

'The Open Book as sequence of events'

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When Welsh artist and curator Mary Husted met up with artist Ou Da Wei in Hong Kong in 2009 she was already fascinated by the folding and expanding books she had seen artists routinely use in mainland China as part of their practice. A subsequent visit to his art supplier saw her buy a whole batch of these blank concertina books, ideal for handing out to fellow artists during her travels. A delay of the planned exhibition, and additional books bought sent back to Wales, allowed several more to be passed between artists who then suggested others to include, until, when the first exhibition finally opened at The National Library of Wales in 2012, there were 16 artists in the show. These included ten from Wales, three from Hong Kong, two from Australia, G.W. Bot and Robin Wallace-Crabbe, and one from England. The exhibition, with considerable richness in colour, variety of style and content in the completed works, was given a uniformity of format by the standard 'silk-bound' blank starting-point the artists all had in common.

There was already a connection between Wales and China through Xu Bing, the Chinese winner of the inaugural Artes Mundi prize in 2004. (The Artes Mundi prize is Wales' prestigious international art prize and the biggest art prize in the UK). It was not surprising then that interest was generated in the *Open Books* concept to expand and travel. Seven more artists were added: five from Wales, one from England, and from Australia, Angela Gardner. *Open Books+* was to be shown alongside The Sanshang Museum of Contemporary Art's annual *Decanter Ink* exhibition, which focused on the use of the folding book within Chinese culture from the beginning of the 20th Century to the present day.

Amongst the 44 Chinese exhibitors were many of China's most prestigious contemporary artists, Joe Zhu commenting that "even oil painting artists would have a folding book in their bag! (Xue Feng and Jin Yangping being two of examples)". A government-funded Biennial of Chinese painting in Hangzhou late in 2014 will use the folding book as a platform. Organiser of *Open Books*, Mary Husted, joined for the Hangzhou exhibition by artist and co-curator Sue Hunt and

Artes Mundi nominated artist Sue Williams, soon realised that *Open Books+* was a very significant exhibition, for both the local Chinese and international artists and curators.

The installation at the initial exhibition at the National Library of Wales displayed the books in several different ways: some with emphasis on the intimacy of holding the book in the hand and revealing it page by page, sometimes partly concealed; as a narrative or filmic 'whole book' in one panoramic image or succession of images; or the book as a sculptural object, hung vertically in a cascade, or twisted and unfurled into curves or circles whilst standing upright, like miniature folding screens. In contrast Professor Chen, the Director of the Museum, and his students, working with curator Joe Zhu, chose to show the works in a very different manner, with a consciously industrial and streamline, contemporary setting, but with a nod to the traditional manner designed to show scrolls - laid flat in an opened-out format, on long specially commissioned exhibition plinths which were covered by a protective perspex case, designed, as Joe Zhu says, "to give each book the same length of display space...which makes all the books seemed 'equal'". This was a wonderful opportunity to see great examples of both traditional practice and some major names on the contemporary scene in its true cultural and artistic context.

Professor Chen, the Director of the Museum, also teaches a course in curating at the China Academy of Art, and had brought in several of his students to work on the installation. This was part of their curriculum, and their dedicated input played a very valuable part in the overall experience. These students are the curators of the future and good English speakers, clearly engaged in the dialog between Eastern and Western uses of Chinese folding book, finding it inspiring to watch the visiting curators try out the many experimental permutations within the constraints, standing the concertina books upright on their edges with the potential to unravel, hide and reveal different aspects of themselves (sometimes the front and the backs simultaneously). As in all good collaborations, the learning experience extended to the visiting curators, who were able to discuss the cultural difference in between approaches. In visiting the two campuses of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, the visiting curators saw drawing using ink-based materials, traditional rice paper and brushes, executed by staff and students with dedication, skill, and enthusiasm. Visiting many exhibitions in Shanghai and Hong Kong confirmed the continuing and extremely close relationship between calligraphy and painting, and how highly revered is the connection between discipline, observation, and a strong spiritual/meditative understanding of the world.

What was clearly evident in the dedicated, hardworking and eager Chinese students met in studio visits and at the inspiring and strongly promoted National Student Exhibition (featuring opportunities available to students both Graduate and Post Graduate), was a keen alertness to what was new and contemporary. In this fast moving globalised and digital age there was a quiet strength and sound confidence through skills learnt, and of a discipline mastered.

With exhibitors already from Australia and Hong Kong, and Open Books' many-levelled success at The Sanshang Museum of Contemporary Art in Hangzhou, its portability encouraged the curators to continue with what was rapidly becoming an international tour. Mary Husted, Sue Hunt, Angela Gardner and a representative of Wales Arts International (WAI) met in Cardiff to discuss the next step: adding more artists and taking the exhibition on to Australia and Hong Kong. The idea was welcomed not just by WAI, who had been supporting the tour financially, but also by the Chinese artists as an opportunity for their work to be shown overseas, and for Joe Zhou as curator to make links with Australia. For artist and poet Angela Gardner it was an opportunity to add Australian venues and further Australian artists: Wim de Vos, Tim Mosely, Caren Florance, Nicci Haynes and Dianne Fogwell to the tour.

At each new iteration, new artists have come on board and new catalogs have been required. From the exhibition at the Sanshang Museum, works by eighteen of the Chinese artists were chosen to travel onwards. These were: Bai Ming, Ding Yi, Guan Huaibin, Hua Jun, Jin YangPing, Liang Quan, Liu Dahong, Liu Qinghe, Sang Huoyao, Wang Dongling, Wang Jinsong, Wei Ligang, Wei Qingji, Xu Bing, Xue Feng, Yang An, Yu Peng and Zhang Hao, Curator Joe Zhu himself taking their books to Australia, where they were shown at Logan Regional Gallery, and the ADFA Library, University of NSW in Canberra, with the show renamed *Open Books+*.

At Logan Regional Gallery the exhibition was displayed on a long broken line of shelves, with one Chinese work flat on a low plinth covered with a Perspex lid directly on the floor, in a nod to the Sanshang exhibition design. Visitors to the show commented that the show was 'peaceful' and had 'amazing detail'. In contrast to the formal display at the Sanshang Museum, the ADFA Library gallery space, a beautiful space for books, employed vitrines suited to a display of books, and utilised some wall space with books cascading from bright fresh new metal hangers, their twisted heads looped over the partitions. With no specific instructions on how to present the Chinese books (one of the strengths of each exhibition as it continues its journeying is the freedom of rich and unbound permeations of constant and fresh renewal.), Caren Florance and

her assistant chose what to a Chinese eye may have seemed an experimental approach; however, Chinese curator Joe Zhu, when he visited, enjoyed the approach, and was “very gracious about our ‘mistakes’”.

One of the striking features of the success of the travelling exhibition has been the use of a digital catalog accessed on the web. This can be professionally printed and mailed, hard copy, to any address, or viewed online, or downloaded as a pdf in its entirety, to allow for the widest dissemination possible. This flexibility and generosity mirrors the approach to the exhibition itself, where artists have been added at each venue and co-curators have joined to ensure wide participation and local involvement on each leg. Introductions and catalog essays have been published in each of the catalogs, and for the Australian edition, art historian, Sasha Grishin, who has considerable knowledge and understanding of the Australian perspective, but also taught courses on Contemporary Art in China, contributed an essay.

On its return journey to the UK the expanded *Open Books+* will show in Hong Kong, overseen by Joe Zhu and by Frank Vigneron, one of the original *Open Books* artists, and Professor of Art Theory at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). The exhibition is due to return to Wales in 2016 for a final cumulative show. The portability of the exhibition, its equalising and inclusive format, the cultural insights and introductions it has fostered, and the deliberate accessibility of the digital catalog, have all contributed to the success of *Open Books+*. In this way the exhibition passes through many hands, allowing for new insights in presentation and reinterpretations of its context, and as Joe Zhu notes, “the networks and opportunities are endless.”

Details of the exhibition venues, full lists of artists, essays and images of the works to date can be found online in the catalogs that can be found at:

<http://au.blurb.com/b/3318049-open-books>

<http://au.blurb.com/b/4668804-open-books-plus-china>

<http://au.blurb.com/books/5226470-open-books-plus-australia>