå mig rätt," Chen again emphasizes the provision of artistic experience and embodied knowledge in an exhibition.
14. Luhmann, Niklas. "The Medium of Art." *Thesis Eleven*. Vol. 18. No. 1. 1987. pp. 101-113.
15. Chen, "—————" (Can you misunderstand me right? On "research-based" curatorial project).
16. Chen, Shuyu. "—————" (Curating is like going down a rabbit hole). ——— ARTDBL. March 24, 2021. Available at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/oNvXaavn7jx9MRaUZ4aMA> (accessed 2021-10-13).
17. Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics*. Vol. 16. No. 1. 1986. pp. 22-27.
18. Cai Qing, Leng Lin, Li Xianting, Qiu Zhijie, Zhang Chaohui, and several other curators of "experimental exhibitions" featured at OCAT in 2016 generally fall into this category.
19. Yutang, Lin. *The Importance of Understanding* (Cleveland, OH, and New York, NY: World Publishing Company, 1960).
20. Derrida, Jacques. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics*. Vol. 25. No. 2. 1995. p. 9.
21. *Ibid.*, 57.