

TRACKING THE *BAT PROJECT*

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Huang Yongping, *Bat Project I*, 2001, installation at the Fourth Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition. Courtesy of the artist.

In the Overseas Chinese Town district of Shenzhen, an orderly tangle-town of carefully staggered and interlocking residential compounds leads to the back of the Overseas Chinese Art Terminal (OCAT) contemporary art centre. Behind the OCAT, against a backdrop of industrial buildings and ever more high-rises, is a tract of grass lined by trees and shrubbery on which Huang Yongping's *Bat Project I* is installed.

Unannounced by any signage or placards, this reconstructed life-sized tail of an EP-3 U.S. Navy surveillance aircraft was, one recent afternoon, shading three men lying in a row on the grass. As the sun sank behind one of the tall residential plinths, several other people could be seen scattered about the lawn. None of them were inspecting or examining this seemingly displaced object painted with a cartoonish bat/lightning bolt emblem below the initials "PR" on the vertical stabilizer and "NAVY" and the U.S. Navy logo on the fuselage. Except for those napping, no one was even getting very close to it. The few whose gaze was pointed in the tail's direction could have been looking not at it, but through it.



Huang Yongping, *Bat Project I*, 2001, installation at the Fourth Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition. Courtesy of the artist.

Shenzhen, the former fishing village now called the “city of immigrants,” began a process of shotgun urban development when it was designated China’s first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in 1980. The city is seen as the testing ground for the country’s economic transformation into the “socialism with Chinese characteristics” fostered by Deng Xiaoping. According to official reports, Shenzhen’s GDP grew at an average rate of thirty percent from 1980 to 2001. Its official per capita income in 2004 was \$7,171 USD, the highest in mainland China.¹ Joining with its neighbours Hong Kong and Guangzhou, Shenzhen is part of an emerging Pearl River Delta mega-city.

Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) is an upper income-level planned residential area developed by the Overseas Chinese Town Group development company. It is home to spaces for contemporary Chinese art, such as the OCAT and the He Xiangning Art Museum, named in honour of the revolutionary painter. OCT contains a group of themed amusement parks—China Folk Culture Village, Happy Valley, Splendid China Miniature Scenery Park, and Window of the World. The OCT Group’s CEO, Ren Kelei, is also the director of the He Xiangning Art Museum, the institution that organized the 2001 Sino-French initiated sculpture exhibition, *Transplantation in Situ*, at the Fourth Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition, which was originally to include *Bat Project I*.²

Coming upon that Shenzhen lawn, anyone can recognize that *Bat Project I* appears to be part of an airplane; there is no need to spend time considering what it is. To be sure, it fits the description and size of an airplane tail. What’s not obvious is why it’s there. It’s clearly a replica, not a relic or a readymade: there are no moveable parts, no rudder where a rudder should be. The materials are different. Moreover, it’s clearly not for amusement, like the miniature replicas of the Great Wall and the Leshan Buddha at nearby Window of the World. In fact, the tail, fabricated in 2001, shows a striking degree of rust and weathering, unfitting for a historical museum or amusement park. Closer inspection reveals countless layers of paint peeling to expose rusty metal panels. It has been spray-painted with graffiti tags and a mobile phone number. In the prefabricated, carefully planned environment of the OCT, *Bat Project I* sits like a question mark, discreetly asking to be investigated.



Huang Yongping, *Bat Project II*, 2002, installation at the Guangzhou Triennale. Courtesy of the artist.

The clue to the story behind *Bat Project* is the “flying mouse,” or *fei shu* emblem. In fact, it is two stories, the “actual” story and the “art” story. In 2001, a U.S. intelligence plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet in China’s airspace. The U.S. plane made an emergency landing on Hainan Island in the South China Sea, while the Chinese plane and pilot were both lost. A diplomatic crisis between the two nations ensued and the U.S. aircraft and crew were held on Chinese soil.

The very day that a resolution was reached—the EP-3 *Bat* was then released, dismantled, and flown back to the U.S. in pieces—Huang Yongping, himself in flight from Paris to Shanghai, initiated the “art” thread. His idea was to replicate the plane in its dismantled form according to his own, “irrational” instructions.³ Over the following months, Huang developed his proposal for the tail replica, which was intended to be exhibited in China to propose the event as “‘unfinished,’ as if it had a ‘tail’ it could not get rid of.”⁴ After the fabrication of *Bat Project I* was completed, but before the opening, it was stricken from the exhibition after intervention by French diplomatic officials. In the next two years, Huang made two more proposals for the piece, *Bat Project II*, the plane’s midsection and left wing, and *Bat Project III*, the right wing. Both were ultimately censored from exhibitions in Guangzhou and Beijing, respectively, for which they were fabricated. In 2002, the artist promised to donate *Bat Project I* to the He Xiangning Museum in Shenzhen, where it was permanently installed in 2003. *Bat Project II* remains in Guangzhou and *Bat Project III* in Beijing. In July 2005 *Bat Project III* was included, unannounced to the media, in an exhibition in the capital at the Today Art Museum.

The return to the U.S. of the EP-3, which was dismantled and transported in another airplane rather than flying back normally, signalled for Huang neither a loss of power nor a lack of technological capability. Rather, he wrote, “It signifies power at its peak and technology with a bright future, because power at its peak is always linked to its decline, and the omnipotence of high technology cannot be separated from its incapacity.”⁵ Like the child of a powerful ruler who is escorted everywhere by bodyguards, the “escorted,” dismantled EP-3 was all at once being protected, made an example of, and watched—a symbol of power and dependence.



Huang Yongping, *Bat Project II*, 2002, installation at the Guangzhou Triennale. Courtesy of the artist.

Although based on an actual event, rather than a historical personal mythology, *Bat Project* echoes what Joseph Beuys demonstrated about the relationship of art to history: it can initiate or embody its own historical trajectory while simultaneously paralleling or continuing another, as in a plane crash that caused a diplomatic conflict. How far and where the trajectory goes is dependent upon the audience. Huang, it seems, prefers, having chosen a direction and location, to go out onto his trajectory, step back, and observe the changes.

Huang wrote in 1987, “Only art in the history of art exists; no other art exists. . . . If pursuing art in the history of art also means pursuing power . . . then to make something become art, you have to use power or make use of the medium of power.”⁶ The complex, well-documented history of the *Bat Project* gives an indication of Huang’s understanding of that medium of power. “When something is suppressed, it can lead to a reaction that will lead to another, related, artwork. . . . Out of the banning, another artwork is created. Not a repetition, but another independent work. One project cannot replace another—they exist as independent things,”⁷ Huang said. From these comments, and in the artist’s meticulous documentation of the *Bat Project* story, one can see that Huang understands that the act of censorship endows with power that which is censored.

However, Huang stressed that he did not anticipate the censorship.⁸ His 1989 essay “Art/Power/Discourse” suggested limitations in art that sets out to incite its own censorship. Huang wrote:

Yet is the goal of deliberately causing an exhibition to be canceled to reveal the existence of power, or is it to use another type of power—that is, by becoming the subject of “more” talk, and not only the subject of talk? As the Chinese idiom “three men create a tiger” shows, a lie gains credibility as it is retold tens of thousands of times. Therefore, power is increasingly acknowledged and affirmed as talk about it multiplies. Of course, it is also doubtful whether one can choose or decide on one’s own to become a power or to run away from it, because this involves not only personal intentions but also the differences between the initial project and its final realization—a project always diverges from the initial plan.⁹



Huang Yongping, *Bat Project III*, 2004, installation at Beijing, China. Courtesy of the artist.

Therein lies the fallacy in the quest for power in art: the unknown. Huang continues:

Art is not so absolute as to require that “it must be done this way”; nevertheless, it is possible for one to insist on this absoluteness with the deliberate aim of obtaining the result of an exhibition being closed down. Obviously, transgressing power relies very much on the use of the language of power—“it must be this way”! Since the artist cannot effectively control his own intention, as he would like to imagine it, the “creativity” through which the artist expresses his singular personality is a problematic concept. The concept of the “creativity of the artist” must time and again be “dried up” because it represents the last “drop” of romanticism. The impossible existence of creativity does not refer to the “inevitable influence of tradition,” as is usually thought; rather, it refers to the impossible existence of autonomous creativity.¹⁰

By not insisting on how it must be done, by surrendering absolute control, Huang resolves the power fallacy, and he does away with the notion of singular, visionary authorship. This introduces what is perhaps one of his prime artistic motivations—to create paradox. Recalling the anti-art-institutional tendencies of 1960s and 1970s Conceptual art, Huang wrote from Xiamen in 1986, “The highest and ultimate goal for the artist is to abandon art completely.”¹¹ For Huang, this has meant putting forth an artwork or exhibition and then turning it against itself. Demonstrating exploration of Chan (Zen) Buddhism (with its “paradox of desires”)¹² and Dada (a self-proclaimed anti-movement), the artist’s projects in the late 1980s consisted largely of work that would begin to self-destruct in its process of being made. The “events” staged by Xiamen Dada during this era included a 1986 exhibition in which, after closing, the exhibition’s contents were burned in the museum courtyard; another proposed one exhibition only to change it at the eleventh hour into another, the *Events* exhibition that took place at the Fujian Art Museum, consisting of objects found around the museum and brought inside; still another, in 1987, *Artworks—To Be Dealt with as Garbage*, had the artists bringing paintings to a dump and then photographing people’s interaction with the discarded art.¹³

The decay of *Bat Project I* could be construed as an act of abandonment, particularly given the advocating that was done to achieve its realization. And of course, Huang does insist on certain



Huang Yongping, *Bat Project IV*, 2004–2005. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

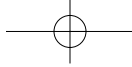
things. He would not, for instance, after suggestions from exhibition organizers, allow the scale of his life-size replica of the *Bat* to be changed.¹⁴ On the other hand, as a rule, he does not oppose external forces acting swiftly and directly on his work, and in many instances he invites them.

In late 2002, during production for the First Guangzhou Triennial, and what would become the second instance of the *Bat Project* being banned, Huang Yongping addressed the question of what would happen to the understanding of the original news event in relation to the artwork itself over the course of the exhibition. Huang said:

Time indeed allows for the switching among multiple meanings. When a sculpture is left in one place for many years, “new” becomes “old,” the unknown becomes familiar, or on the contrary, the familiar becomes the unknown. Memories originally related to a piece of news will no longer exist, and these airplane fragments will become an object for people to sneer at. Yes, in any case, time sneers at everything.¹⁵

Perhaps not intending to address the issue of a project’s future maintenance, the above statements provide an illuminating view into what has become of *Bat Project I*. It is an object that is hard to classify as anything other than a declarative statement of the simultaneity of its own existence and impermanence, like a lizard tail wasting away in the desert. In *Bat Project I*, time is sneering not only at newness and preservation, but also at the media event that inspired it and that is now perhaps forgotten.

Bat Project I’s lack of introduction, explanation, and preservation flies in the face of most other large-scale examples of public art. Here, just as in the Xiamen Dada “events”—when viewers’ reactions became the content of the work—there is no apology for the art object and exhibition’s demise. It is an exhibition of demise.



Bat Project's form finds roots in Huang's examination of a particular "metaphysical illusion created by the human brain"¹⁶: the idea of the "whole." In his 1985 essay "Talking about Art," Huang likened the Western concept of the "whole" to the "vessel" of Daoism. He wrote, "A 'vessel' is a whole that is assembled from originally separate parts, and it is greater than the totality of its parts. If we take the 'vessel' apart, however, dividing it into its constituent pieces, the 'vessel' will cease being a whole."¹⁷ He continues, quoting chapter 28 of the *Dao De Jing*, "'splitting the uncarved wood to shape into a vessel,' the 'vessel' is not only a whole but also a part (of the uncarved wood), and represents the thing that corresponds to the term whole. In any case, the whole no longer exists either."¹⁸

Sculpture is the physical embodiment of this "infinitely malleable"¹⁹ whole vis-à-vis a dismantled airplane. Seeming to anticipate the *Bat Project*, Huang continues, "The whole now exists in the form of disjointed pieces; precisely because the pieces do not need to be related to one another, however, it is inappropriate to regard the whole as being disintegrated."²⁰ By reversing the order—first carving, then creating a "vessel" (the airplane), Huang examines this idea of the impossibility of the "disintegration" of the disjointed whole, or "carved vessel." Sure enough, *Bat Project I* is immediately recognized as a part of a larger thing, without the rest of its parts nearby. It seems impossible to imagine not being able to recognize it and the mind not reflexively filling in the missing parts.

During the period in his career when Huang was using divining practices and chance to execute his assault on the "autonomous creativity of the artist" and the "absoluteness of art," the instructions in the Daoist treatise *Yijing* (Book of Changes) and homemade roulette wheels were the interface to the material world. As those interfaces gradually disappeared from his practice, we see in the *Bat Projects* that Huang has not moved away from Daoist principles—if anything he uses them to become more expansive—and is undaunted by scale or politics. Huang's making art according to chance perhaps left him with the temperament of the fortune-teller, in the way that the artist is a seeker not of answers, but possibilities; the answer—echoing Huang's 2001 comment about time and ridicule—seems to be the same for everything, including art: doom.

Huang wrote in his personal journal about the *Bat Project*:

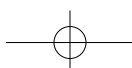
"What if the real and fake planes had the same fate?"

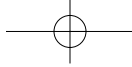
and:

"The fact that something was made from the 'tail' (the tail of the plane) signified from the very beginning that this reverse order would result in resistance."²¹

The above musings are typical of the artist's challenge of reason. The notion of doom carries with it the stigma of superstition, fatalism, and irrationality. If the *Bat Project's* tail-first construction would signal resistance, so too would a breech baby be destined to a difficult life.

Inevitably, Huang finds a point of entry through the bat, viewing it through the lens of Chinese medicine, language, and iconography. In the Chinese tradition, this animal is used to treat eye problems, signifies wealth and good fortune ("bat" and "wealth" are homonyms), and is good at absorbing *qi* (energy). Meanwhile, in the West, this animal signifies Halloween, vampires, a caped superhero (Batman), bad vision ("blind as a bat"), and insanity ("bats in the belfry," "gone batty"). In the military intelligence context, it could be an image of stealth and nocturnal infiltration.





The fourth installment of *Bat Project* is part of the large-scale retrospective *House of Oracles*, which opened last October at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and has since travelled to MassMoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. For the latest manifestation of this project, Huang attached to the nose of a real decommissioned EP-3 (the final piece of the airplane) a 40-foot fuselage made of the bamboo scaffolding and blue, white, and red tarpaulin seen at many of China's construction sites. Inside are documentation of *Bat Project* (2001–2005) and taxidermic bats hung from above. Huang's read on the bat, played back to a global audience, could be seen as yet another introduction of the East to the West and vice versa. Likely, it is more complex than that—an ironic, playfully subversive suggestion (one person's bearer of wealth is another's blood-sucking monster), within the context of a two-nation standoff, of how language and tradition can shape thinking.

Huang said from Fujian province in December, "I put a period at the end of this project: in the future, in China, I will not continue to make work related to the *Bat Project*. It's over." He says that none of the *Bat Project* sculptures in China were fully realized. Despite this, *Bat Project I, II* and *III* are in China now, and he suggested the potential for putting all the parts of *Bat Project* together into a composite.²²

China does indeed have a Pinocchio-like "tail" (and a fuselage and two wings) that it cannot seem to get rid of today. But unlike Carlo Collodi's wooden boy, who finds he has sprouted a backside appendage (and the ears of an ass) after his trip to the notorious Pleasure Island, Huang did not grow a tail because of some individual's moral slip. It is a reminder of an event that created a tense moment and that brought the deep-seated, potentially clashing beliefs and desires of powerful individuals and nations to the surface. There is no traditional moral, only history and potential and a disjointed airplane with a long past.

Notes

¹ Shenzhen Government Online, "Investment Environment," <http://english.sz.gov.cn/ftz/> (accessed January 8, 2006).

² *Bat Project* chronological information compiled from "Bat Project: A Chronology," in *House of Oracles: A Huang Yongping Retrospective*, ed. Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 76–79; and a telephone conversation with Huang Yongping on December 22, 2005.

³ From the artist's comment, "The way the Americans dismantled the spy plane was structural and rational, whereas I dismantled the plane in an irrational, nonstructural way. I cut up an airplane as if I were slicing a loaf of bread," in "Bat Project," trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *House of Oracles*, 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶ Huang Yongping, "Thoughts, Creations and Activities in 1987," trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *ibid.*, 52.

⁷ Comment from a telephone conversation with the artist on December 22, 2005.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Huang Yongping, "Excerpt from 'Art/Power/Discourse' (1989)," trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *House of Oracles*, 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹¹ Huang Yongping, "Excerpt from 'On the Question of Language in 'Art'' (1986)," trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *ibid.*, 85.

¹² The Buddhist "paradox of desires" can be roughly described as this: in order for humans to achieve enlightenment, they must give up all of their desires, including their desire to achieve enlightenment.

¹³ See "Notebook 01, 1980–1989" by Huang Yongping, trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *House of Oracles*, 37–58.

¹⁴ From September 2002 letters of correspondence between Huang Yongping and the Guangdong Museum of Art reprinted from the artist's journal, trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *ibid.*, 66, ii.

¹⁵ Comment from Alberte Gynpas Nguyen's 2002 interview with Huang Yongping in *ibid.*, 62, iv.

¹⁶ Huang Yongping, "Excerpt from 'Talking about Art' (1985)," trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

²¹ Huang Yongping, "Bat Project," trans. Yu Hsiao Hwei, in *ibid.*, 60, ii.

²² Comment from a telephone conversation with the artist on December 22, 2005.

