

Thinking Meat

On Gu Dexin's *May 2, 2009*

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David Xu Borjonjon

Abstract: In 2009, the reclusive artist Gu Dexin finally bid farewell to the art world after a decades-long career with a sweeping installation that centered on two declarations: “we have killed people,” and “we can go to heaven.” This work, *May 2, 2009*, recalls both phases of his career, including his early investment through collaborative projects in diagrammatic abstractions as well as his continuous sculptural practice, which often comprised accumulations of decaying organic matter. This article proposes to understand this final work—and, relatedly, his two bodies of work—as continuous rather than distinct, through the lens of *meat* as a form of thought, as a relation of predation or nutrition rather than an object. In Gu’s peculiar materialism, butchery functions as analysis and ingestion as synthesis, ultimately approaches a kind of rationalism—in this light, I end with a suggestion about the relevance of new strains of speculative materialism for a reappraisal of experimental artistic practices in China from the 1990s on with their philosophical ambitions in mind.



Gu Dexin, *May 2, 2009*, 2009, wooden panels, paints, red lacquer, iron cage, old TV, video DVD. Image by Oak Taylor-Smith, courtesy of Galleria Continua San Gimignano / Les Moulins / Beijing / Habana.

Thinking Meat On Gu Dexin's *May 2, 2009*

After he retired from the art world, one of the most prominent institutions for the display of contemporary art in China, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) hosted a retrospective of Gu Dexin's practice with his tacit permission.¹ The title of *The Important Thing is not the Meat* (重要的不是肉) riffed on a famous statement by curator Li Xianting, "the important thing is not the art," a riposte to formalism with the implication that art was ultimately instrumental to social and cultural concerns. In some ways, the title proved a powerful analytic to survey Gu's work, which often deploys flesh as sculpture into immersive installations. Such a perspective brings out how his use of meat often has overtones of political protest, yet it also—as this article contends—obscures how meat is not just instrumental or incidental to Gu's practice, but primary. Gu's work can be interpreted as an extended meditation on the philosophical status of meat, which bridges the human subject and the natural object by being both simultaneously.

Untrained and notably reticent in speaking on his work, Gu combined conceptual investigations with corporeal obsessions. He is well-known for his participation in the 1980s in rigorously conceptual collectives that largely produced diagrams—the Tactile Sensation Group and the New Measurement Group—and throughout the last decades for his massive installations using rotting fruit, pig's brains, and other organic matters. Despite an impressive international exhibition record, he is not well known internationally (Fei 273).²

May 2, 2009, an installation titled after the day of its opening, marked Gu Dexin's farewell from art and an illustrious career bookended by participation in *Magiciens de la Terre* and a post-retirement retrospective in the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. The work occupied the entirety of Galeria Continua, a stalwart Italian transplant in the 798 art district in Beijing with a cathedral-like warehouse gallery space. In its center, Gu raised a concrete-cast podium of roughly four square meters in size and 0.5 meters in height, on which was painted the phrase "WE CAN GO TO HEAVEN." A wide and dense band of words covered the four walls around this altar, repeating a mantra-like confession:

... WE KILLED PEOPLE WE KILLED MEN WE KILLED WOMEN WE KILLED THE OLD WE
KILLED THE KIDS WE'VE EATEN PEOPLE WE'VE EATEN HEARTS WE'VE EATEN BRAINS

¹ Though he assented to the exhibition, he refused to be directly involved. The catalogue that was originally intended for his retrospective at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art was shelved because Gu did not want to be involved in any way in the exhibition, making image rights difficult to obtain. There has been no in-depth academic analysis of his practice in Chinese or English that I know of as of yet.

² Although it's ultimately a futile exercise to explain why something is not, I would venture two reasons for the disparity between his attention within and outside China. The first has been his reluctance to explicate his work. Famously quiet, his comportment led Zhang Peili to say of him that the curators liked him because his quietness allowed others to think the best of his work: "Eventually, they convince themselves that it is great, deep, meaningful work..." (191 Smith) (This essay may be just such an exercise in overanalysis.) The second reason, I would suggest, is due to the general inclination in non-Chinese criticism of Chinese contemporary art to focus on political critique or cultural history, which obscures the philosophical presumptions of Gu's work.

WE'VE BEATEN PEOPLE WE'VE BLINDED THEIR EYES WE'VE SMASHED THEIR FACES WE
KILLED PEOPLE ...

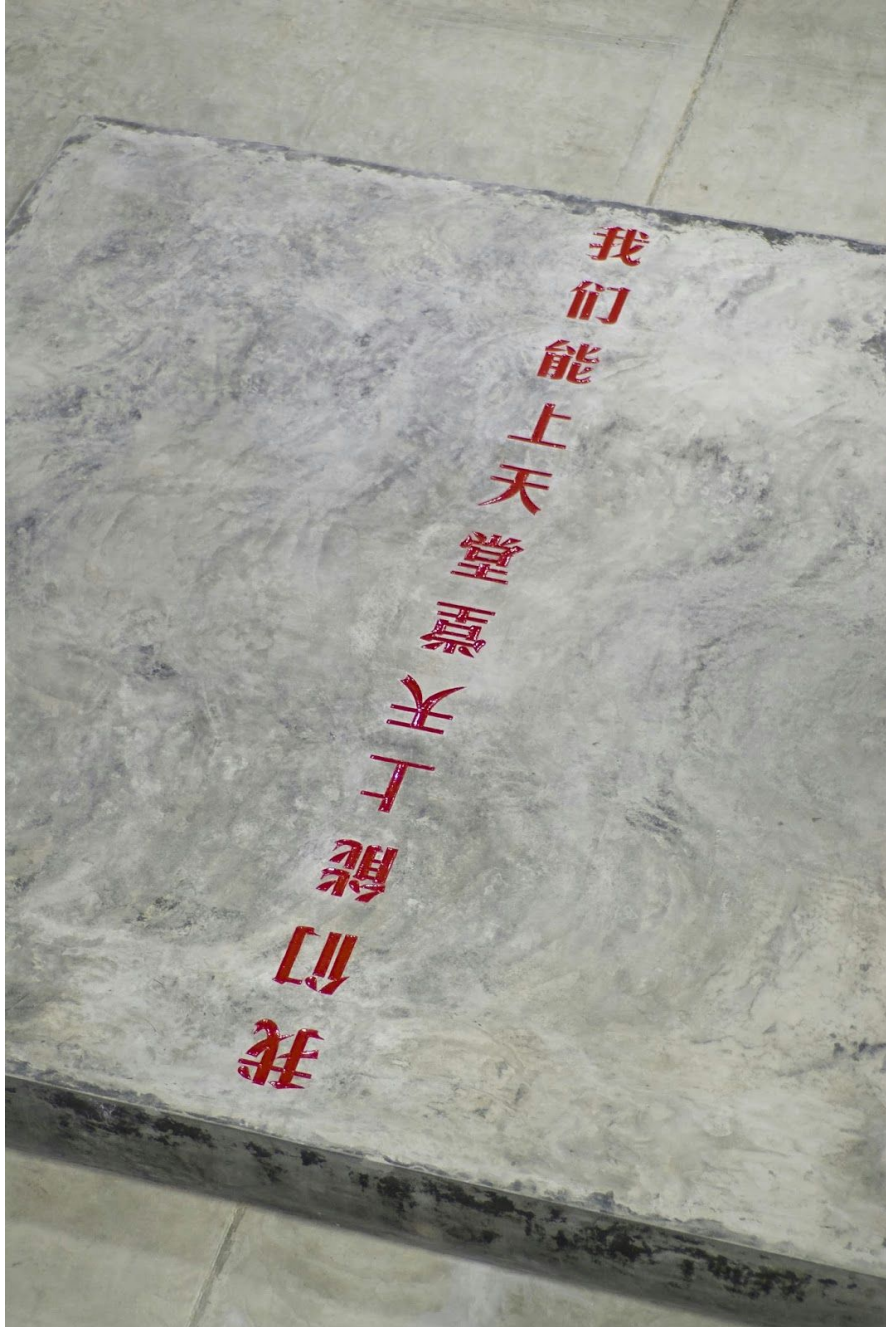
In the clerestory-like bay along the spine of the gallery, twenty windows were blocked off with television screens, with either four or six in each window playing identical imagery of white clouds trailing over an electric blue sky. In the upstairs rooms, multi-channel videos of the same clouds looped silently.

The political overtones of the work are evident in the contrast between the violent declarations and the peaceful imagery. The beautiful evocation of "heaven" above render the writing on the wall more tragic. In this view, the lower space of the blood-red words, where viewers actually stand, *contrasts* the upper reaches of the sky-blue screens, which they can only look upon and desire. Gu's "heaven,"³ for the more secular, could be thought of as a dramatic metaphor for an innocent state prior to violence, or after redemption. Given the nostalgic style of the lettering and the Maoist history of the Dashanzi industrial complex, the work also implies specific historical traumas of the Cultural Revolution; *May 2, 2009* could function as an attempt at healing process. This historical allusion is then lent further pathos by the simulacral sky above—the sky overhead is a synthetic one, made more so by its uncanny repetition across multiple small screens which block off the actual windows. The brightness of the sky and the vividness of the lettering both dramatize the failure of representation, both in providing a convincing image of an alternative, and accounting for historical wrong.

However, such an interpretation is incomplete; it relies on the central statement of the work being read either ironically or tragically.⁴ Given the confession of murder, we certainly can *not* go to heaven, or at the very most, we *wish* that we could go to heaven. I would contend that Gu's affirmation of the possibility of ascension—or, more specifically, of transcendence—should be understood *literally*. Firstly, within the peculiar architecture of Galeria Continua, viewers can climb stairs through a second and third floor of galleries, all of which face onto the main hall, until they *are* much closer to the bay of televisions.

³ He uses the term *tiantang*, which usually specifies a religious space that spirits rise to—most prominently the Christian heaven—rather than a more general notion of the sky, *tian*.

⁴ An example of a similar interpretation of a different project by Gu—though one that also juxtaposed violence and peaceful imagery—can be found in David Ho Yeung Chan's account of a 2005 exhibition in Yishu (2005: pp. 104-113)



"We can go to heaven." (Text written both backwards and forwards)

The question, then, is of what the continuity between violence and ascension might be. Under what conditions is "WE'VE EATEN BRAINS [...] WE CAN GO TO HEAVEN," not only intelligible, but meaningful statement? To make sense of *May 2, 2009's* unlikely marriage of violence and heaven, we will situate it within an interpretation of Gu's decades-long practice in general that stresses how flesh transcends.

The conceptual pairs broached above are typically separated into, on the one hand, the immanent (violence, meat) and on the other hand, the transcendental (heaven, thought). *May 2, 2009*, and Gu's work at large, are interesting because they propose insistently that one realm connects fluidly to the next. "WE KILLED PEOPLE—WE CAN GO TO HEAVEN." In other words, Gu's work is *speculative* in the proper philosophical sense (rather than a financial or aesthetic sense): it allows for direct access to the transcendent.

This disarming ambition is evident in one of Gu's few public statements. Asked about his interest in meat, Gu replied, "Using meat? I do that because it's just relatively close to humans. It's the same with pig brains. Brains, they have to do with wisdom (智慧), so of course they're related to people." (Wu, 2002: 319) In passing easily over lines normally fixed—those between humans and meat (the subject of the taboo on cannibalism), as well as the line between wisdom and brains, not to mention that between pigs and humans—his reply implies an opinion that there is *no fundamental difference* between the physical world and transcendent being.

To make these points, it's useful to situate this final work within the context of his varied career, and also to digress into a few theoretical resources with which to equip my argument. His interest in meat was continuous, and also the subject of several long-term projects. For example, in 1995, Gu was told that he had only one square centimeter of exhibition space in a European venue, when in fact, he had a square meter. This miscommunication allowed him to begin a decade-long project of creating very small sculptures. Gu began to knead small pieces of salted pork until they dried into hard lumps, and amass them—in 2002 he had 1200 on his shelf, since each one took about a hundred days of kneading to dry out. Often shown in dramatic oversize black-and-white photographs, kneaded in his hand, his contorted fingers echo the twisted lump grasped between them. (Huang and Bingyi 2002: 55)

The uncanny similarity between his hands and the meat he kneads is suggestive of a symmetry between meat and humans—as he puts it, of their "relative close[ness]." The kneading process, too, acts as an actual transfer of moisture between the person and the meat, a closing of the gap between human and meat. This work suggests that for Gu, meat is not an object of a particular sort, but *a conceptual category* by which we describe the potential assimilation of matter by other matter (Thacker: 215-30). In other words, and following the work of "dark ecologist" Eugene Thacker, meat is a *relation*, not an object. Anything could be meat, or in other words, could become denatured from itself and then integrated into another.

Like Lu Xun's famous madman, Gu Dexin finds that meat—"eat people!"—and morality are uncomfortably close. Yet rather than making this discovery the basis of a critique, Gu's work takes a constructive tack to cannibalism that is reminiscent of pioneering Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's "cannibal metaphysics." In this schema, the cannibal does not eat simply material flesh, but also socially integrates the status of the enemy. (de Castro 2013: 18) Meat, then, is of critical utility because it is a transformation, which "breaks down" one being in order to "build up" another—in other words, it acts both

analytically (recalling that the process of digestion is termed *lysis*), and synthetically. (Negarestani (2011): 235)

It is in this analogy between meat and thought as forms of transformation, which are both physical and more than physical, that Gu's materialism approaches a kind of rationalism—the idea that by the exercise of conceptual powers subjects can achieve knowledge beyond immediate experience. More specifically, it sheds light on Gu's early collective work in the 1980s and 1990s with Wang Luyan. Beginning in with the collective *Tactile Sensation*, the two collaborators began to create austere black-and-white diagrams of physical experiences like the wind and room temperature. Soon after, Wang and Gu reformed as the New Measurement Group with the additional participation of Chen Shaoping, and began to produce instructions that were purely geometric, with no reference to the phenomenal world of bodily experiences. These new drawings simply comprised intersecting lines and angles that were arbitrarily determined.

The relation between this body of collective work, marked by an obsession with diagrammatic abstraction, and his other work, the corporeal installations described above, is normally not commented on—instead, these two bodies of work are seen as evidence of Gu's intriguing breadth. Yet I would insist on the continuity between them. For example, the New Measurement Group's project of eradicating the subject totally actually is founded with a process of (visual) butchering:

[We started] while [Gu was] working as a guard in a factory... friends had commented that [Gu's] sketches of human bodies were out of proportion, and in response, he measured his friends and made drawings of their bodies on his sketchbook with lines drawn by a ruler... marking lines with exact measurements. (Wang Luyan, quoted in Lu and Liu 2015)

The founding moment of this method, then, derives from an abstraction of the body. The anecdote helps make sense of how Gu could be consistently interested in flesh in general, yet totally uninterested in specific bodies (mine, yours, or his own). For Gu, meat, like thought, is a shorthand for a process of abstraction by which one takes material (such as a body or an idea) and denatures it from its particular circumstances (the person that inhabits the body, or the observation that produced the idea)—this material can then circulate as an unmarked currency, a simple quantity of meat or thought.

If Gu's work has not been paid much attention in non-Chinese settings, I would suggest it is precisely because of this abstractness. His more general interest in ontology—and this is not to say that Gu reads Kant, but merely that his dogged investigation reveals certain philosophical inclinations—provides little traction for a tradition of criticism that prefers to uncover behind the artwork a political critique or cultural history. His work's reception may have been further complicated by its surface similarity to contemporaneous practices in North America and Europe that are “corporeal”: whereas

identity politics are absent from Gu's work since he is uninterested in subjects, they are useful for an understanding of, for example, Kiki Smith and Ana Mendieta.

The utility of Speculative Realism within this article is precisely in its well-articulated rejection of representation as a rubric. In the mid-2000s, a set of thinkers loosely grouped under the umbrella of Speculative Realism developed a varied program for articulating the the inadequacy of poststructuralism (Malik, 2015). A hodgepodge of rationalism, post-Marxism, and materialism that has since fractured further, the key contention of this grouping is articulated by Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*. According to the author, Post-Kantian thought, up to and including post-structuralism (2010: p. 38), was defined by the prominence of "correlationist" thought, which essentially insisted on the inseparability of thought from the thinking subject:

"Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object "in itself", in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object" (After Finitude, 36)

The criticism of pure reason (beginning, of course, with Kant's Critique), then, instituted a tragic, insuperable gap between thought and the thinking subject. This metaphysical claim produces a specific trajectory for aesthetic theory that could be loosely termed a problematic of representation: the job of the critic is to determine how facts differ from appearances—and protect the dogma that every supposed fact is ultimately just another appearance. *Diary of a Madman* is a good example of exactly this "hermeneutic of suspicion," (Sedgwick p. 18) as Paul Ricoeur calls it. In this view, any set of justifying reasons (such as rationalism, science, universalism, benevolence) and reveal that they are in fact nothing but facts (economic incentives, power struggles, sexual desire or the search for recognition). (Brandom 2013: pp. 7-9)

Speculative realism, as the name suggests, was unified in its insistence on speculation, or the possibility of knowledge *above and beyond experience*, and realism, or the contention that *something* (whether that's matter or divine being) *does in fact exist* beyond the subject. Gu's speculations pertain to the ability of objects to become subjects, and the other way around—to move between these two states of meat and

thought.⁵ The hinge between these two realms is a specifically cognitive one: “WE’VE EATEN BRAINS.” Brains, not to put too fine a point on it, are both meat and thought.

The philosophy of cognitive science must play host to a range of positions between strict materialism, since the brain is simply neurons, as well as intense idealism, since thought seems irreducible to neuronal patterns. Catherine Malabou, a French philosopher who inherited and transformed the thought of Derrida, drawing from the neuroscientifically proven ability of brains to shift and grow, has developed a conception of plasticity to replace the post-structuralist problematic of representation, which insists on the distinction between the material and the ideal. Instead, she stakes a speculative claim through her insistence that the neuronal (material) and the mental (ideal) are continuous, though still contradictory:

This relationship between form and itself is not founded on a difference. The two modes of being of the subject are not different from one another, but each of them transforms itself into the other. With plasticity, we are not facing a pre-given difference, but a process of metamorphosis. (2009 p. 8)

Brains, critically, allow us to conceive of the relationship between the material and ideal as a process of abstract transformations, rather than as a tragically unbridgeable gap. It would instate a continuity between fact and appearance, ontology and epistemology, rather than a difference. In other words, a subject can be both imbricated in the daily violence of the world—and in particular, post-Cultural Revolution China—and accede to a synthetic world of thought: “WE CAN GO TO HEAVEN.” Continuous, if contradictory.

One doesn’t look at meat—one eats it. In other words, meat is primarily of ontological rather than epistemological interest. More specifically, meat can be thought of as joining sensorial information to ontological existence, since the taste of meat is continuous with its integration into the eating body. You are what you eat; you become what you taste. Gu’s practice, as such, is a privileged site for thinking about the proper relationship of materialism and rationalism in true speculative fashion. By using a set of speculative philosophies,⁶ we can now return to the initial provocation: when is “WE’VE

⁵ Such an interpretation is helpful in understanding Gu’s peers and successors, such as Qian Weikang (the subject of important new work by Katherine Grube) or the post-Sensory generation (in Qiu Zhijie’s coinage). In particular, it could make sense of the relationship between an interest in unabashedly *bodily* performance, and professedly idealist inclinations. In this regard, it would serve as an alternative to “sociological criticism,” (or, following Meillassoux, correlationist thinking) or the type of reading in which a work is primarily and most interestingly *about* something else (typically political critique or cultural commentary). For curator Bao Dong, the legacy of 1990s conceptual art in the “anti-sociological” tradition split into two branches: one of these stressed human divinity (and might be exemplified by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s anarcho-libertarian bravura (2015)), and the other the total erasure of the subject (typified by Qiu Zhijie’s archive of abnegation). This essay attempts a first step into an account of this legacy in the explicitly philosophical terms of the artists, and as such inevitably risks generality.

⁶ It is surely too culturalist and grossly Sinicist to draw attention here to New Confucian philosophy—however, the recent invocation of such work by prominent speculative realists like Reza Negarestani should give us pause. After all, the ultimate goal of Mou and his teacher Xiong Shili was to revise Kant through the speculative lens of the “School of Mind” of Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming—in other words, to bracket the critique of pure

EATEN BRAINS [...] WE CAN GO TO HEAVEN," not only a lucid but a meaningful statement? How can we think of *May 2, 2009* not as an ironic or critical piece, but as a *synthetic* one? Nowhere is the troubled relation between past transgressions ("we have eaten people") and potential transcendence ("we can go to heaven") more visible than in the undead afterlife of *May 2, 2009*.



Installation view, *Unlived By What Is Seen*, curated by Sun Yuan, Peng Yu and Cui Cancan. Image by Oak Taylor-Smith, courtesy of Galleria Continua San Gimignano / Les Moulins / Beijing / Habana.

Gu Dexin chose not to participate in this retrospective of the Beijing avant-garde of the 1990s, and the curators left a conspicuously absent homage to him on the site of the "altar."

reason by advocating for the possibility of moral intuition. While Gu's cannibal transcendentalism is quite far removed from this, it presupposes a metaphysical continuity between the transcendent and the immanent, which is the core proposition of Song-Ming rationalism. It is beyond the scope of this article, but I would propose that this emphasis on the possibility of intuition—especially prominent in *art* as a creative practice—is a primary obstacle for a deeper understanding of a generation Chinese contemporary artists by critics and historians.

In spring of 2015, the artist duo Sun Yuan and Peng Yu organized together with curator Cui Cancan the three-site exhibition *Unlived By What Is Seen*⁷ which examined Beijing avant-gardes and their art-school inheritors. Galeria Continua hosted the most sober presentation: in the empty center of the space was a scar-like patch of concrete in the center of the floor, lit by the clerestory far above it. (See image) The patch was precisely where the altar-like platform had been six years ago. Even without a label, it was a clear restaging of Gu Dexin's *May 2, 2009* (Gu was included in the show bill, though he had in fact refused the curator's request to participate) (personal communication from Cui Cancan).

Much of this article has dwelled on the inadequacy of "suspicious" (or correlationist) criticism to unpack Gu's work, yet this presentation makes the opposite mistake: it is too speculative. By entirely dematerializing Gu's work, it strips out its physical ground, and leaves only its transcendental claims. If the former is a zombie, a body deprived of spirit, then the latter is a ghost, a thought without substance. Both interpretations miss the mark: the virtue of brains, of *thinking meat*, is to allow for movement between the physical and the metaphysical, between cannibals and angels, the lettered concrete and the synthetic screen. On the way up, we call it thought. On the way down, meat.

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⁷ A more apt translation is, "Not Acting Within the Image." (不在图像中行动) an exhibition that sprawled across three of the most respected spaces in 798: PACE, Galeria Continua, and Tang Gallery. Despite its title, it was "a vast pool of images" (Lau), a mix of interviews and artworks that totaled 80 hours of viewing time. Within Continua, the upstairs mezzanine included work by Zhuang Hui, who has worked on documenting of desert and transport ecologies, while the main hall was partitioned into three. On one side, Zhao Bandi's panda-inspired works, on another, a small screen presenting Li Yongbin's reflections on his durational performances; and in the center, nothing. Significantly, the interviews were presented not as archival context, but akin to works themselves: the artists were on display.

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