



Centre for
Contemporary
Asian Art



Xiao Lu:
Impossible Dialogue
肖鲁：语嘿

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Xiao Lu's art provokes a complex range of responses, including about what it means to be an artist and a woman in China. Her work fearlessly expresses her desire to break through societal norms and achieve transcendence. Through performance the artist has found her voice.

Xiao Lu has staged a powerful series of performance works in recent decades: a mock wedding/funeral, asked members of the public 'what is love?', invited strangers to drink red wine with her and become so intoxicated that she was taken to hospital, had her head shaved, sought sperm donors, exposed her mature naked body in an act of purging, doused herself with a bucket of ink and then water, and inflicted serious bodily harm on herself while cutting her way out from within a tower of ice. While the artist makes careful preparations, the final outcome of these events is not known. She welcomes unpredicted spontaneous occurrences for where they may lead. She works with intuition and feeling and thrives on nerve. Her work is informed by a raw, disruptive aesthetic that draws on deep emotions, extreme action and chance.

When something extraordinary happens how can we know the truth of its happening? What if an action appears to be the product of a particular *zeitgeist* and a narrative is created to make sense of it, but in fact the action is motivated by highly personal impulses that run counter to the given explanations and exceed interpretation; when action is chosen over words? What happens when agency is usurped and the action becomes part of a larger, even heroic narrative that has implications for the writing of history? What happens when the country is China and the actor is female?

Thirty years ago, on 5 February 1989, Xiao Lu fired a handgun into her art work *Dialogue* 《对话》 in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, an unprecedented survey of contemporary Chinese art at Beijing's National Art Gallery. At the time she was a recent art school graduate. Her installation comprised two telephone booths - a novelty in China at the time - separated by a central plinth on top of which was placed a red phone, the hand receiver dangling off the hook, with mirror glass behind. Photographic images of a man and a woman, their backs to the viewer, could be seen inside the booths. Xiao Lu's two gunshots, generally referred to as the 'Shooting incident 枪击事件', caused the temporary closure of the exhibition and resulted in the detention and interrogation of Xiao Lu and male artist Tang Song, linking him to the action too. A statement explaining that the gunshots were purely artistic in intent as jointly signed by Tang Song and Xiao Lu, linking Tang Song to the action. The 'Shooting incident' led to Xiao Lu's flight to Sydney in the aftermath of the student-led protests at Tiananmen that were brutally suppressed by the Chinese military in June of that year. She was eventually joined by Tang Song, who was by then her partner, and became an Australian citizen.

Over a decade later, back in Beijing and after separating from Tang Song, Xiao Lu finally broke her silence and sought to recuperate *Dialogue* as all her own work, with the act of shooting the gun an integral element of that installation. This assertion proved difficult for many in the Beijing art world, including those who linked the shooting to Tang Song, and attached larger artistic and socio-political meanings to the event. Xiao Lu insisted that the work came out of complex personal emotions ultimately arising from a much earlier abusive betrayal of trust. The work was about autobiography, unruly thoughts associated with unruly actions, and violent retribution in the form of a gun shot at her own image as reflected in the mirror of the installation. This interpretation came from a deep, dark, personal space that few could have anticipated. It proved irreconcilable with the significance that had been claimed for the work by others.

The drawn out *Dialogue* affair prompted leading Beijing-based female art critic Xu Hong to support Xiao Lu's belated effort to set the record straight regarding the work's authorship, citing qualitative differences in Xiao Lu's and Tang Song's approaches to art making, among other factors. While Xu Hong questions the reasons for Xiao Lu's earlier silence, criticising it as 'a kind of acquiescence', she took aim at the persistent 'dictatorship of ideology' in operation in the art world that devalued the expression of emotion in art. In her 2006 essay on Xiao Lu and *Dialogue*, Xu Hong draws attention to the denigration of women's creative practice by men who wield power in art world discourse in China, 'perpetuating the myth of male greatness and female insignificance'.¹

Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue 肖鲁：语嘿, timed to coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, provides an opportunity for audiences at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art to reflect on the art of Xiao Lu and her connection with Australia. The exhibition is the result of collaboration between curators and artists in Australia and China. The ground floor gallery features a photograph and video footage of *Dialogue*, together with images of works by other artists included in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, a striking installation by Wang Youshen (whose work was also included in the show) of documentary photographs of the exhibition featuring rare images of Xiao Lu and Tang Song, archival documentation relating to the show and ephemera from Xiao Lu and Tang Song's time in Australia. The first floor gallery displays a selection of key artworks and performance stills by Xiao Lu together with videos of all of her major performance works. 4A is also presenting a new performance art commission *Tides*, which is a response by Xiao Lu to her thirty-year association with Australia and her eight-year period of residence in Sydney (1989-1997), much of it spent living close to Bondi Beach. This exhibition provides an important opportunity to acknowledge Xiao Lu's close association with Sydney and the place she occupies in both Chinese and Australian art history.

Claire Roberts
Australian Research Council Future Fellow, Associate Professor of Art History, The University of Melbourne

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Xiao Lu (born 1962, Hangzhou) works with performance and installation. She is a graduate of the Subsidiary School of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing and Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art), Hangzhou. Her graduation work *Dialogue* was included in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing in 1989 and became famous after she fired a gun at it, which led to her temporary arrest and an extended period of residence in Sydney. Xiao Lu's fictional memoir *Dialogue* 《对话》, published in Chinese and English in 2010, exposed powerful forces affecting women artists in contemporary China. Xiao Lu's work has been included in important international exhibitions, most recently *Performer and Participant*, Tate, London (2018) and *Art and China After 1989: Theatre of the World*, Guggenheim Museum, New York (2017), and been collected by public and private institutions including the Tate, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Taikang Insurance Group Art Collection, Beijing; and White Rabbit Collection, Sydney. Xiao Lu lives and works in Beijing and Australia.

Curators: Claire Roberts, Mikala Tai, Xu Hong.
Curatorial Assistant: Kelly Doley

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Art and Activism: Changing the Conversation
Sunday 20 January
12.00-1.00pm
Sydney Festival Director Wesley Enoch and Xiao Lu in conversation. Free, book at 4a.com.au

The China/Avant-Garde Exhibition 30 Years On
Friday 1 February
10.00am-5.00pm
Day-long international workshop. Free, book at 4a.com.au

Please Explain: Gender + Art in China
Saturday 2 February
2pm - 3.30pm
Panel discussion featuring Xiao Lu. Free, book at 4a.com.au

Congee Breakfast Tour
Saturday 9 February
10am - 12.30pm
A tour of Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue followed by a congee breakfast. \$25, book at 4a.com.au

Public programs also taking place interstate: see 4a.com.au

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Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue 肖鲁：语嘿 19 January - 24 March 2019



LIST OF WORKS

Ground floor:

1. Xiao Lu
Dialogue 《对话》
1989
C-type print on vinyl
documentation of installation, and performance: 11.10 am, 5 February 1989, *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, National Art Gallery, Beijing, reproduced courtesy Wen Pulin Archive of Chinese Avant-Garde Art and the artist.
2. Xiao Lu
Dialogue 《对话》
1989
single channel video, 2:04 minutes
documentation of performance: 11.10 am, 5 February 1989, *China/Avant-Garde* Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Beijing
Courtesy Wen Pulin Archive of Chinese Avant-Garde Art and the artist.
3. *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, set of 210 archival slides produced by Fine Arts Magazine, 1991. Courtesy Claire Roberts.

4. Wang Youshen
China/Avant-Garde exhibition • *Before and after the 'Shooting Incident'*, 《中国现代艺术展·枪击事件前后》
1989
25 digital prints, dimensions variable
courtesy Wang Youshen.

5. *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition archival materials
courtesy Wang Youshen

6. Archival materials relating to Xiao Lu
courtesy Xiao Lu, Claire Roberts, Archibald McKenzie

See wall text and 4a.com.au for a full list of archival materials

First floor:

1. Xiao Lu
15 Gunshots... From 1989 to 2003, 《15枪...从1989到2003》
2003
15 digital prints, framed and then punctured by a bullet
100 x 45 x 15 cm, edition 12/15, printed 2018
photographs by Li Songsong. Courtesy the artist.

2. Xiao Lu
Sperm 《精子》
2006
C-type print, 120 x 160cm, edition 6/10, printed 2016
documentation of performance: 21-23 May 2006, Long March Project-Yan'an, Kangda Hotel, Yan'an, China. Courtesy Long March Space and the artist.

3. Xiao Lu
One 《合一》
2015
C-type print, 120 x 80 cm, edition 1/10, printed 2017
documentation of performance: 5 September 2015, Live Action 10, Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
Photographs by Lin Qijian. Courtesy of the artist.

4. Xiao Lu
One 《合一》
2015
single channel video, 3.10 minutes
documentation of performance: 5 September 2015, Live Action 10, Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
Filmed by Zhang Zhiqiang, edited by Xiao Lu. Courtesy the artist

5. Xiao Lu
Polar 《极地》
2016
C-type prints, 80 x 120 cm, editions 1/9 and 5/9, printed 2018
documentation of performance: 23 October 2016, Beijing Live 1, Danish Cultural Center, 798 Arts District, Beijing, China.
Photographs by Yi Zilei. Courtesy the artist

6. Xiao Lu
Polar, 《极地》
2016
single channel video, 4.43 minutes.
documentation of performance: 23 October 2016, Beijing Live 1, Danish Cultural Center, 798, Beijing, China.
Filmed by Zhang Zhiqiang and Li Kai, edited by Zhang Li and Xiao Lu
courtesy the artist.

7. Xiao Lu
Documentation of performance works: videos and still photographs (2009-2019):
Sperm 《精子》, 21-13 May 2006
What is Love? 《什么是爱?》, 11 October 2009
Drunk 《醉》, 15 October 2009
Wedlock 《婚》, 5 February 2009
Bald Girls 《秃头戈女》, 3 March 2012
Purge 《清洗》, 31 May 2013
Skin Paper Room 《皮纸间》, 3 November 2013
Money laundering 《洗钱》, 27-30 August 2015
People 《人》, 19 March 2016
Suspension 《悬冰》, 16 February 2017
Holy water 《圣水》, 13 May 2017
Coil 《纠》, 28 April 2018

8. Xiao Lu, *Tides* 《弄潮》
2019
ephemera from performance: Sydney, 18 January 2019.
commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art for the exhibition *Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue* 肖鲁：语嘿

Image front: Xiao Lu, *One* 《合一》, performance, 5 September 2015, Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Photograph by Lin Qijian, courtesy Xiao Lu.

¹ Xu Hong, "'She', 'They', 'He' - Reflections prompted by Xiao Lu's *Dialogue*", *Huakan* 《画刊》, January 2006, p.16.

