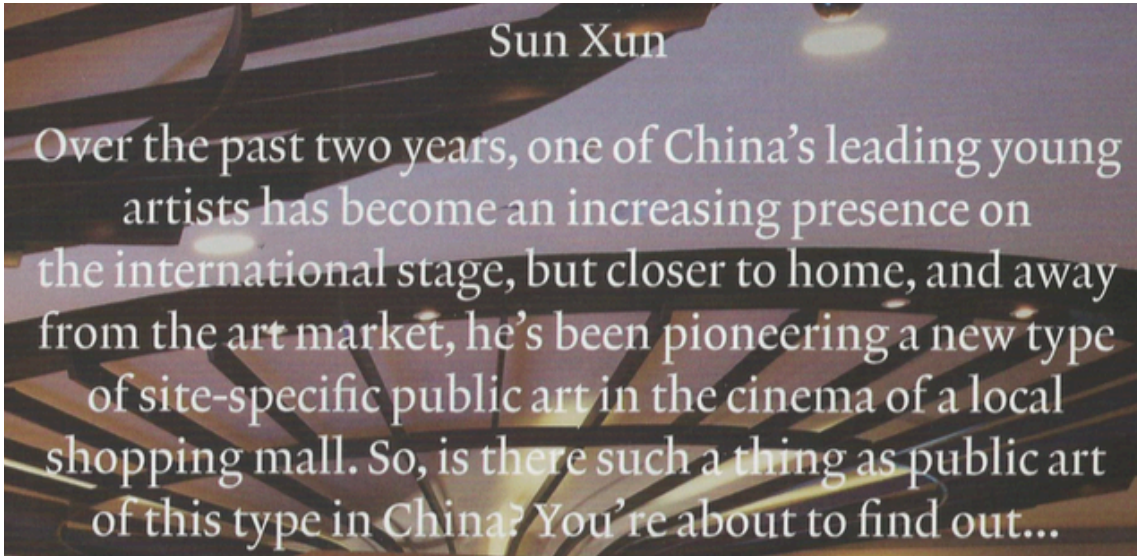


SEAN KELLY

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ArtReview



Screening of a Sun Xun work as part of *The Script*, 2015, Zeyi Cinema Hangzhou



What verb would best describe Sun Xun's two-month residency at Hangzhou's Zeyi Cinema and his complete transformation of its interior space? Occupy? Permeate? Parasitise? The first two come from media reports on Sun's site-specific project, *The Script*; the third was used by Sun himself in an interview conducted two hours before the opening reception on 7 June.

The thirty-five-year-old Beijing-based artist is famous for his whimsical, imaginative animations and brush drawings. The image of a magician frequents Sun's narratives. The artist is also often described as a magician, as he mesmerisingly merges modern life, historical imagery (often alluding to communist events and ideology) and ancient mythologies. The dark storyline painted in an acid-bright palette is his signature. Sun took up the cinema residency not long after returning from New York, following his first us solo exhibition, at Sean Kelly Gallery, in January, part of which involved an open residency. At the beginning of last year, New Yorkers could find his work featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, while closer to home it was also included in *Social Factory*, the 2014 Shanghai Biennale. All of which is to illustrate that when it comes to the tricky combination of commercial success, international exposure and unique artistic expression, Sun is unarguably one of the leading artists of China's younger generation.

Zeyi Cinema is situated in a sunken shopping outlet called Sasseur Life Plaza, located in the middle of an unfinished development presumably designed to serve as a new business district for Hangzhou, which is the capital of Zhejiang province, in Eastern China. A gigantic golden globe that turns out to be the Inter-Continental Hotel stands very close to the ground-level accesses to the mall, alongside a series of other eccentric architectures under construction. Few people are spotted walking on the exceptionally clean streets, but while the siting of Sun's project is intriguing, the artist's focus is more about the larger location: his second home, Hangzhou. He moved here at the age of fourteen to study calligraphy and ink painting, both of which remain important to his oeuvre. A series of wall and ceiling paintings in the cinema nostalgically depict the city and its familiar West Lake. From a documentary, screened during the opening of the project, we learn that Sun completed the painting of a delicate small folding-screen entirely during the course of a picturesque boat trip on the lake. In this regard, Sun seems to be following in the footsteps of numerous other intellectuals passing or dispatched to the city of Hangzhou, appreciating the natural beauty

and embracing it as their inspiration. In Sun's work, hundreds of years of literati culture – the main field of what has been traditionally considered art in ancient China – is reenacted.

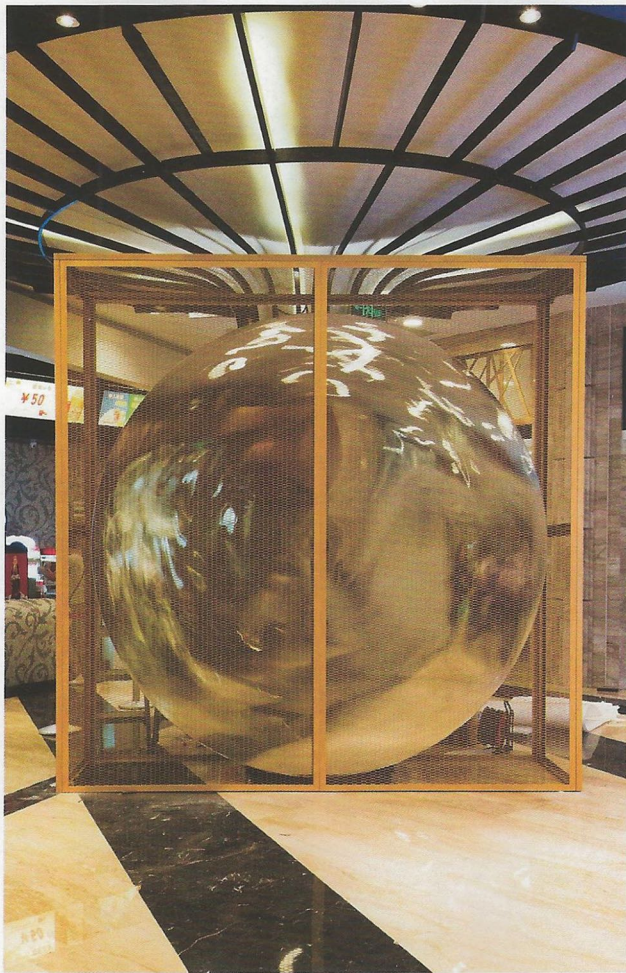
Even before entering the cinema, the audience is confronted with a line of fluttering (thanks to big electronic fans) flags, whose white backgrounds feature black drawings of a variety of animals and loose red doodles. In this context the flags seem unusual; passersby stop to take photographs. In the main lobby of the cinema, standing slightly to the left of the central area, is a large metal disc, engineered so as to rotate on its vertical plane. The rotation is quick but somewhat awkward – the mechanism looks low-tech and nonfunctional – and creates a reflection of the viewers standing in front of

it. Not far to the right, numerous palm-size monitors form a cylindrical larger screen wrapping one of the columns in the lobby. Abstract images appear, disappear and move across on the screens. Near the inner entrance to the theatres, on the wall, Sun has replaced the posters promoting blockbusters with cut-paper work of fairytale scenarios glued onto the inner surface of the light-boxes. With some elements moving or floating (presumably due to another set of fans), it appears as if we are being presented with a shadow-puppet play. On a broader level, the three installations collectively form a tribute to another of Sun's preferred mediums: they highlight the elements – light, image and shadow – essential to film and the other photographic arts. At the opening of the project four of the cinema's seven theatres screened Sun's animated shorts; the entire cinema complex seemed activated to celebrate his residency, as well as film's status as a form of art.

More than that, the project as a whole offers insight into Sun's own practice. When the artist talks or

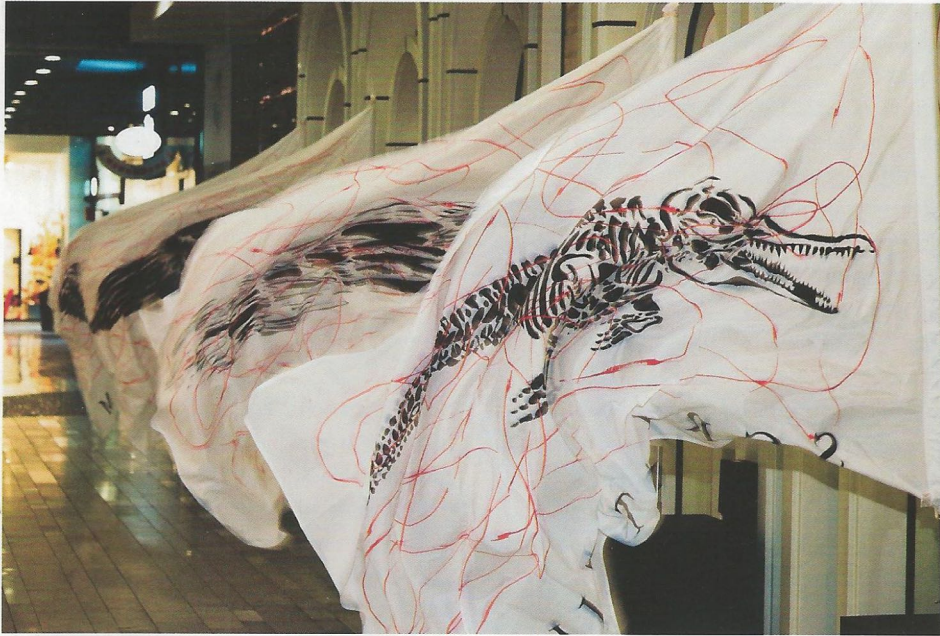
writes about his work, his remarks are not always directly relevant to his art; rather, they seem more like general comments on larger issues, such as art, people and the world. 'Cinema lies,' claimed Sun in various texts and interviews at the time of the project's opening. It's a statement that was offered during his New York show, *The Time Vivarium*, which was inspired by a visit to the Natural History Museum (which the artist discovered to be another promoter of untruths). And as always in his work, history is the biggest liar. (Sun often attributes this sense of disbelief to the incompatibility between family history, told by family members, and official history, taught by textbooks.)

Offering no hope or way to escape such a 'horrible' fictive world, Sun is not interested in tending to contemporary realities. This time, too, with the cinema project, the artist is more interested in



above *One Second Movement*, 2015 (installation view, *The Script*, Zeyi Cinema, Hangzhou, 2015)

preceding pages *Eidolon*, 2015 (installation view, *The Script*, Zeyi Cinema, Hangzhou, 2015)



both images *The Script*, 2015
(installation views, Zeyi Cinema, Hangzhou)

exhibiting his art and values in the context of a movie theatre than in considering the work as a site-specific, public-engaging project.

Albeit hinting at a political agenda, his films have hypnotising effects, overflowing with symbolic images and narratives. *The Time Vivarium*, which was screened at the opening at Zeyi, is filled with instantly recognisable images: Tiananmen Square, stone lions, a tiger wearing a gas mask, skulls and so on. They emerge and fade out like a fireworks show. In this work, most evidently, film as a medium becomes reducible (to slideshows). Sun's image-production works in the same way as his sloganeering.

In classic *shanshui* paintings, artists are almost always state officials who regard the practice more as a form of leisure that conveys personal expression and cultivates a meta-physical worldview. Anything too specific or overtly political would be incongruous with their professional identity. Sun Xun's background, work and artistic approaches are reminiscent of this. *New York Times* critic Martha Schwendener did not see this specific reference in Sun's lack of critical inquiry, but her overall assessment remains accurate: 'Mr Sun's work has the same bombast and grand-narrative-style ambition [as eighteenth-century works by Honoré Daumier or William Hogarth], as well as a universalizing bent to the work that is frowned upon by many artists and critics working in a globalized industry. After all, one artist and his assistants can't speak for everyone affected by history. Or can he?'

During the 1970s, there was an ideological transition in the us among different public art commissioning bodies, from seeing contemporary art pieces placed in public space as showcases of individual mastery and an extension of the museum, to regarding them

as active sites of/for community engagement. Where in the context of these two now-classic poles and in the context of China does *The Script* fit in? Sun himself talks about his project as a rare rendezvous of two values: the so-called mainstream values of the regular cinema audience and the marginalised values of the contemporary artworld. When asked as to whether or not he had kept the public in mind while creating the work, his answer is equivocal: "The project offers a chance to test the potential of these both." But looking at the result, the communication is still unilateral.

Site-specific public art is a relatively new phenomenon in mainland China, and the collaboration between Sun Xun, New Century Art Foundation and Zeyi Cinema sheds some light on the future devel-

opment of similar projects, as collectors are keen on exhibiting their new acquisitions and business owners are eager to embrace contemporary art. Maybe it is more accurate to call it quasi-public art, given that no public bodies played a role in the commissioning of the work (both sponsors are private;

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New Century Art Foundation is a renowned contemporary art foundation that supports not-for-profit art spaces nationwide), and the cinema itself is not exactly a public space. But perhaps that in itself tells us something about the way in which, in China, because of a lack of foresight in government cultural policy, privately funded projects and institutions have taken up the role of coordinating contemporary art within the public domain; some private institutions in Beijing and Shanghai, for example, are dedicated to providing extensive public programmes. And intentional or not, one of the things projects like this highlight is the need for a debate about the 'publicness' of China's public art. Perhaps, to use Sun's favoured idiom, 'public art is a lie'. ara



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Zeyi Cinema, Hangzhou



The Time Vivarium – 29, 2014,
acrylic and pastel on museum board, 51 × 41 cm.
Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. © the artist.
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

all images but this page Courtesy the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai & Beijing