

Xiao Lu: asserting her voice through artistic practice

Laia Manonelles Moner¹

¹Universitat de Barcelona – Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT – Xiao Lu: asserting her voice through artistic practice – At the opening of the iconic exhibition *Chinal/Avant-Garde* (1989, Beijing), the artist Xiao Lu fired two shots at her installation *Dialogue* and handed the gun to the artist Tang Song, who would later become her boyfriend. From that moment on, the artworld attributed the piece to Tang Song and Xiao Lu. Two decades after the event, Xiao Lu disputed the unique authorship of the artwork in a fictional memoir, *Dialogue* (2010). In this text, she presented a historiography of her art, reflecting on the performance and challenging Tang Song's appropriation of the work. This article explores Xiao Lu's re-writing of the official history of art and its patriarchal foundations through a feminist lens. It engages with complementary, contradictory, and contrasting readings of Xiao Lu's art and offers a new approach that addresses both the therapeutic and political dimensions of the artist's autobiographical account.

Keywords: **Xiao Lu. Performance. Feminism. Chinese Experimental Art. Authorship.**

RÉSUMÉ – Xiao Lu: affirmer sa propre voix à travers la pratique artistique – Lors du vernissage de l'exposition emblématique *Chinal/Avant-Garde* (1989, Pékin), l'artiste Xiao Lu tire deux coups de feu sur son installation *Dialogue* et tend l'arme à feu à l'artiste Tang Song, qui deviendra plus tard son couple. À partir de ce moment, le monde de l'art attribue la pièce à Tang Song et Xiao Lu. Deux décennies après l'événement, Xiao Lu a contesté qu'elle était l'unique auteure de l'œuvre d'art dans son mémoire fictif, *Dialogue* (2010). Dans ce texte, elle présente une historiographie de son art, réfléchit sur la performance et interpelle l'appropriation de l'œuvre par Tang Song. Cet article explore la réécriture par l'artiste de l'histoire officielle de l'art et de ses fondements patriarcaux à travers une perspective féministe. Il engage des lectures complémentaires, contradictoires et contraposées de l'art de Xiao Lu et propose une nouvelle approche qui aborde à la fois les dimensions thérapeutiques et politiques du récit autobiographique de l'artiste.

Mots-clés: **Xiao Lu. Performance. Féminisme. Art Expérimental Chinois. Titularité.**

RESUMO – Xiao Lu: afirmar sua voz por meio da prática artística – Na abertura da icônica exposição *Chinal/Avant-Garde* (1989, Pequim), a artista Xiao Lu disparou dois tiros contra sua instalação *Dialogue* e entregou a arma ao artista Tang Song, que mais tarde se tornaria seu namorado. A partir daquele momento, o mundo da arte atribuiu a peça a Tang Song e Xiao Lu. Duas décadas depois, Xiao Lu disputou a autoria exclusiva da obra de arte em um livro de memórias ficcionais, *Dialogue* (2010). Nesse texto, ela apresentou uma historiografia de sua arte, refletindo sobre a performance e desafiando a apropriação da obra por Tang Song. Este artigo explora a reescrita de Xiao Lu a respeito da história oficial da arte e seus fundamentos patriarcais por intermédio de uma lente feminista. Abarca leituras complementares, contraditórias e contrastantes da arte de Xiao Lu e oferece uma nova abordagem tanto à dimensão terapêutica como política do relato autobiográfico da artista.

Palavras-chave: **Xiao Lu. Performance. Feminismo. Arte Experimental Chinesa. Autoria.**

Xiao Lu: artistic creation as a means for speaking out

The form of a work of art, its very existence, is just the manifestation of an inner demand. Depending on your psychology in any given situation, it may be a poem, or the firing of a gun. [...] It's an instinctive survival mechanism. It's where you're at in life (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 4).

In her fictional memoir *Dialogue* (对话, 2010) Xiao Lu (肖鲁, Hanzhou, 1962) describes artistic creation as a response to an intimate need, which is linked to an instinctive survival mechanism. This article examines this memoir, considering it as a means of liberation, denouncement, and feminine empowerment. Focusing on the artist's process of developing self-awareness and her reflection on identity issues, it explores the cathartic potential of artistic production and the close association between lived experience and creative practice. Xiao Lu's writing emerges from a willingness to map out a historiography of her own artwork and, above all, a need to reclaim authorship of both the conception and performance of *Dialogue: The Gunshot incident* (1989), which has become an iconic work in the history of experimental art in China.

In her fictional memoir, Xiao Lu states that she conceived *Dialogue* (1988) in her final year as a student at the Department of Oil Painting of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. She intended to explore “the dialogue between male and female – a dialogue without dialogue, this was my real life situation” (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 60). In response to her suggestion, her tutor advised her to carefully consider the artwork's format. This issue was resolved shortly after she had a conversation with an “old family friend”, Wei Bo, from a telephone booth (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 61). During that exchange, Xiao Lu accused him of sexual abuse and of having ruined her life. She recalls how “[...] [j]ust as I left the phone booth, a picture appeared before my eyes, specific and artistically formed: the telephone booth, a male-female conversation, a dangling telephone receiver, an engaged signal... It had found its format” (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 62). Her art teacher, Shen Sheng-tiang, assisted her during the process and supported her choice to use a real telephone booth. He also suggested that she use black and white photographs instead of paintings (Xiao Lu, 2010). Xiao Lu decided to place a mirror with a red cross in the middle of her installation to reflect her own image. She remembers how “Teacher Song” said to her: “This work is too

clean. It needs to be broken”, suggesting she use a gun to crack the mirror without breaking it (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 69). Song belonged to a generation of young teachers who had returned from studying abroad and encouraged their students to explore experimental artistic languages and transgress the dominant concepts of socialist realism (Shen Shentiang had been in the USA and Song in France). However, to avoid possible obstacles to presenting a conceptual and experimental artwork, Xiao Lu agreed with the Department of Oil Painting to submit a painting and installation as her final project (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 66). In her fictional memoir, Xiao Lu delves deep into her feelings of confusion and unease, and an installation her difficulty to communicate with men as the main reasons that led her to create this installation:

I did *Dialogue* just because at the time I felt very stifled, really quite suffocated. I had a boyfriend but I could not talk to him honestly about my past. I was keeping a lot of things to myself. Even though we were living together as a couple, I felt like we were strangers, and I couldn't talk to him about anything. I felt like I could not communicate with men. *Dialogue* was about that (Merlin, 2018).

Artistic creation helped her process and channel the trauma she could not verbalize, as a consequence of the power her abuser exerted over Xiao Lu and her vulnerability.

The backbone of the fictional memoir's story is her performance, *Dialogue: The Gunshot incident* (Figure 1), which took place at the opening of the iconic exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* (1989) at the National Art Museum in Beijing. In this performance, Xiao Lu fired two shots at her installation *Dialogue* and then gave the gun to Tang Song. For over a decade, the art world attributed the work to both artists, however, in *Dialogue* (2010), Xiao Lu explains that Tang Song had nothing to do with the conception of the work and that he had improperly appropriated it. She reveals her decision to break her silence after splitting up with her partner of 15-years to narrate the events in her own terms and assert sole authorship of the work.



Figure 1 – Xiao Lu (1989). *Dialogue-The Gunshot incident* [Performance]. Beijing.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Xiao Lu, in both her installation *Dialogue* and the performance *Dialogue-The Gunshot incident*, exorcises the trauma of sexual abuse. For instance, in the fictional memoir, she recounts how after the performance, she sent Wei Bo, her parent's friend who had sexually abused her, a letter that stated: "Did you hear the shots? Do you know what made me fire that gun?" Xiao Lu notes how after sending the letter: "I seemed to wave goodbye to the gunshots, and to my past as well" (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 113). By engaging with personal trauma in art, the personal becomes a collective matter and thus political.

This article explores the relationship between the personal and the political. It examines therapeutic and political aspects of Xiao Lu's biographical account of her other artworks, as well texts by and interviews with the artist, including two interviews I conducted with her in 2008 and 2019. It thus delves into Xiao Lu's artwork and statements over eleven years, revealing the unfolding of her practice and her thinking processes. My work contributes to the existing critical corpus by presenting re-readings of critical reflections by other art historians and curators, unveiling new and more nuanced aspects of her artistic output. Sensitive to the unequal position and status of women artists in China, the article locates these discourses in connection to the emergence of avant-garde art and the outset of the construction of the history of experimental art in China. It regards Xiao Lu's empowerment as illustrative of women's struggle for their own space in a patriarchal system that limits and polices their freedom, and as a means to give visibility to the work of women artists. My methodological approach is transdisciplinary, interweaving the fields of art history, anthropology, sociology, and feminism to discuss these issues in relation to the socio-political

conditions in which the first generation of Chinese women experimental artists emerged in the 1980s.

Dialogue – The Gunshot incident: asserting the artist’s own voice

Xiao Lu recalls seeing posters with the symbol *No U-turn* as she accessed the venue for the *China-Avant-Garde* exhibition, which was the first exposition of experimental and avant-garde art to be shown in an official location in the country. She had decided to shoot at her installation the night before and considered telling her intention to the organizers. Unable to speak to them and, in retrospect, aware of the fact that permission would not have been granted, she chose to conduct the performance anyway (Merlin, 2018). The artist obtained the gun from her childhood friend, Li Song-song and when she bumped into an old fellow student, Ju Qing, she asked him to film her action (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 87).

Xiao Lu explained the detention of Tang Song after the shots and how, in a state of panic, she jumped into a bus. After several rides on different bus routes, turned herself in to the police (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 96-97; p. 99). In her statement to the police, she described her action as performance art and returned the gun. While international news agencies, such as the *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *Agence France Presse* and *United Press International* identified her as the author of the performance, the Chinese press only mentioned that a man and a woman had been arrested by the police (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 204). Gao Minglu, who was one of the curators of *China-Avant-Garde*, said that the event site was closed a few hours after its opening, and the two following re-openings in February were short-lived due to the shadow that Xiao Lu’s performance had cast over it. It was even forced to shut down due to bomb threats¹. The organizers were fined 2000 renminbi and banned from exhibiting at the National Art Museum for two years (Tan, 2012, p. 129). The exhibition was the first display of experimental art to be showcased in an official institution, although it was censored shortly after the first performance due to the shooting. In fact, avant-garde art of the 1980s began to enter institutional spaces, albeit under stringent government control, during a period of opening promoted by President Deng Xiaoping.

The artists were released from jail three days later, and they met Gao Minglu, who invited them to participate in an academic seminar to talk about the work. Tang Song introduced Xiao Lu to Li Xianting, the co-curator of the exhibition and editor of the art journal *Zhongguo Meishu Bao*. Upon arrival at the editorial department, the artist was suffering from a severe headache and lay down while Tang Song spoke with Li Xianting. She had another headache the following day at the *Central Fine Arts Academy*, where she also felt unable to talk. As she clearly recollects, as soon as she lost the ability to communicate, Tang Song became the sole spokesman for the action:

Everybody wanted to talk to us about the gun. Lan Jun [(Lan Jun is the fictional name used for the protagonist's boyfriend in the novel)] and I sat on a bed and faced all those people. My mind was disturbed by something, and I couldn't open my mouth, no matter what. I lowered my head. Lan Jun was explaining the work with amiable frankness, its political, legal and strategic implications and so on and so forth, a huge load of deep vocabulary, causing everybody present to listen to him in fascination. As I listened to all those things which had nothing whatsoever to do with me, my whole mind was filled with humiliation. [...] I had completely lost my tongue (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 106).

She became friends with Tang Song, who offered to write about the action for Gao Minglu (Xiao Lu, 2010, ix) and suggested that they should immediately depart for Hangzhou. Tang Song appropriated her work and the ensuing discourses about it. In fact, when Li Xianting published the article "Two Gunshots: The curtain call of the new wave in art" (1989) for the *Zhongguo Meishu Bao*, he wrote that the action had been co-authored by the two artists (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 111). Xiao Lu remembers that her teacher had advised her to publicly affirm her sole authorship of the work, as did her mother: "He's fallen in love with this gun of yours. [...] How can you be so foolish? Everybody on campus is saying that Lan Jun is using you emotionally to usurp your work". However, she remained silent and this inability to communicate allowed him to take claim of the work because she was in love (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 113).

The exhibition took place at a time when experimental art was beginning to grow in China and in the context prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre. Although Xiao Lu emphasized that the origin of her work was not connected with the political events at the time (Xiao Lu apud Manonelles

Moner, 2011, p. 191), it is important to note the progressive repression unleashed by the government in response to the growing demand for democracy by students, workers, and intellectuals. On May 19 loudspeakers declared martial law and in the early hours of the June 4, 1989 tanks entered Tiananmen Square (Moreno, 1992, p. 222). After this historic clash, government policy became more repressive and artists witnessed a vanishing of the utopian spirit that had characterized the 1980s. The art scene entered a new period of unease which forced many experimental artists to work underground to avoid repression and censorship (Andrews; Minglu, 1995, p. 237).

The students of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts also took part, alongside many other university students, in the movements that, beginning in April 1989, sought to establish dialogue with the government. Tang Song became a representative voice and was blacklisted after the incidents in Tiananmen. Because of this complex political situation, Xiao Lu began to think about leaving the country and thanks to her family's network of contacts she was able to submit her papers at the Australian consulate of Shanghai. Following the advice of an acquaintance, she presented evidence of the critical reception that *Dialogue-The Gunshot incident* had in international media. The next day she was offered a three-month tourist visa (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 118-19) and flew to Sydney on December 14, 1989. Tang Song followed her a 18-months later, entering Australia illegally from Hong Kong. In the fictional memoir, the artist chronicles her new life in Sydney, her happiness, but also the conflicts she had with Tang Song, who gambled all the money she earned and the state subsidies they received. They returned to China in 1997 and witnessed the impact of the economic and urban transformation implemented by Deng Xiaoping. The couple's problems magnified under her desire to have children, which was not shared by Tang Song. They argued intensely and she began dialoguing with herself and putting her thoughts in order, writing constantly and asking herself why – over all those years – she had not been able to openly discuss her work *Dialogue* (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 158). Tang Song's visit to Australia for a period of four months in 2001 was a decisive moment in her process of developing self-awareness. In the words of the artist: "When Lan Jun suddenly left in 2001, it was the turning-point of my life. I had slept for many years, and now I slowly woke up. I who had struggled with puzzles and contradictions began to find a way out. This change very gradually penetrated my

whole body” (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 159). After twenty years of silence, she told Tang Song that she had fired at her installation in response to Wei Bo’s abuse, breaking the “keep silent” command ordered by the “old family friend”. Sharing the underlying motivation for the shooting performance helped challenge the oppression she had felt during all those years (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 162).

In fact, a year before the breakup of their relationship, Xiao Lu had already started to search for her own space. When she went to the US – following an invitation from a childhood friend – Tang Song sent her instructions for a collaborative project, however, unhappy about their previous joint works, she decided against it². In the words of Xiao Lu (2010, p. 167): “Collaboration is about two people reaching a common understanding, not about one obeying the other. If we must collaborate, you finish your part in Hangzhou, and I’ll finish my part in New York”. Rejecting her partner’s mandate and working autonomously helped her to rebuild her self-confidence. In the performance *We are in New York* (2002), Xiao Lu took a mannequin in the likeness of Tang Song for a walk around the city and takes photos of herself with it at the 9/11 Memorial Site, the Brooklyn Bridge and Times Square. He had sent her the mannequin, but not for that purpose. Instead, Xiao Lu executed her own proposal, appearing at all these sites next to her partner, who became a shadow, a ghost, a doll. Her resolution to conduct these actions autonomously led to an argument upon her return to Hangzhou and spearheaded a process that would eventually lead to their splitting up.

In her novel, Xiao Lu chronicles the difficult years she spent with Tang Song and reveals how she became silent the moment her partner became the main voice for her work. She was only able to articulate her history aloud when she was no longer with him. It was precisely her determination to explain what happened that created a turning point in both her life and work. *Dialogue* was sold to the art collector Song He, although it had deteriorated significantly due to poor conservation. When the two artists were approached with a request to reproduce it, Xiao Lu expressed her desire to do it herself. In response to her assertion of sole authorship, Tang Song told her that it was he who had been the sole voice for the work. Xiao Lu answered him:

'You must know that for all these years, I'm the one who's been talking about it'

'Yes, you've been talking, and why? Because I haven't'

'Say as much as you like, you can't change it. It's already written into history' 'History is written by people, and I'm not dead yet! Don't forget I made this work, you know best in your heart what your part was in it' (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 186).

Xiao Lu belongs to a generation of women who were educated in the rigid patriarchal system of the Cultural Revolution. Women had to submit to fathers, husbands and sons in a structure that reflects the Confucious maxim, "the lack of talent is a virtue in a woman" (González Puy, 1995, p. 163). The anthropologist Su-Ling Welland (2018, p. 58-59) notes how the family friend who abused Xiao Lu, a painter who had studied with her father in the USSR, told the artist after raping her: "I'd like to paint a nude portrait of you". This sentence crystallizes the connection between sexual aggression and the tradition of the female nude in art, which constructs women's bodies as objects-to-be-looked-at.

However, she and other women of her generation began to define their own paths in the 1980s, finding their own voice through artistic creation and challenging official narratives through their questioning of hegemony. Xiao Lu belongs to the first generation of women who studied visual arts and began to explore experimental art in a male artistic ecosystem. For her graduation project, she decided to present a conceptual work of art that challenged what was considered as *official* art, in the Oil painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, of which her father was the director and where her mother also taught. At the opening of *China Avantgarde* she destroyed her own installation to exorcise the violence of sexual abuse and the feeling of hopelessness she experienced when her own family did not protect her. She took a step forward when she made up her mind to reclaim her authorship of *Dialogue, the Gunshot incident* and confronted her ex-partner, as well as the socio-cultural context that places women in a submissive position in the predominantly male art system.

Subverting the official narrative about avant-garde art

Xiao Lu's work has yielded a polyphony of readings. Art historian and curator Inma González Puy (1995, p. 179) draws attention to the web of

privileges and the unequal justice system that governed the artworld. She notes how Xiao Lu and Tang Song were freed after a few days because she fired a gun that belonged to a family member who had a senior role in the party and many contacts due to his elitist social condition.

Among the many readings of *Dialogue- the Gunshot incident*, Li Xianting's stands out because he locates it in a political context by rendering the performance a presage of the Tiananmen Square events (Li Xianting, 1993, p. XIX). Xiao Lu, however, bemoans the granting of co-authorship to Tang Song by the influential critic, known in art circles as *Big Brother* (Lao Li). Li Xianting's later article, *Critical Historical Junctures in the 1980s* (2005), continued to name both artists as co-authors (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 194). Despite another attempt by Xiao Lu to speak with Li Xianting to clarify the issue of authorship, he persisted in defending the co-authorship in his subsequent writings. In October, the art critic published another article in *Meishu Tongmeng* where he claimed that it was Tang Song who had pushed her to fire the gun. Three days later, Xiao Lu made publicly affirmed her authorship in three different publications and provided visual evidence, pointing to the fact that Tang Song spontaneously encouraged her to fire the gun a second time, as a spectator and not as a conceptual co-author³. Xiao Lu accuses the critic of not wanting "[...] the creator of this work to be entirely female. In his imagination, the actions of a woman must be subject to direction by a man" (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 196). The art critic Ji Hong welcomed Xiao's account, stressing the need to revise history in her article "sHE, tHEy, HE- Reflections prompted by Xiao Lu's *Dialogue*" (2005):

To provide history with an honest and clear explanation, so that in Chinese art history – unlike in the fine arts history and other kinds of history of the past – the male right to control discourse will never again belittle and erase the value of female creativity in an attempt to continue to maintain the myth of male greatness and female insignificance (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 198).

Adele Tan also approaches Xiao Lu's work from a gender perspective and expresses a desire to revise the iconic performance, about which a monolithic history was created, and to consider other narratives that are open to feminine and feminist readings (Tan, 2012, p. 127). Tan notes the difficulties of being a female artist in a patriarchal artistic context that does not accept that the author of such a powerful work of art is a woman: "Xiao un-

mistakably answered the critics who had doubted her ability to produce a work of singular ‘masculine’ force” (Tan, 2012, p. 131). It is notable that Gao Minglu (2005, p. 253) saw *Dialogue-The Gunshot incident* as the most violent artwork of 1980s China. Minglu, who had a key role in making avant-garde art visible in the country, established dialogue with the artist, visited her Beijing studio in 2003, and after hearing her side of the story, asked her to provide a written account of it (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 188). In the prologue to Xiao Lu’s novel, Gao Minglu presents the reasons why Xiao Lu chose to present a fictional account (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. vi)⁴. In the first chapter of the novel, Xiao Lu includes the correspondence she exchanged with Gao Minglu about her action at the opening of *China/Avant-Garde*. She received an email on her 42 birthday and his words encouraged her to explain the series of events in order to sketch a new history:

[...] this matter is not merely a wrangle between two individuals, yourself and Lan Jun, about the authorship question, but is about demonstrating that at any given moment in history, there can be various kinds of coincidental, distorting factors, such a revision motivated by individual interests, exaggeration and reinterpretation by the media, the collective fabrication of rumours among the broad masses and so on. [...] I understand that being a woman may have led you to sacrifice the fame that is properly your own on the altar of emotion. As you say in your letter, this event is also a story about feminism. In particular, it is a story about being a woman in China. I very much understand what you are saying, that being female in China you are perhaps in an even better position to understand the essence of historical fabrication (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 5-6).

The correspondence between Gao Minglu and Xiao Lu was published in the editorial section of the website of the Beijing art journal Meishu Tongment. Shortly after it was made public, two articles appeared as a response: “A Feminist Misunderstanding’ and ‘The Gunshot Incident Is Over, History Is Over, What Does it Mean Today? – Clarification Depends on the Facts, The History of Art is Still Emotion” (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 7). Xiao Lu remembers how she started getting phone calls asking her why she had not spoken out before and accusing her of being spiteful after her breakup with her partner (Xiao Lu, 2010). She explains that many men objected to her decision to tell the truth and reads their disapproval in relation to the socio-political and cultural context: “Li Xianting and other critics told me that if I had loved this man, why should I disturb the past?” (Xiao

Lu apud Manonelles Moner, 2011, p. 192). Her reflections are illustrative of patriarchy's systematic oppression of women and the invisibility of their narratives. Significantly, Gao Minglu notes that her choice to reveal her side of the story was illustrative of the reality of being a woman in China and that her subversion of the official narrative of avant-garde art led to the public construction of the artist as a "vengeful woman":

Xiao Lu's revision, like her gunshots, became a controversial case in the history of contemporary art. It was different because initially she had been a heroine, whereas this time she was a 'vindictive woman'. The revision was perceived as going against the established history of avant-garde art, against authority, even against patriarchal society. Therefore, Xiao Lu's revision lost her the sympathy formerly extended to her (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. xi).

Gao Minglu and Xiao Lu began to exchange correspondence, in which they reflect on artistic creation and the therapeutic potential of art. Their letters to each other were published on the *Meishu Tongmeng website* (20 April 2004). Three days later, Xiao Lu published her draft text "Explanation of the Gunshot Work *Dialogue* at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, 1989" a second version of this article was published on the same platform in October 2004 in the *Second Artist's Colloquium*, and a third in the *Tianya magazine* (Horizon) in 2005 (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 205). Gao Minglu (2006) analyses the artwork from various angles, with hindsight and at a time when Chinese contemporary art was expanding into the international arena, and states: "Both shots were aimed at the mirror between the two telephone booths, and in this mirror, Xiao Lu saw herself. This is to say, Xiao Lu fired upon herself, committing symbolic suicide. This is the tragedy of a woman, and of a society". Another relevant interpretation that Gao Minglu (2006) offers concerns the relationship between artistic movements and democracy: "[...] immediately after June 4, Xiao Lu's gunshot were called by conservative persons in the art works 'the first gunshots of Tiananmen', just as the China Avant-Garde Exhibition was described – after June 4 – as 'the little Tiananmen Square'" (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. viii).

Even Gao Minglu (2010, p. 43) draws on Xiao Lu's process of empowerment to reflect on the need to rethink the history of contemporary art in China from the perspective of gender, a view that was not considered in art circles during the 1980s and 1990s. In 2006, he revisits the work and argues that it is a challenge to critics, warning of the dangers of simplifica-

tion and reductionism. Gao Minglu openly favors re-writing the history of art he had helped construct and gets involved in this revision, beginning a re-evaluation of his own practice as an art historian. Because of this commitment to Xiao Lu and other women artists, he highlights the need to find new paradigms that go beyond western feminism.

Despite the general opprobrium, other men (Huang Rui) supported Xiao Lu's determination to speak out. Huang Rui – the artist and co-organizer of the Arts Festival in Dashanzi (2004) along with the artist Dai Guangyu and the art historian Thomas J. Berghuis – invited Xiao Lu to participate in the exhibition *Language Without Borders 2004: Volume control*, and told her: “[...] for so many years, you have said nothing in public about *Dialogue*. For this exhibition, you must speak with your own voice” (Xiao Lu, 2010, 8). In response to the invitation, Xiao Lu presented the series *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* (2003) (Figure 2), a remaking of her 1989 installation *Dialogue* and she also performed *A Dialogue about Dialogue* in the *Chinese Modern Art Exhibition* (2004).



Figure 2 – Xiao Lu. (2003). *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* [Performance]. Beijing.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

The resolve to reclaim her exclusive authorship can be read under the feminist premise which postulates that the personal is political. Hence, when personal trauma is made public – by means of creative practice – the boundaries between individual and collective experiences are blurred, and this is an essential step in confronting and transforming the systemic violence of patriarchal systems.

Social resistance and female resistance

Gao Minglu speaks of a “social resistance and a female resistance”, when referring to the willingness to articulate that which has been silenced, made invisible, by means of artistic production, ultimately weaving together lived experience with artistic creation. Consequently, by establishing this relationship between the intimate and the collective, the personal acquires a political dimension. It follows that art functions as a way to give shape to

emotions and conflicts, yet it also becomes a tool to speak out in order to share events and develop critical thinking.



Figure 3 – Xiao Lu. (2003). *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003*, Detail [Performance]. Beijing.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Dialogue (2010) can be understood as the artist's manifesto that questions the construction of an official narrative of the history of Chinese avant-gardes, based on a revision of the performance *Dialogue-the Gunshot incident*, which is now a canonical piece of experimental art in China. However, the deconstruction of the official narrative began a few years earlier, with the actions *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* (2003) and *A Dialogue about Dialogue* in the *Arts Festival* (2004). In *Dialogue* the artist presents the thinking processes behind all these works, and considers the role of art critics, and her own role in generating misunderstandings, and the difficulties she encountered when she decided to re-write her history. I will now outline Xiao Lu's process of empowerment, focusing on both her artwork and her fictional memoir. The point of departure is *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* (19th October, Beijing) (Figure 3), where the artist presents a series of 15 photographs of herself firing a gun, a shot for each one of the years that she was in a relationship with Tang Song. Interesting-

ly, in this work she revisits the same performative strategy to enact a liberation ritual. The first time, it was related to sexual abuse, whereas in this occasion she exorcises the complex 15-year long relationship with her ex-partner:

For the work *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003*, I raised the gun again. But raising it this time was not as confused as it had been fifteen years earlier. The great changes which appeared in my eyes bore a resolute strength. One shot for each year, fifteen shots in all. The months and years of fifteen years of my youth, what I had lost was time, what I had gained was the courage of a woman to face her past, as well as the force to regenerate (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 188).

This relationship between destruction and creation can be related to the *Tirs series* (1961-1970) by Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002) in which the young French-American artist, who was at the time in the early stages of her artistic career, also exorcized her father's systemic violence and sexual abuse by shooting her own artwork. Both artists understand art as a way to channel unease and present it back to society by adopting a daring, confrontational and active role. Xiao Lu and Niki de Saint Phalle belong to different cultural environments and distinct generations; however, they share a commitment to using creation to denounce abuse in the public sphere, sublimating their personal trauma and engaging the audience.

Xiao Lu notes how in 2003 she took up a firearm once again to claim publicly that she was the sole author of *Dialogue*: "A dispute about who was to be recognized as its author brought to light some Little-known history. The story begins with a gun" (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 5), and on April 12, 2004 she published a text, *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* on the *Meishu Tongmeng* (arts.tom.com) web site (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 205). The artist acknowledges her difficulties in articulating her own narrative, however, poetry and writing became fundamental in her process of self-affirmation and are integrated to her artwork and published on specialist art platforms. Words are also essential in her performance *A Dialogue about Dialogue*, which took place at the closing event of the exhibition *Language Without Borders 2004: Volume Control* (2004). At that time the artist showed a reconstruction of her installation *Dialogue* and read a poem⁵. The poem is saturated with emotions and explains how her inability to explain the firing of the gun enabled Tang Song to become the spokesman for the work. It

would not be until she found her own words as an artist that she could offer her truth to the artworld. After reading her poem, Xiao Lu symbolically cut off some locks of her long hair (untouched for 15 years) and gave them to 20 members of the audience alongside manuscripts of her correspondence with Gao Minglu and other relevant publications about her 1989 performance. The reconstruction of this work plays a key role in the artist's process of developing self-awareness and shows her determination to set the record straight. As Adele Tan (2012, p. 131) notes, the work did not achieve the same level of visibility as the shooting event in 1989: "The Dashanzi performance, unlike the pandemonium fifteen years earlier, was a strangely muted affair without media coverage".



Figure 4 – Xiao Lu. (2006). *Sperm* [Performance]. Jingzi.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Along with challenging patriarchal conventions over artistic authorship, Xiao Lu questioned traditional notions of motherhood and marriage in her performance art. The traditional role of women in China influenced the young artist until she was able to rid herself of pre-established clichés. She addresses these issues from an autobiographical perspective in two of her artworks, *Sperm* (Jingzi, 2006) (Figure 4) and *Wedlock* (2009). In her installation and performance *Sperm*, produced for the art project "Long March Project-Yan'an" and commissioned by Lu Jie, she asked men who were willing to par-

participate to leave a flask with sperm in the freezer located at the “Yan’an Forum on Art Education” so she could undergo artificial insemination at the age of 44. However, this attempt to collect sperm at Yan’an failed⁶. In this work, Xiao Lu (2010, p. 154) considers assisted reproduction to become a mother without the need to be in a relationship with a man, alluding to the years she lived with Tang Song during which he did not want them to have children. In both her performances and novel, she ponders her relationship with men, denounces sexual abuse and hints at how he pressured her into having an abortion on two occasions. When the couple returned to China, she suggested having a child, but he was evasive. In fact, he even took his position to the extreme by proposing the performance *Sterilization Project*, where the two artists would undergo surgery to become sterile. Xiao Lu rejected this proposal, despite his demand that she sacrifice her desire to become a mother in the name of art (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 163).

Sperm can therefore be regarded as a counterproposal to *Sterilization Project*, and in which Xiao Lu questions the myth of romantic love, in terms of motherhood and the idea of an idyllic marriage. In *Sperm* the artist subverts the traditional relationship by situating him in a passive role, as sperm donor, and granting the woman an active role. Xiao Lu transgresses the established norm and proposes new spaces of reproductive freedom for women. In the same vein is her work *Wedlock* (2009) (Figure 5), presented at the exhibition *Twenty Years Anniversary of the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* (5th February 2009) and curated by Gao Minglu at the *Wall Art Museum* in Beijing, where the artist gets married to herself.



Figure 5 – Xiao Lu. (2009). *Wedlock* [Performance]. Beijing.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

The performance began with a nuptial limousine arriving at the museum to the sound of traditional Chinese funerary music, and four young men carrying a black coffin to the entrance of the museum. Xiao Lu comes out of the coffin wearing a bridal dress and the music changes to a traditional nuptial tune while she enters the art institution. Guo Qiang is in charge of performing the wedding ceremony and the artist, her younger sister, and Gao Minglu participate in the formal speeches. Finally, the performance ends when the bride frees doves after getting married to herself (Figure 6). The wedding becomes a funeral, and the bride does not wait for her consort to conduct the ritual. The officiation of the commitment is saturated with irony, as well as liturgic and para-theatricality. The artist notes: “There is an old saying in China that states that marriage is the tomb of love. Therefore, I used this image of the coffin to emerge out of the tomb and get married to myself. The doves are a symbol of freedom” (Xiao Lu apud Manonelles Moner, 2011).



Figure 6 – Xiao Lu. (2009). *Wedlock* [Performance]. Beijing.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

As we have seen, the determination to speak out as conveyed in the works analyzed can be understood in terms of “social resistance and a female resistance”. However, as Gao Minglu, Inma González Puy and Liao Wen observe, there is a difference between these artworks and Western feminist art. These critics agree that although the exhibitions bring together the output of women artists, there is no sense of a collective struggle in their work (González Puy, 1995, p. 165). Accordingly, these authors coincide in their view that it is not appropriate to talk about feminist art in China (un-

derstood in Western terms) because the national social and cultural context needs to be considered.

The relationship between individual and collective experience is multifaceted. Xiao Lu's generation was educated to conceive of art as an instrument for communicating collective feelings and that was at the service of the revolution. This explains why it is so important for Xiao Lu to address personal issues as a woman as well as an artist. Xiao Lu subverts the role expected of her and dares to occupy a symbolic official space, the National Museum of Art, in 1989. Further, she continues to defy male dominance by presenting her work in public spaces where her personal experience can be linked to those of a generation of women. She establishes the connection with the collective by engaging directly with the audience. By exhibiting her work and undertaking public performances in museums, institutions, and art galleries, she allows these locations to become spaces where traditionally omitted narratives can be heard.

Individual and Collective

In addition to drawing on her own experience in the construction of *Wedlock* and *Sperm*, her contact with artists such as Li Xinmo and Lan Jing was essential to her use of individual experience as a metaphor for the collective. They founded the group *Bald Girls* and constituted themselves in a symbolic ceremony on March 3, 2012 by shaving their hair while they announced the birth of their group in the *Iberia Center for Contemporary Art* in Beijing (Figure 7). Xiao Lu explains that her relationship with *Bald Girls* transformed her and opened a window for investigating women's rights and collaborative work:

Before, I had always been concerned with my own personal experiences, but after *Bald Girls* I started to pay more attention to the lives and experiences of other women. My works were no longer exclusively based on my own situation. This was the transformation. [...] Previously, my work had been about externalising the internal. Now perhaps I am internalising the external, and then externalising it again (Merlin, 2018).



Figure 7 – Xiao Lu, Li Xinmo and Lan Jing (2012). *The Bald Girls* [Performance]. Beijing.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

The group engages with the reality of women in China. But their artwork was not censored, despite explicitly deploying a phrase about women's rights in an exhibition of women artists. They drew attention to their marginal status in the artworld, and Xiao Lu emphasized the need to defend feminism in China (Merlin, 2018). Her stance is also discernible in her work *What is Feminism?* (2012) presented at Osmanthus-Rain Villa in Hangzhou, where she invited the audience to write down what they understand as feminism:

The English word 'Feminism' is translated into Chinese as Nüquanzhuyi (女权主义) – meaning 'Women's-rights-ism' – or Nüxingzhuyi (女性主义) – meaning 'Feminism'. However, in China, the use of Nüquanzhuyi (女权主义) is usually avoided. Why? I made the work *What Is Feminism* with this question in mind, requesting that the present beholders please leave a few words on *What is Feminism* written in the album⁷.

Xiao Lu reflects on the different meanings and interpretations associated to feminisms and reveals that she had asked herself the same questions. She notes working with *Bald girls*, she began to read feminist books, noting her wish to go beyond labels (Xiao Lu, 2019). The majority of Chinese women artists do not identify with gender difference; therefore, their work cannot be regarded in the same manner as that of feminist Euro-American ones. Xiao Lu talks about her enthusiasm when introduced to feminism by

the curator Xu Juan and the artists Li Xinmo and Lan Jing. Still, she reveals “I went to the bookstore to buy all the books that I could find about feminism, but I also understood that I cannot create work according to the definitions in these books” (Xiao Lu, 2019). Xiao Lu sustains that instead of being founded on concepts or theory, her work emerges from feelings, as a way to externalize an intimate and personal urge. Because of this, despite presenting herself as a feminist, she defends the distinctions between “the social question of feminism from that of artistic creation” (Xiao Lu, 2019). However, another issue that needs consideration is whether it is possible to separate this in such a clear-cut manner, since her feminist perspective – be it conscious or unconscious – undoubtedly permeates her artistic practice. In the two interviews I conducted with the artist in 2008 and 2019 I noted a growing self-confidence and empowerment through her performances, the writing of articles and her fictional memoir. In her case, theory develops from her practice, her use of the body and voice. Likewise, her agreeing to be interviewed is illustrative of a willingness to speak out, and share with Chinese and foreign art historians, to affirm the need to re-write history.

Despite sharing some common ground with feminism in the western world, Chinese feminism can vary significantly, hence the importance of socio-historical context. The sociologist Amelia Sáiz López notes that women’s studies in China date back to the 1980s, in spite of the fact that the May 4 movement of 1919 claimed a space for women in a heteropatriarchal society for the first time. Sáiz López (2009) notes that in the 1980s, women’s organizations were established to defend their rights and transform society. The turn to “women’s studies” in China, however, emphasized the importance of not relying too much on Eurocentric feminist premises. It was understood to be essential to adapt western knowledge to the Chinese context to ensure that Chinese women have their own voice and express their own subjectivity in a global context (Sáiz López, 2009, p. 184).

In *Dialogue*, Xiao Lu refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) (Beauvoir, 2005), where the French thinker speaks of women’s condition in western society and notes how culture and society render woman *Other* to man. She notes: “Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The second sex*: ‘women are not born, they are made’. Well in my experience women are born. Women’s innate maternal character endows them with a faculty of

self-sacrifice” (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 204). It is important to note how the artist explains that during the first part of her life, she exclusively lived for men and depended on their recognition (Merlin, 2018), which is in keeping with the patriarchal context discussed above. Nevertheless, through creative process these preconceived ideas about the nature of women towards self-sacrifice are discarded as they are freed from preestablished social imperatives. The artist’s journey materializes in the 15 shots she fires for each of the years she spent with Tang Song, and her first public claim of sole authorship when she showcased the re-creation of the installation *Dialogue*. With *Sperm* and *Wedlock* she questions the longstanding model of normative family. Finally, in her fictional memoir, *Dialogue*, she ponders and reconstructs her personal narrative, weaves together lived and artistic experience and speaks out to claim her authorship, writing history from another prism.

Artistic practice allows Xiao Lu to be in tune with her own needs and rid herself of social imperatives and the necessity to be recognized by others. In 2008, when I asked Xiao Lu her opinion about the development of Chinese women artists in the last three decades, she answered that in China power is controlled by men, who have more opportunities to exhibit their work and receive the attention of critics (Xiao Lu). Xiao Lu establishes links between the empowerment of women and artists in China: “My case demonstrates the development of women, from being quiet to speaking out and facing reality so that my capabilities are recognized. This is the development that women have achieved in the last three decades: emancipation” (Manonelles Moner, 2011, p. 194).

As I have outlined, and as is noted by Gao Minglu, one of the consequences of this decision was that Xiao Lu was codified as a “bad woman” by a primarily male Chinese art elite. Xiao Lu challenges the hegemonic order of a patriarchal society and subverts the official narrative of experimental art. In the words of the artist: “In China, the world of critics consists exclusively of men and they are the ones who have the authority to speak. So when a woman encounters an issue, she has nowhere to turn to, no one will listen to her” (Merlin, 2018). Xiao Lu takes a step and with the help of Gao Minglu, the art critic Ji Hong, and of curators and artists such as Huang Rui, initiates a new artistic era.

Conclusion

Xiao Lu stresses the cathartic power of writing *Dialogue*, which became an exercise to ponder, digest, expel and repair her unease. It is also essential to emphasize the transformative capacity of the word – written, pronounced and shared – and its ability to transcend the sphere of the individual and enter the realm of the collective, to recall Carol Hanish’s understanding of the personal as political. However, Xiao Lu’s work must be read in the Chinese context, considering its reappropriations of feminist movements. The artist explains how she lost her voice during the years she spent with Tang Song, but also, how after their breakup, she decided to speak out. The culmination of this process would be the writing of *Dialogue*, and her various performances that integrated poetry and the use of written language.

Her friend Elsa, whom she met on her arrival to Australia, encouraged her to write about what had happened in the form of a fictional memoir, as Elsa had done in a period of depression. Xiao Lu began to write in the winter of 2004 and finished in 2009 with the help of Elsa and her friend Archibald Mckenzie, who would translate the book into English. The writing process is essential. She uses the first person singular throughout but shifts to the third person to narrate the sexual abuse by the “old family friend” and feels embarrassment, pain, alienation, and the feeling of being adrift (Xiao Lu, 2010, p. 39). The artist explains her difficulty in writing about the trauma and the only means available to speak about it was the detachment that the third person narration provided (Xiao Lu, 2019). The different voices and perspectives allow her to narrate that which is impossible to articulate, to explain that which had been silenced. The spoken word, writing and communication is essential in Xiao Lu’s process of empowerment.

Xiao Lu claims a female genealogy, recalling how her own mother had asked her why she allowed her authorship of the artwork to be usurped. She lost contact with her progenitor and only recovered it years later when she was ready to spell out the difficulties she had faced. Likewise, her friends help her separate from Tang Song; Wu Ling provided assistance during the process of breaking up, Wen Hui encouraged her to socialize, Elsa to write the novel, and the collective *Bald girls* helped her to develop self-awareness. Her female friends established a support network to ensure that the personal could be connected with the collective. Xiao Lu’s work transcends a ca-

thartic individual experience and focuses instead, as Gao Minglu notes, on a “social resistance and a female resistance”. Xiao Lu’s rewriting of history compels historians and art critics to revise narratives they have constructed and continue to construct. This is a challenge and responsibility that is shared by those involved in the writing of contemporary art history.

In conclusion, Xiao Lu, in her symbolic production, and literary and performative work finds and shares her own voice, connects with other women’s experiences, and makes visible that which has been omitted from official narratives. This creative process provides the artist a new framework for interpreting her own life and her artwork, as well as the possibility to transform reality. Xiao Lu proposes subverting the great official narrative of avant-garde art and to re-narrate Art History from the first person singular, questioning patriarchal authority, and claiming new readings and critical reflections⁸.

Notes

- ¹ The exhibition reopened on February 10 but was closed on the 14th due to bomb threats. It reopened again on the 17th of the same month but was finally closed on the 19th.
- ² The curator of the show *Post-89’ New Chinese Art*, in Hong Kong, and *Mao Goes Pop*, in Sydney, invited both artists to participate in the exhibition when they lived in Sydney. Tang Song suggested that they produce something jointly but that he would be the author of the concept. In this way he emphasized how a couple should work together.
- ³ She published her statements in the *Meishu Tongmeng website* “Xiao Lu’s Supplementary Account of the work *Dialogue*, Shot at the Chinese National Art Museum, Beijing”, “The Video of Xiao Lu Shooting the work *Dialogue* in 1989, supplied by Lü Nin” and “Account of the Work *Dialogue*, Shot at the Chinese National Art Museum, Beijing in 1989 (revised Version)”
- ⁴ In the novel, people’s real names are changed into fictional ones. Xiao Lu becomes Xiao Xiao, Tang Song is given the name Lan Jun, Gao Minglu is quoted as Gao Tianyu and Li Xianting as Song Li Wei.
- ⁵ See Xiao Lu’s web page:
<http://www.xiaoluart.com/en/showpro.asp?id1=78&Classid1=18>. Accessed on: 12 May 2021.

- ⁶ See Xiao Lu's web page:
<http://www.xiaoluart.com/en/showpro.asp?id1=85&Classid1=17>. Accessed on:
12 May 2021.
- ⁷ See Xiao Lu's web page:
<http://www.xiaoluart.com/en/showpro.asp?id1=88&Classid1=30>. Accessed on:
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Laià Manonelles Moner holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Barcelona. She is an associate professor in Department of History of Art, University of Barcelona, Spain. In addition, she's a member of InterAsia. Interculturality in East Asia (Autonomous University of Barcelona). She is also the author of the book *La construcción de la(s) historia(s) del arte contemporáneo en China: Conversaciones con comisarios, historiadores y críticos* (The Constructions of Chinese Contemporary Art Histor(ies): Conversations with Curators, Historians and Art Critics, 2017).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0738-0811>

E-mail: laiamanonelles@ub.edu

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