Maoist Currents and Un-American Art Histories

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America, a Mercy Killing is as close to a visual disembowelling as one gets in postwar American art (*plate 1*). Made by Ed Bereal between 1966 and 1974, it unfurls a scene of non-stop carnage. Bodies are bled, trussed up, or subject to imminent castration. Made all the more gruesome by their reenactment in miniature, an act of lynching viscerally underscores an America sustained by feral brutality. Anarchy is not the word for it. Controlling systems do exist. A Frankenstein-like plastic figure in a grey flannel suit endlessly churns dollar bills, possibly at the behest of a zombie Uncle Sam who always gets his pound of flesh. Portraits representing major activists of the era, or what Bereal describes as a 'rogues' gallery', congregate on the right.[1] Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, looks bemusedly at the viewer, while the boxer Muhammad Ali shoots us a baleful glare. Mounted on small rectilinear tiles edged in jarringly artificial and psychedelic-adjacent greens, yellows, and magenta, the likenesses appear to throb.

As if to highlight it especially, Bereal frames in bright blue a portrait of what had become, by the early 1970s, the world's most reproduced individual: the Chinese leader Mao Zedong. The smallness of the portrait belies its relevance to the entire tableau that cannot escape being called Maoist. *America, a Mercy Killing* takes Mao's concept of 'continuous revolution' to its visual extreme. Most commonly associated with an article commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution that appeared one year after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, 'continuous revolution' assumes an unending, and inescapably violent, class struggle that rejects incremental change. Citing the Vietnamese politician and revolutionary Ho Chi Minh as part of his own political education, Bereal recalls how 'Mao was in the air', particularly in the wake of escalated US involvement in Vietnam, and amidst numerous race riots at home.[2] *America, a Mercy Killing* activates Maoism not as citation, but as a current that persists through the work's formal properties. It has a sticky residuality that inheres not merely in the repetitive figuration of Mao's likeness, but through the experience of looking, the webs of allusion, and forms of presentation.

Until recently, scholarship on modern and contemporary art has sidelined Maoism with a consensus so complete that it barely registers as a choice.[3] A construct of various, and often incompatible, perspectives tendered by different manifestations of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong, Maoism is known especially through the visual cultures produced during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Especially conspicuous is the absence of Maoism from even the most revisionist and internationally minded approaches to American art. This partly stems from how

Detail of May Sun, *Untitled*, 1989 (*plate 11*).

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1 Detail of Ed Bereal, *America, a Mercy Killing*, 1966–1974. Mixed media including wood, metal, fabric, plastic, and paper, with electric, kinetic, and pneumatic components, 69.2 × 140.9 × 114.3 cm. Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photo: Lucia Martino.

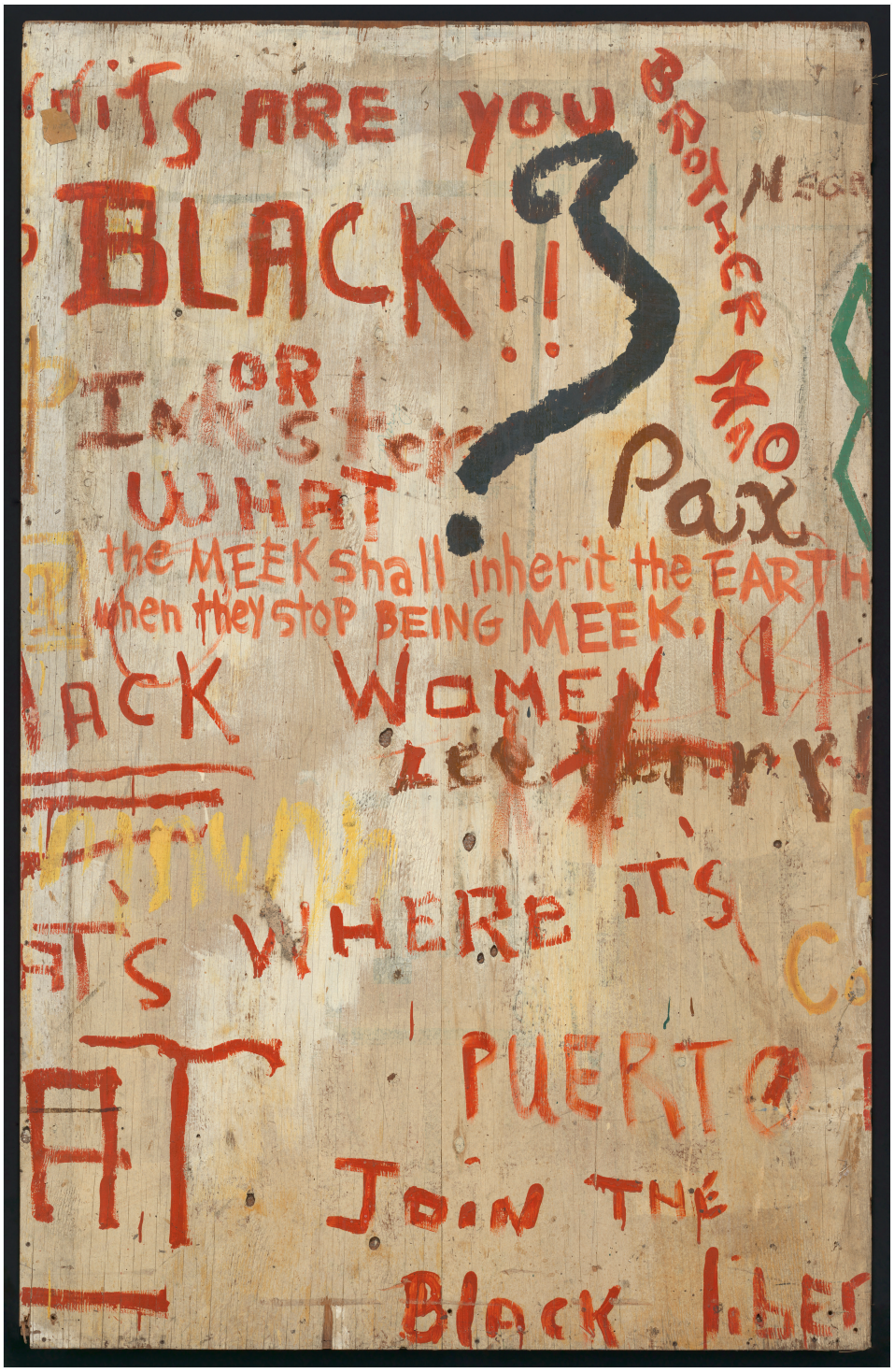
Maoism was seen as inescapably anti-, or more accurately, un-American, not only because of Mao and what he stood for, but also because of his American adherents, including numerous activists of colour.

Without a fixed doctrinal core or institutional structure, Maoism was a conceptual framework that could be dismantled, reconfigured, and repurposed according to one's own political, social, and aesthetic preoccupations. Such plasticity helps explain why it failed to establish lasting and widespread roots in US terrain. At the same time, the inherent mutability of Maoism represents not a dilution, but rather the genuine materialist potential of Maoist thought when divorced from its originating historical circumstances. The distinction matters. As the artist Jim Dong put it, nurturing artistic community to 'pre-visualize imagery of the future' was entirely different from 'being used as an arm of a special interest [group] or political entity'.[4] Rather than a doctrine demanding followers, Maoism was a tool for building community towards what Dong calls 'pre-visualizing the future' outside existing political frameworks.

In *America, a Mercy Killing*, the portrait of Mao wields its power like a talisman, and derives supplementary force from the inscription 'Brother Mao' marked upon the *Hunger Wall* of Resurrection City (*plate 2*). A physical actualisation of Martin Luther King Jr's dream of an actual commons built and occupied by all those struggling with poverty, almost three thousand temporary A-frame buildings spread over a sixteen-acre encampment in Washington, DC during the summer of 1968. Written

anonymously on one of the 'city' walls, 'Brother Mao' gestures towards a rephrasing of one of the Beatitudes that could have easily served as a second title for Bereal's work: the MEEK shall inherit the EARTH when they stop BEING MEEK. Not by accident did political observers such as William Hsu distil the essence of Maoism as something beyond mere political doctrine or ideological framework. 'Fundamentally a matter of faith', he called it.[5]

For many, Maoism transcended the intellectual sphere to become a belief system that asked not for understanding, but for obedience. But something else happened



2 Unknown artist, panel from *Hunger Wall Mural*, originally part of Resurrection City, Washington, DC, 1968. Oil paint and ink on plywood, 190.5 × 121.9 × 1.3 cm. Washington, DC: National Museum of African American History and Culture. Photo: Alex Jamison.

in the process, too. Mao's likeness, endlessly reproduced and circulated, seems to have taken on a life of its own. It appears where it was never invited, persists where it should not, and asserted its presence in ways that exceed both artistic intention and conventional political boundaries. Maoism has always operated in the visual field by just such means: not as a doctrine that artists consciously adopt, but as a force that attaches itself to a wide range of artworks, sometimes in spite of an artist's stated intentions or political affiliations.

The potency of Maoism manifests not as direct citation, but because of its persistence even after the disappearance of the original referent. Consider remanence, the physical property whereby magnetism persists after its generating field withdraws. Across a spectrum of political positions — from Bereal's revolutionary embrace to Hung Liu's scepticism born of lived experience under the regime — we observe the force of this sticky residuality. The chronological span examined here, should therefore not be read as a trajectory from hope to disillusionment, but rather as through distinct modes from Bereal's visceral confrontation with American violence, and the visual commonwealth created by Emory Douglas and Jim Dong, to May Sun and Hung Liu's negotiation of Maoist legacies as biographical inheritance. Maoist remanence, or ambient Maoism, persists by refusing the linear logic that would contain it within period categories like 'modern', 'contemporary', and 'postwar'.

Rather than reinforcing America's presumed centrality, the remanence of Maoism opens a conceptual space for imagining how art exists outside the all-encompassing structure of an America where rapacious absorption is symptomatised by liberal inclusion as well as coercive policies of assimilation. Viewed through this lens, thinking about the remanence of Maoism might reposition the category of American art within the broader currents of a world that has always exceeded Euroamerican frameworks. Can Maoism release artworks into an intellectual analogue of the high seas, that is, a global commons belonging to all, but over which no agent has sovereignty?

Such a repositioning might require engaging with what has been dismissed as un-American — including Maoism, widely regarded as an embodiment of anti-American sentiment — to yield a productively different art-historical framework. The point is not to defend or justify Maoism. Nor is it a call to substitute one identity politics for another in order to invert US exceptionalism with its supposed opposite. Simply invoking Maoism iconographically risks the very reductionism that transforms revolutionary *methodologies* into manageable cultural symbols, missing how Maoist practices of contradiction, self-criticism, and collective production continue to operate through artistic form itself.

To pursue such an un-American framework means taking seriously what Alex Goodall describes as historical function of the 'un-American' in the early twentieth century. Goodall shows how the concept served as a tool of political repression against those 'who threatened the established political order' by reducing them to crude identitarian assessments.[6] Yet the 'un-American' concept also required accounting for 'a more open definition of nationhood by showing where its boundaries lay'.[7] Pulsing especially through the work of many artists whose legitimacy was constantly questioned on account of their racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds, Maoism offered minoritised populations the possibility of extraterritorial belonging that bypassed the nation-state entirely. The 'un-American' designation becomes not a stigma to overcome, but a productive condition for generating aesthetic practices that exceed what can be contained within acceptable

forms of difference. To focus on artists' encounters with Maoism shifts the terms of analysis. Rather than viewing them as domestic minorities struggling within national boundaries, they surface as part of a global majority whose very existence reveals US exceptionalism as privilege controlled by a comparative few.

Calling attention to the remanence of Maoism is to reorganise fields of study around different connections to international revolutionary movements, community-based practices outside institutional validation, as well as modes of production that reject both market imperatives and the supposed marketplace of ideas where critical positions function as brand differentiation. Ambient Maoism thus counteracts some of the distorting effects of Americanisation expressed by US institutions that mistake their critical preoccupations as having automatic universal purchase.[8] What emerges is a truer vision of America: neither universal ontology nor exclusionary polity, but an assembly of irreconcilables that shifts our analytical priorities from taxonomic conceptions of inclusion and exclusion to swells that move across political borders, to intellectual currents that circulate through visual means, and to frictions occasioned by form and the politics of artistic self-determination.

Ed Bereal's Un-American Revolution

America, a Mercy Killing mirrors LeRoi Jones's vision of a new 'revolutionary theatre' that would be 'a theatre of assault (*plate 3*). The play that will split the heavens for us will be called *The Destruction of America*'.[9] As Jones declared, 'fascism has been made obsolete by the word America, and Americanism'.[10] This convergence was hardly accidental. Jones would later embrace Maoist theories of revolutionary art for Black liberation, concepts that would complement Bereal's work after the Watts Riots of 1965 had transformed his artistic practice.[11]

3 Ed Bereal, *America, a Mercy Killing*, 1966–1974.

Described by the artist as a 'politics of positioning', *America, a Mercy Killing* unfolds on a life-sized US flag that echoes the tablecloth featured in the poster for *War Babies*, the first racially integrated exhibition in Los Angeles, held at the Huysman Gallery in 1961.[12] While the flag in *War Babies* serves as connective tissue for Bereal and his friends who perform various racial and religious stereotypes — questioning whether America is merely a collection of typecasting — in *America, a Mercy Killing*, the flag functions as an operating table or execution site.[13] On the upper deck, Bereal has us confront the devastating transformation of communities united by mutual needs into markets defined by manufactured desires — a shift infamously characterised by financier Paul Mazur in 1928. Mazur observed that 'man's desires can be developed so that they will greatly overshadow his needs'.[14] One profound consequence of this desire-driven society is how it not only positions people primarily as consumers, but conditions them either to instrumentalise other human beings or perceive them as inconveniences requiring minimisation or elimination.

For Bereal this situation transcends mere disappointment — it provokes visceral disgust. His remark to John Weisman cuts through polite evasion: 'the secret of America is fuck everybody. It's like standing in a cesspool tryin' to use the water to clean yourself off'.[15] Streaks of red paint trickling down one of the fractured columns supporting the upper tier recall K. William Kgositsile's remarkably clear-eyed 1967 essay 'Is the Black Revolutionist a Phony?' There the South African poet and African National Congress member dispensed with reformist fantasies: 'our problems are not going to be solved in conference rooms. The fight is going to be bloody, and our art, if it is valid, is going to be carved from that portion of history. It is going to reflect, explore, and celebrate the nature of that blood'.[16] Kgositsile understood what liberal America desperately wanted to forget — that dialogue alone does little to heal gaping historical wounds.

To the right, a screen flashes 'fuck you' in an endless loop — a concise summation of the relationship between American media and its marginalised subjects. 'Amerika is a painful muthafucker; I mean, it is painful', he told Weisman; 'you gotta get used to seein' casualties, man. It's like Vietnam but on a colour TV level'.[17] The comparison is instructive. Just as the Vietnam War transmitted senseless violence into American living rooms, Bereal's installation forces viewers to confront America's domestic casualties. Bereal's approach to form and formlessness paves the way for a kind of decentralisation that was in fact part of the 'un-American' condition so vehemently opposed by liberals and nationalists alike. The experience of revulsion repels any efforts at reconciliation. In this way, the work moves well beyond what literary theorist Liu Kang infers from *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts*, of how the 'revolutionary subject' had to be primed through visual, aural, and legible cultural forms.[18] Bereal creates a space where revulsion becomes politically generative not through direct formal equivalences to Maoist principles, but through the creation of an affective environment. Revolutionary consciousness emerges not from ideological persuasion, but from visceral discomfort, making the experience of revulsion inseparable from the revolutionary impulse itself. Visceral disgust becomes a form of political clarity that refuses to mistake revolutionary energy for revolutionary optimism.

Early viewers immediately sensed the work's un-American potential. Property developer Ed Janss Jr, who described his family as just 'to the right of Attila the Hun', had bought the work for the Smithsonian American Art Museum to help Bereal.[19] A member of Business Executives Move for Vietnam Peace, Janss was a ranking member of Richard Nixon's enemy list for protesting against the Vietnam War.[20] Then

employed at the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum), Bereal's longtime friend, the curator Walter Hopps, was discouraged from showing *America, a Mercy Killing*, possibly due to his own disapproval of the politics of S. Dillon Ripley, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and the former chief of US intelligence in Southeast Asia during World War II.[21]

That *America, a Mercy Killing* ended up being vandalised by an NFCA employee while in storage indicates a deeper truth about art's relation to power.[22] Even confined within institutional walls, the work maintained its capacity to provoke — to unsettle the very structures meant to neutralise it. This incident directly parallels Mao's concept of 'continuous revolution', suggesting that the artwork maintained its disruptive power even when institutionalised; the artwork generated precisely the confrontation that it theorised. What we witness in this vandalism is not simply destruction, but the artwork achieving its full dimension as social fact.

Foregrounded is an area ringed by trash cans with glue, sand, and gravel. Bereal concocted the trash bins from beer cans. In stark red paint suggestive of stage blood, the numbers '4716' are smeared across the surface, alluding to the artist's Washington Boulevard home in Los Angeles during that period. Bereal describes this as the area 'where winos lived, where police beat you up, where people go broke, where people are thrown away'.[23] As if abandoned while escaping a police raid, handheld signs of declaration, rejection, and outrage pile limply on the ground. The tableau echoes a performance that the artist enacted as part of Bodacious Buggerilla, the street theatre group that he established in a Black studies course at the University of California, Riverside in 1968. Dressed as an abject Uncle Sam on the brick steps named after the Janss Investment Company (now known as the Tongva Steps) at the University of California, Los Angeles, Bereal pulled out a bottle of wine, a bible, and a steering wheel to demonstrate satirically how to, in Bereal's words, 'deorganise' Black Americans.[24]

'Deorganise' proves an enlightening term, for the America that Bereal depicts exists in a state of entropic dissolution. Our eye gingerly picks through the chaos, being careful to avoid the guillotine blade and churn of the treadmill. Money spews from a cash register, accumulating without purpose. No coherent hierarchy presents itself. Though this assemblage spans two floors, it lacks any taxonomic discipline. In its place is a chaotic jumble where nothing has its proper place. Trash cans assume central importance, alongside bleeding corpses, grime, and defiant graffiti. The toilet commands a surprisingly prominent position.

Georges Bataille's concept of the *informe* — that which refuses classification, that which corrodes taxonomies — is apt here. Bereal undoes the form of an America whose faith in coherence depends on the exclusion of multitudes and the deaths of many, and whose claims to exceptionalism often mask various systems of coercion. The horizontality which Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss so closely associated with Bataille's *informe* is brought to bear with the American flag pinned ignominiously to the ground.[25] With its edges fastened down like a specimen prepared for dissection, the flag establishes immediately that we are witnessing an autopsy rather than a celebration. Bereal lays bare the republic's architectural failure: support columns fractured beyond salvage, its populace reduced to either mindless animation or puppet-like dependency with the affect of four-legged creatures standing on hind legs, and corpses requiring external suspension to maintain even the semblance of proper stance.

Most formless of all are the discarded placards strewn across the ground. They litter the flag-covered ground now soiled by scattered gravel. We do not know

whether these artefacts of protest have been flung down in revulsion or scattered during confrontation between those enforcing laws and those demanding their transformation. What remains is an afterimage of mass action now rendered mute. Slogans once animated by the voices of multitudes now flattened into mere detritus. Notable is how these abandoned markers of resistance populate that juncture where the ground pitches sharply downward, functioning as a kind of ramp that implies exodus from the central arena.

This prostrate configuration presents an antithesis to the assertive perpendicularity that characterises Öyvind Fahlström's *Mao-Hope March*. (*plate* 4). Winding through Fifth Avenue's commercial heart, New York's consummate shrine to consumption, this remarkable procession featured participants hoisting oversized photographic effigies of a camera-conscious, beaming Chairman Mao juxtaposed with Bob Hope's more circumspect countenance. The visual staging unavoidably recalls the mythologised 1966 episode when Mao's image appeared to traverse the surface of the Yangtze River, his face elevated by devoted followers — a carefully choreographed tableau of power through vertical display.

Fahlström's work simultaneously interrogates the demonstration itself, probing whether such public spectacles prioritise structural presentation over substantive message. The placards belong to the syntax of political demonstration, but their purpose is not to rally or persuade. Participants display not slogans but photographic portraits, and the demonstration itself is not a demonstration *for* anything in particular: it is simply a procession without destination. The placards, the marching, the public occupation of space — all the formal elements of protest function now as quotation, as aesthetic gesture rather than political intervention.

America, a Mercy Killing, by contrast, derives its nuclear force from the desertion that it stages. The cause of this evacuation remains strategically undetermined. State violence offers itself as one reading, but the work refuses such ready explanation. Rarely does 'Fuck Power' seem so, well, *fucked*. Vacated of potency, these emblems of

4 Still from Öyvind Fahlström, *Mao-Hope March*, 1966. 16 mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound), 4 minutes 30 seconds. New York: Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Courtesy of Öyvind Fahlström Foundation and Archives.

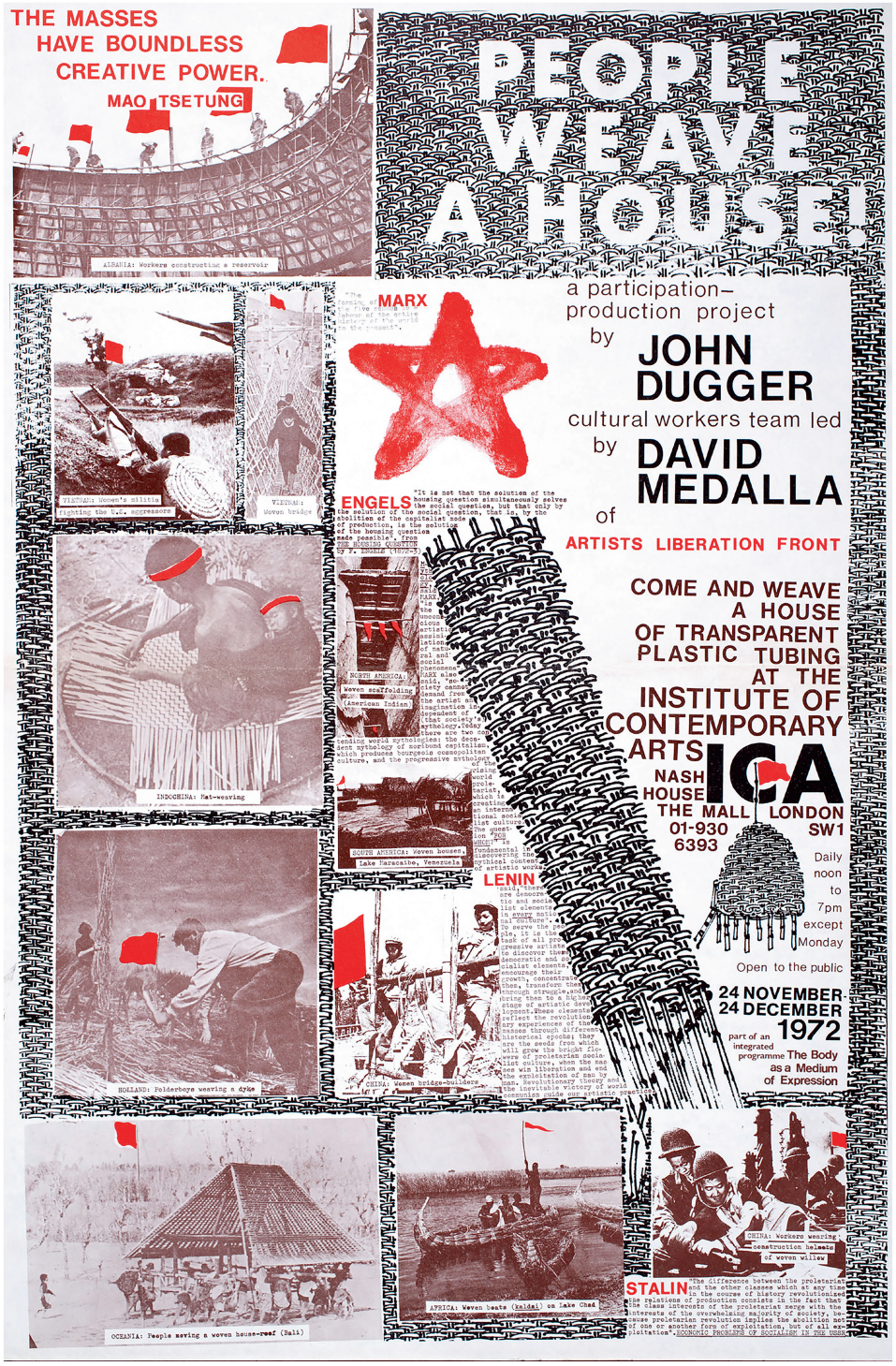
resistance and affirmation stage not merely defeat, but a terminal condition beyond the hope of renewal. Partially concealed beneath gravel, two mantras associated with the Black Power and antiwar movements — 'Black is Beautiful' and 'Make Love Not War' — look as if undergoing their own burial. This is not revolution betrayed so much as revolution doomed to effacement and the inevitability of inertia.

Having witnessed first-hand the most devastating upheaval in Los Angeles's history, and, more crucially, the absence of substantive transformation that followed, Bereal grasped with exceptional lucidity the limitations of revolutionary action. Though *America, a Mercy Killing* pulses with distinctly Maoist energies — restless and convulsive in its formal articulations — it squarely dismisses the notion that such energy must inherently carry hope or lead to favourable results. This pessimistic realism comes into sharper relief when juxtaposed with John Dugger, amongst the most authentically Maoist of American artists, who embraced what historian René Goldman observed as the early Cultural Revolution credo: that collective political passion possesses an almost supernatural power to transcend material limitations.[26]

Compelled by opposition to American intervention in Vietnam, Dugger left the US for London in 1967. Five years later, he travelled to China on a trip sponsored by the pro-China Society for Anglo Chinese Understanding (SACU), which activated what Tom Buchanan describes as 'direct — at times almost mystical — inspiration from the Chinese revolution'.[27] For the fifth iteration of *documenta* in 1972, he realised the *People's Participation Pavilion* alongside David Medalla — a reimagining of Tiananmen Square complete with sunflowers, and broadcasts of Red Guard anthems and 'The Internationale'.[28] The pavilion represented a determined effort to construct an alternative narrative framework challenging both US world-building and emerging identity politics.

Unaware of pointed critiques like Richard Long's question whether 'the stride cretinism of China's Cultural Revolution' could claim moral high ground over 'US murder in Vietnam', Dugger's idealism persisted with such unwavering sincerity that it constituted its own curious form of resistance, even in the face of Cultural Revolution atrocities.[29] With Medalla, his subsequent *People Weave a House* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London invited audiences to weave plastic tubing to make Vietnamese village-inspired shelters, aspiring to transform viewers from passive consumers into productive comrades (*plate* 5).[30] Yet as John A. Walker notes, the ostensibly democratic impulse to 'involve the masses' collapsed into circumscribed reality; the 'masses' proved to be largely artists and cultural workers, while existing structures of authority — the museum, the market, the academy, and the state — remained fundamentally unchanged.[31]. The poster designed by Dugger, however, gets at the heart of the matter. Drawing from his travels in China, Dugger grasped the core mechanics of Maoist visual culture: its bold typography, photomontage technique, and the calculated deployment of revolutionary slogans such as 'THE MASSES HAVE BOUNDLESS CREATIVE POWER'. Exceeding the impact of the performance it advertised, the poster suggests where the real work of cultural politics was being done: not in the democratic theatre of collective creation, but in the harder task of translating one revolutionary visual language into the conditions of another historical moment.

Dugger, Medalla, and Bereal share an aspiration toward what the latter termed an ethics 'outside the middle class', notably through their incorporation of Maoist emphases on collective action, communal labour, and Maoist emblems and symbols, including the Chairman's likeness.[32] But *America, a Mercy Killing* navigates more treacherous terrain where revolution appears simultaneously necessary and



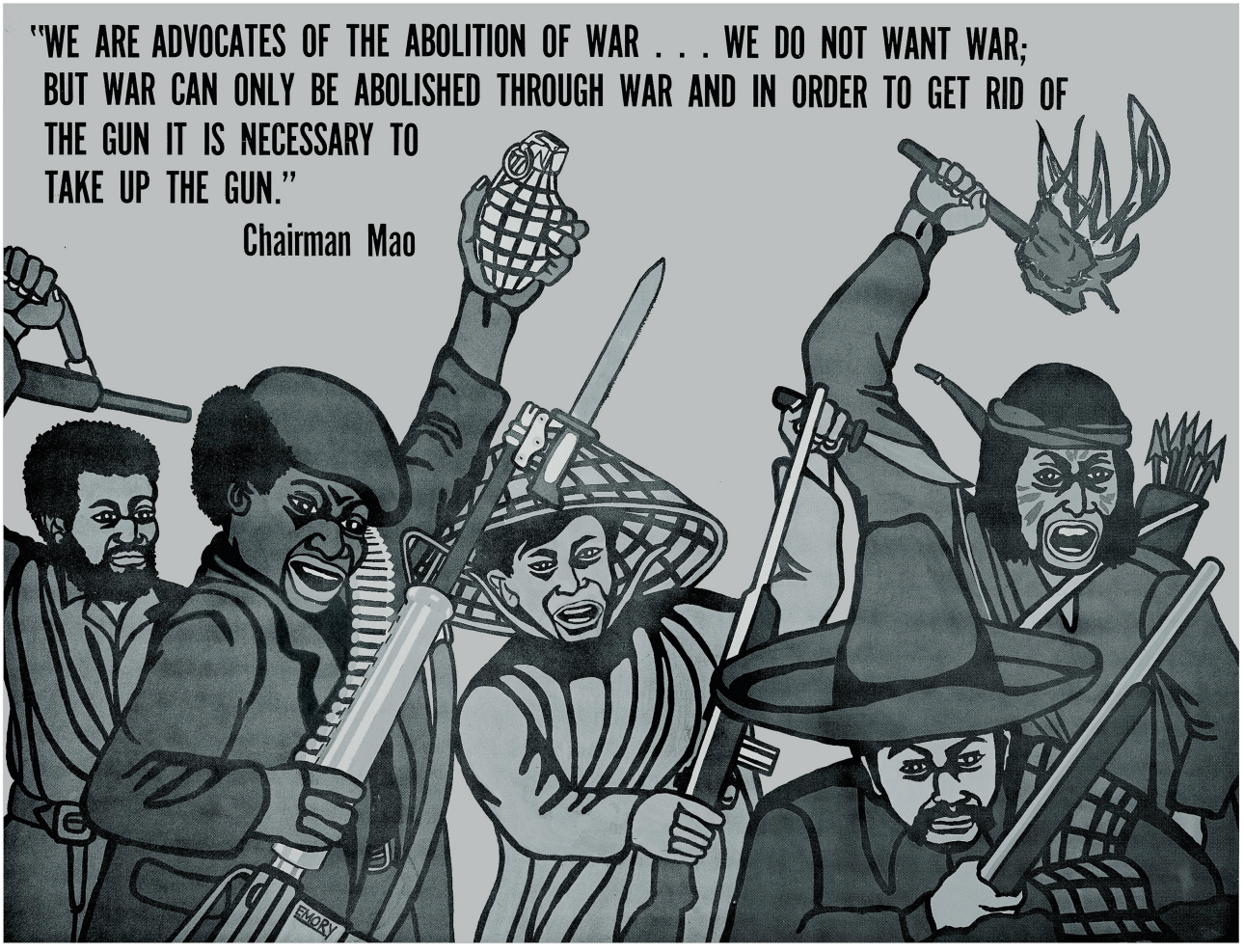
5 Poster designed by John Dugger for *People Weave a House*, 1972, a participation-production project led by David Medalla, Artists Liberation Front. © Estate of John Dugger. Photo: England & Co., London.

insufficient. The work centres on the impossibility of equilibrium, a concept central to Mao's 'On Contradiction', one of his few systematic philosophical texts. Mao argues that 'internal contradiction exists in every single thing, hence its motion and development. Contradictoriness within a thing is the fundamental cause of its development, while its inter-relations and interactions with other things are secondary causes'.[33] Applied as a critical tool, Mao's insight reveals how *America, a Mercy Killing* exposes the limitations of contemporary terms like 'dissensus' or 'diversity' that drain the material antagonisms these works originally sought to articulate of their radical content.

Uniting States of Un-America

Andrew Walder argues that what passes as 'Maoism' is often a 'process of elaboration, translation, and adumbration of Mao and his popularisers' *outside* China.[34] In this respect, amongst the most astute visual interlocutors of Maoism is Emory Douglas. As Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party beginning in 1967, he produced several lithographs for the *Black Panther* newspaper that acted ceaselessly in response to, and in parallel with, Maoist propaganda. Observing that the publication could only afford to print one colour alongside black ink, Douglas developed a singular style that mimicked the look of woodcuts using markers, ink, and ballpoint pens.[35] Douglas's penchant for high-contrast compositions use negative space not as absence but as activation, creating a visual rhythm that feels life-affirming.

Douglas's work has a pronounced theatricality. Bearing a quote from Mao's 'Problems of War and Strategy' of November 1938, Douglas's lithograph *We Are Advocates of the Abolition of War* assembles representatives of the Black Panthers, North Vietnamese, Native Americans, and Zapatistas in Mexico (*plate 6*). The energy seems less scripted than in the Maoist envisioning of Black liberation. In 'Art for the People's Sake', his quasi-manifesto published in the *Black Panther* in 1972, Douglas asserted that 'art is subordinate to politics'.[36] Yet this work transforms militancy into graphic exuberance that flouts the drab obedience characterising art which illustrates politics. From the far left, a hand clutching an automatic gun points us to the visual polyphony of two rows of diagonal sightlines. Raised arms and hands clutching various small



6 Emory Douglas, *We Are Advocates of the Abolition of War*, published in *The Black Panther*, 28 September 1968. Offset lithograph on paper, 55.9 × 45.7 cm. Oakland: Oakland Museum of California. © Emory Douglas. Photo: afnylaw.com.

weapons aloft compose an upper sequence complemented by long narrow guns urging the eye upwards through pictorial space. The work pulses, then throbs.

For Douglas, who participated in the Black Panther leadership trip to China in 1972, Maoism offered a foil to what he dismissed as 'civil rights art', which he defined as art that moved beyond the depiction of community suffering or 'cultural nationalism'.[37] Fellow Panther Brad Brewer declared in 1970 that 'the question confronting Black people today is not whether one is "Black" but whether one is a revolutionary'.[38] Insisting on 'art that serves our people', Douglas memorably wrote that 'the community was the museum for our artwork', a pithy encapsulation of Mao's principle of 'Serving the People' translated into aesthetic practice.[39]

To speak of Maoism in art compels us to confront the poverty of our critical vocabulary. 'Influence' is too meagre, too passive a term. When Colette Gaiter characterises Black Panther visual production and its Maoist affinities as an 'international graphic language of anti-imperialist insubordination', she approaches the matter more directly, though 'language' is not quite the word for it.[40] Douglas's prints insist on pictorial comradeship where forms stand alongside other forms in what might be called a visual commonwealth. One cannot properly see a Douglas print without recognising its material kinship with works such as Jim Dong's 1972 serigraph of a child mounted on a tiger, for example (*plate 7*). Human and animal coalesce into a single fighting unit, twisting with sudden urgency to confront an

7 Jim Dong, *Year of the Tiger*, 1972. Serigraph, 43.7 × 58.4 cm. Santa Barbara: University of California Santa Barbara Special Collections.

opponent who exists, significantly, beyond the frame. The landscape itself appears to participate in this torsion; it tilts and spirals in sympathy with the action. The tiger's dramatically foreshortened paws, the meticulous linear detail, and that brilliant formal rhyme between the arched tail and the mountain ridge behind it collapse spatial hierarchy. Background thrusts itself into foreground. Dramatic to the hilt, the works of Douglas and Dong refuse any separation between being seen and being public. They deprive the viewer of any retreat into private aesthetic experience or the comforts of coded political messaging.

Dong himself was not Maoist nor did he read Maoist literature, despite a friend giving him a copy of *Talks at the Yan'an Forum*.[41] A co-founder of the seminal multidisciplinary arts organisation Kearny Street Workshop in 1972 at the International Hotel (I-Hotel) in San Francisco, Dong worked next to the offices of the Maoist group I Wor Kuen, formerly the Red Guard Party. He produced invitations and posters for various Maoist organisations, but firmly maintained his ideological independence by resisting efforts from Maoist groups to conscript the Kearny Street Workshop as their cultural appendage.[42]

Still, his work as graphics editor for the pioneering Asian American journal *Aion* is hardly incidental. Though not explicitly Maoist in its editorial stance, *Aion*'s inaugural issue included an image of Mao, and an interview with Alex Hing, former Minister of Information of the Red Guard Party noted that 'we American born Chinese tried to be Americans and found that we couldn't do that'.[43] In a nation systematically failing its professed ideals of citizenship, Maoism offered some Asian Americans an alternative mode of belonging, one that did not require apology.

Ambient Maoism provided what might be called moral scaffolding. Even as Dong resisted organsational co-optation, he worked within a context where Maoist frameworks provided different minoritarian bodies, especially Black Americans and Asian Americans, with conceptual resources for thinking about postnational collectivity. The visual commonwealth that Douglas and Dong create through shared revolutionary iconography echoes what Max Elbaum identified as the New Communist Movement (NCM)'s foundational appeal: regardless of background, members saw themselves as part of a 'we' crossing, or rather, defying, racial and geographic borders.[44] Yet where the NCM's universalism operated through political organisation, the works of Douglas and Dong generate collectivity through aesthetic practice, creating what might be called a visual 'we' that operates through 'group form' rather than party membership. Think, for instance, of a print Jim Dong created to publicise a benefit for the Revolutionary Communist Party (*plate 8*). Its open-mouthed superhero-like figure thrusts a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao,* better known as the Little Red Book, into the immediate foreground. The effect is startlingly abrupt, a veritable fist in the face that exemplifies how aesthetic practice generates political identification through visual impact rather than organisational membership.

Group form amongst artists and artworks engaged with Maoist thought operates across several dimensions, each revealing different facets of collectivity's relationship to visual practice. At its most basic level, this involves shared reference points creating visual echoes across works that might otherwise appear unrelated. Maoist visual production is a way of thinking about group form in which certain arrangements of images and objects do not merely represent collective experience but actively produce it. In her persuasive account of collective production in Maoist China, Christine I. Ho argues that artistic production was not simply about group authorship, but served as a visual apparatus engineered to transfigure its spectators into a revolutionary body politic, 'to voice the roar of the masses'.[45] Douglas, far from resisting this

8 Jim Dong, *Benefit for Revolutionary Communist Party*, 1979. Serigraph, 45.7 × 61 cm. Washington, DC: Library of Congress,

transformative imperative, embraced such a function — deploying visual means to forge collective consciousness out of atomised individuals.

Worth considering further is how Maoist visual materials functioned to establish political boundaries. While Maoist visual culture in China remade the relationship between citizen and nation through art, ambient Maoist group form in the American context operated differently, displacing citizenship as the grounds for polity-building in favour of a global majority that bypassed the coalitional tensions inherent in US identity politics. Such displacement reveals how ambient Maoism functioned not as foreign doctrine, but as the substrate of group form able to operate outside the citizen-state apparatus entirely.

The distinction between comrade and opponent emerged performatively through the very practices of creating, exhibiting, and circulating revolutionary imagery, making doctrinal adherence secondary to what might be called Maoist group form in America. My understanding of 'group form' draws on Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman's concept of group style, where groups form through specific patterns of interaction and boundary-making practices rather than predetermined declarations of unity. [46] The conditions enabling such group form were particularly evident in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the Kearny Street Workshop

neighboured Everybody's Bookstore, which sourced Maoist literature from the same supplier that furnished Black Panthers with Little Red Books.[47] Panther book sales funded arms purchases from Asian American radicals, exemplifying how Maoist visual culture created practical alliances that exceeded formal political organisations.[48]

More than illustrations of radical politics, the works of Douglas and Dong instantiate group form that reveals how Maoist strategies operated within, but also beyond, the identity politics framework that Colleen Lye has argued as US Maoism's primary contribution. Where US Maoism sought 'the cultural construction of a new mass revolutionary agent' through identity categories that linked particularity to totality through what Mao called the interpenetrating character of opposites, the works of Douglas and Dong activate what we might call the surplus of these strategies.[49] Even as their works helped make possible the recognition of Asian American and Black revolutionary figures, they simultaneously transformed such recognition into affirmation of a global majority that both preceded and outlasted the particular historical moment of identity-based organising. Such group form positions the 'un-American' in connection with the world's actual majority whose labour and lives sustain a prosperity which they rarely share in.

In *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing*, Dong transformed the political question of shelter from policy debate into pictorial confrontation along these lines (*plate 9*). Commissioned for the exhibition *People's Murals: Some Events in American History* intended to commemorate the US bicentennial at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing* deftly encompasses these questions. It ranks amongst the most potently allegorical representations of one of the most watershed moments in

9 Jim Dong, *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing*, 1976. Acrylic paint on plywood, 426.7 × 731.5 cm. Whereabouts unknown.

an expanded history of US human rights in which Asian Americans played a central part: a multi-year protest from 1968 to 1977 against the forced eviction of mostly elderly Filipino tenants from the I-Hotel in San Francisco.

Housing — that most basic element of social reproduction — becomes in Dong's hands the site where class struggle achieves an immediate and tangible expression. Drawing from his enduring attraction to comics, he coalesces graphic novel immediacy with the mythic effect so ardently pursued by Social Realist muralists.[50] With the underlying armature rendered in black and white, Dong then introduced a chromatic range whose subtle vibrancy and material presence photography fails to record.[51] Making full use of an unusual V-shaped canvas framed in pine lumber painted white, Dong bestowed superhero status on Felix Ayson, one of the leaders of the tenant campaign who posed for the work.[52] Raising his cane as if it could harness the elements, the dramatically foreshortened Ayson leans to one side, bringing the brick façade of the I-Hotel with him. Thrust into the immediate central foreground is Ayson's oversized hand grasping a wrecking ball that uncannily resembles a bomb. The characterisation of Ayson matters especially given that at the time of the work Ayson had difficulty walking.[53]

That Dong aligned this intervention with the pageantry of the US Bicentennial exposes the fundamental contradiction between state celebration and materialist critique. Rolando Castellón's decision to commission Dong — a deliberate curatorial choice by SFMOMA's first curator of colour working against the grain of institutional convention — situates the painting within a larger project that sought to integrate communities of colour into the American visual narrative without relegating them to what Castellón himself recognised could be dismissed as a 'third world separate thing'.[54] The I-Hotel struggle that initiated the work had similarly drawn together diverse radical coalitions, including Maoist organisations alongside tenant organisers, all recognising housing as central to revolutionary practice. Dong's unflinching focus on housing insecurity as a fundamental, not incidental, aspect of American experience represents a clear-eyed rejection of celebratory national mythology. For Dong, true Americans were those for whom 'the American dream' functions not as possibility but as ideological veil, specifically those whose structural positions guaranteed their permanent exclusion from an entrenched private property regime disguised as economic prosperity for all. The work poses not just alternative content but a fundamental challenge to what gets seen. I-Hotel protestor Martha Senger observed how San Francisco authorities did their utmost 'not to permit any struggle to remain visible'.[55] Dong's mural insists on visibility for the very spaces that official narratives work hardest to conceal.

Castellón, who described how 'one of the most important roles of the artist is to talk about his time and what's happening', remembered some museum trustees bristling at what he described as the 'accusative' quality of the mural.[56] Dong mentions an unnamed, but well-known, San Francisco critic who applauded the mural's quality of execution but not the subject or what the painting depicted.[57] Though no voice explicitly condemned the mural as 'un-American', Dong undoes the myth of an America as either idealised abstraction or consensual achievement.

Having taught one of the first studio art classes at the University of California at Berkeley to integrate Asian American and ethnic consciousnesses explicitly, Dong states that he drew mainly from what he describes as his 'traditional cultural awareness' rather than from Maoist propaganda freely accessible in the Bay Area.[58] He remembers having ready access to reproductions of Chinese Socialist Realist paintings in the Bay Area, although he regarded them as looking too 'suppressed' by

Soviet precedents.[59] More generative for him was Diego Rivera's pictorial mediation of Marxism which he encountered in reproduction.[60] Ayson's hand holding the wrecking ball echoes the hand grasping a sphere in *Man at the Crossroads*, Rivera's fresco intended for Rockefeller Centre in New York City.[61]

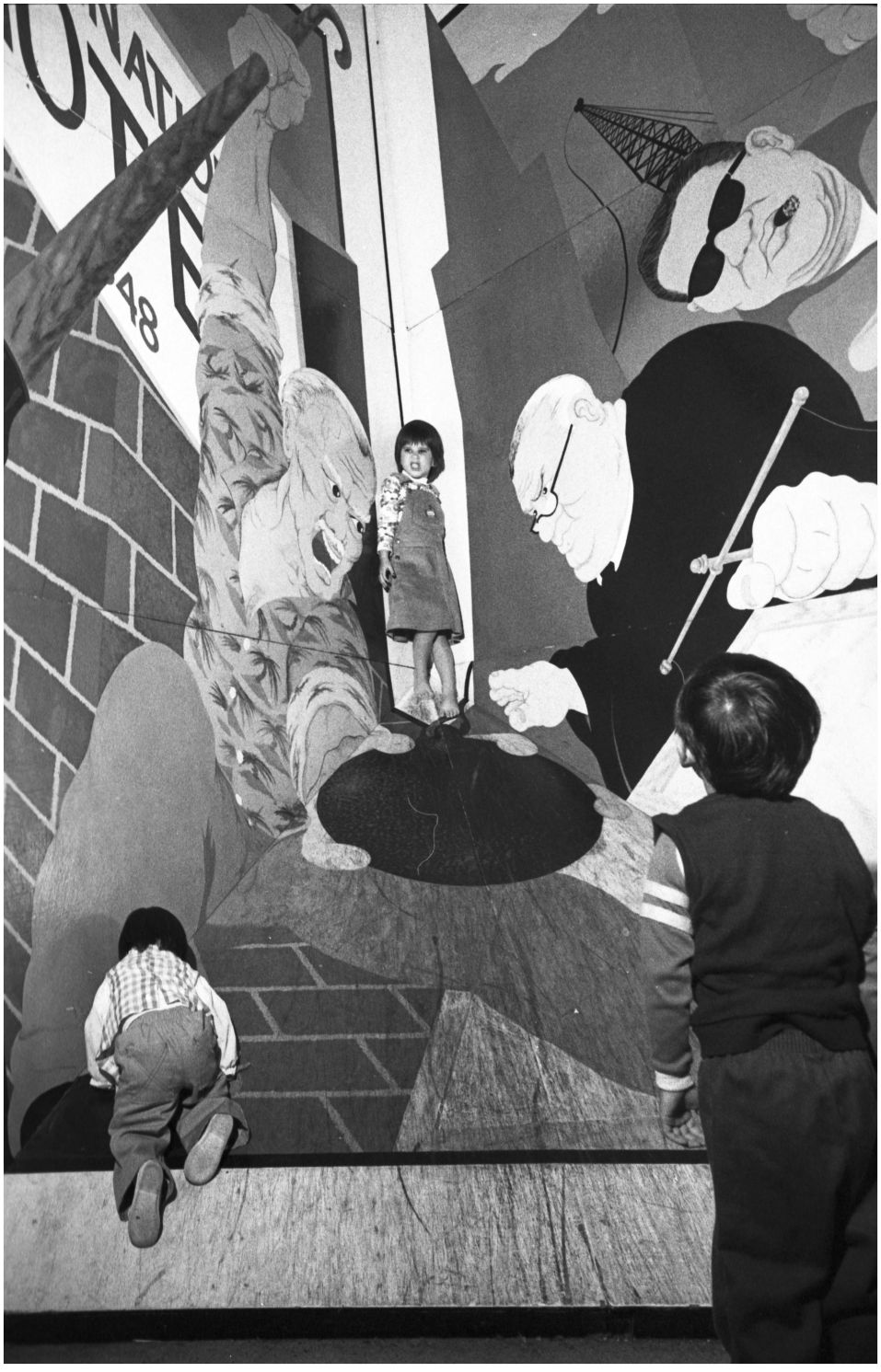
Yet *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing* also benefitted from a pervasive, if diffuse, consciousness of Maoism that joined what in the US was legible primarily as a minoritarian struggle to the majority of the world's population deprived of any real autonomy over their living circumstances. Hear the exhaustion of Nancy Hom, who helped complete the painting after the design was sketched onto the panels: *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing* as a paid associate: 'you burn out, *serving, serving, serving. Serving our comrades, serving the people, serving every night the poor, serve, serve, serve*'.[62] Hom describes her Maoist-inflected commitments to 'serve the people' as an implicit duty to refrain not only from self-serving behaviour, but to deny actively one's own identity.[63]

The thickness of the wooden frame encasing the scene of protest insistently separates the view pictured within its edges from both the wall and the world outside the museum. But Dong did not visualise the struggle for housing as separate from the living conditions of the working class. On the contrary, the painting was intended to shape new living conditions as a hinged mobile wall divider on wheels for the I-Hotel recreation room.[64] Perhaps suggesting a windowsill, the frame causes the painting to read as an architectural proposition.

But the V-shaped canvas is more of a staging tactic than a surrogate for a window-like form. Reflecting Dong's lasting interest in what he calls 'structural borders', the work emphasises its own objecthood while also effectively underscoring the good-versus-evil narrative.[65] To stress the eviction as itself a battle over the fate of the city, the I-Hotel is brought to the foreground. Conversely, the 'bad' side is backgrounded by a silhouette of the recently erected Transamerica Pyramid which at the time was derided even by the chief planning director of San Francisco as 'an inhuman creation in an urban area that strives to be human and supremely liveable'.[66] The wooden bench from which the judge glares is as formidable as the Transamerica Pyramid. Moreover, one cannot help feeling spied upon by the developer whose beefy hands feed coins to the scales of justice. The V-shape resurfaces as a call to recognise how viewing is a composite of angles. *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing* makes room for viewers looking at the mural askance or sideways, hence acknowledging as co-created the labour of looking that is central to protest. Such looking is further characterised by momentum, direction, and speed: the painting feels slower when one is standing under the judge's podium, and faster when one stands in front of Ayson's outstretched hand.

Connecting the space of the artist's studio to that of the I-Hotel recreation room, portability is a tactic for strengthening personal connection to the depicted struggle by amplifying the sensorial pleasures of protest. Form and colour impart a visceral excitement that itself staved off the fear of alienation; even today, the centripetal appeal of the artwork defies what literature scholar Steven Lee describes in his reading of *I-Hotel*, Karen Tei Yamashita's groundbreaking archipelago of novella-epics from 2010, as the 'familiar arc from illusion to disillusion, an arc that would have us believe that revolution and avant-gardism are somehow preprogrammed to fail'.[67] Concurrently, the allegorical narratives depicted by the mural with an iconic Ayson as their anchor suggest the mural as itself a portable shrine intended to spread and affirm belief. More than a question of depiction, the work substantiates its own conception of space through boundaries and edges, and by establishing its own sense of interiority and exteriority.

The hinge constitutes a decisive form of articulation (*plate 10*). Deployed outward, seven discrete planes of wood appear to open into flight. Collapsed inward, they establish a menacing contiguity, planes shutting against one another. The visible grain of the judicial dais attests to brute power, and our uncomfortable proximity to its operations. When folded, the composition equalises the dimensional presence of Ayson's head with that of Judge Ira Brown, the famously abrasive and physically intimidating San Francisco Superior Court judge who ordered the eviction. The child



10 Installation view of Jim Dong, *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing*, at Galería de la Raza, San Francisco, 1978.

balanced above the demolition sphere is all too emblematic of our situation caught between the immediacy of direct intervention and the hierarchical impositions of regulatory frameworks wherein the law sides with financial capital.

Breaking down resistance against unjust eviction into a fluctuating composite of viewpoints and scalar disjunctions, *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing* overwrites the blandness of institutional rhetoric and the alienation of top-down proclamations with an insistence on productive deformation. Like *America, a Mercy Killing*, the work urges us to consider how certain artists refused to see America as a polity but instead as a predicament of a world under constant siege.

As much was suggested by its prominent placement in the essay that artist and Galería de la Raza founder Rupert Garcia wrote for *Other Sources*, one of the most significant counter-bicentennial exhibitions of 1976. Curated by the artist Carlos Villa, this two-part show at the San Francisco Art Institute advocated for a global majority rather than for minoritarian life alone. Race was not the only factor in articulating the global majority; as Garcia wrote, 'whites here and abroad share in the same struggle against the enemy of class oppression'.[68] Dong registered this expanded geography of power: the unnaturally enlarged hand of the red-shirted developer Supasit Mahaguna (who himself had fled China after Mao founded the People's Republic in 1949) embodies the distant but determining grasp of overseas investment.

Repurposing the term 'Third World', *Other Sources* called for a rechannelling of American art through an epistemology that struck at the mythology of US exceptionalism. For Dong, what was required was forging a new America through systematic un-Americanising, rendering the dominant cultural formation beside the point. The particular 'Third World' that Dong's work inhabited was predicated not on private property's vigilantly patrolled exclusions, but on mutual affirmative enmeshment intended to give form to collective life.

Who's Right, What's Left?

Villa's exhibition had wagered everything on a 'Third World' conceived not as cultural storehouse, but as strategic necessity to thinking outside developmentalist models. Yet only a few years later that wager would be called in. The political field had snapped back to the oppositions that *Other Sources* had laboured to dissolve, producing not the anticipated synthesis, but a triumphant Right encapsulated by the landslide victory of Ronald Reagan in the US presidential election of 1980.

Lucy Lippard's perceptive account of her journey to China that same year catches something of this historical recoil. Her political genealogy ran counter to the prevailing current. Where many of her contemporaries seized on the Cultural Revolution's militant theatre, Lippard found herself drawn to the 'Hundred Flowers' moment of 1956, when Mao appeared to invite the very critique from intellectuals and party elites that he was positioning himself to crush.[69] What attracted her was not centralised authority, but the prospect of genuine exchange and the productive friction of ideas allowed to collide. Yet when she finally reached China in 1980, what registered was loss: 'Mao is to be found', she wrote, 'but not in his previous profusion'.[70]

Her observations are telling. Here was a critic who had consistently opposed personality cult and centralised control, yet she found herself disoriented by the very absence that she should have welcomed. It captures something essential about Maoism's reception in the American art world, whereby the image of revolution could become more compelling than revolution itself. The discomfort at the

11 May Sun, *Untitled*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. Los Angeles: Collection of the artist. Photo: May Sun.

diminished iconographic presence of the very figure whose cult of personality defined the Cultural Revolution's suppression of dissent suggests whether aesthetics sometimes overtook political substance in Euroamerican engagements with Maoism.

Against this backdrop of contracted possibilities, I turn now to an untitled black-and-white photograph taken by May Sun on a stretch of what was formerly Sunset Boulevard (now Cesar Chavez Boulevard) near Chinatown in Los Angeles (*plate 11*). Wrinkled and torn, two adjoining posters take up most of her viewfinder. They show faces of a group bearing an image of Mao that flooded the world from the sixties to the present. In the corner of both posters it reads 'a world to win', one of the more common refrains of the *Communist Manifesto* penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848. Also printed in Spanish, the phrase was a rallying cry for what remained of the Progressive Labor Party, a Maoist faction established in 1962 that regarded working class struggle as fundamentally a fight against racism. Shadows cast on the wall by overgrown bougainvillea appear to rain down onto the surface of the posters, which consequently appear to fragment into multiple narrow shards. The face of Mao persists with a strange obstinacy. It adheres to the walls of the city even in the moment of its defacement. The torn poster manifests Maoism's capacity to linger even after its apparent historical defeat; it embeds itself in urban space, and the destruction becomes part of its continuing visual presence.

Another black-and-white photograph shows a wall spray-painted with the commonplace slogan 'God Bless America' (*plate 12*). Sounding less like a benediction and more of a call to arms, 'God Bless America' summons a very particular history

of an American art history seeded in acts of negation. Both photographs hold our attention at the moment where imagined collectivity was torn to shreds. Yet what we see is not just damaged propaganda, but a present actively constituted by these fragments — torn edges and weathered surfaces that reject historical burial, and continue to activate suppressed or neglected memories and incomplete projects.

Who's Right, What's Left is a work that holds America's contradictions in suspension (*plate 13*). Sun achieves this because she grasps Maoism not as doctrine, but as a nested series of practical transformations, operating simultaneously at multiple levels of social reality. Displayed at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach in 1990, *Who's Right, What's Left* considers Maoism as part of a rapidly obsolescing Communist legacy at an impasse. Realised on two gallery walls meeting in a corner, Sun installed a diptych on one wall composed of an enlarged reproduction of an inverted black-and-white likeness of Mao and a brightly coloured painting by her depicting images of protesting students based on media documentation of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Applied letter by letter to the gallery wall, Sun's question materialises through labourious process: 'is it better for the majority to suffer mildly than for the minority to suffer a great deal?' The hand-applied text refuses domestic frameworks that define majority and minority through racial categories, instead suggesting that the American 'majority' becomes a privileged minority extracting wealth from a suffering global majority.

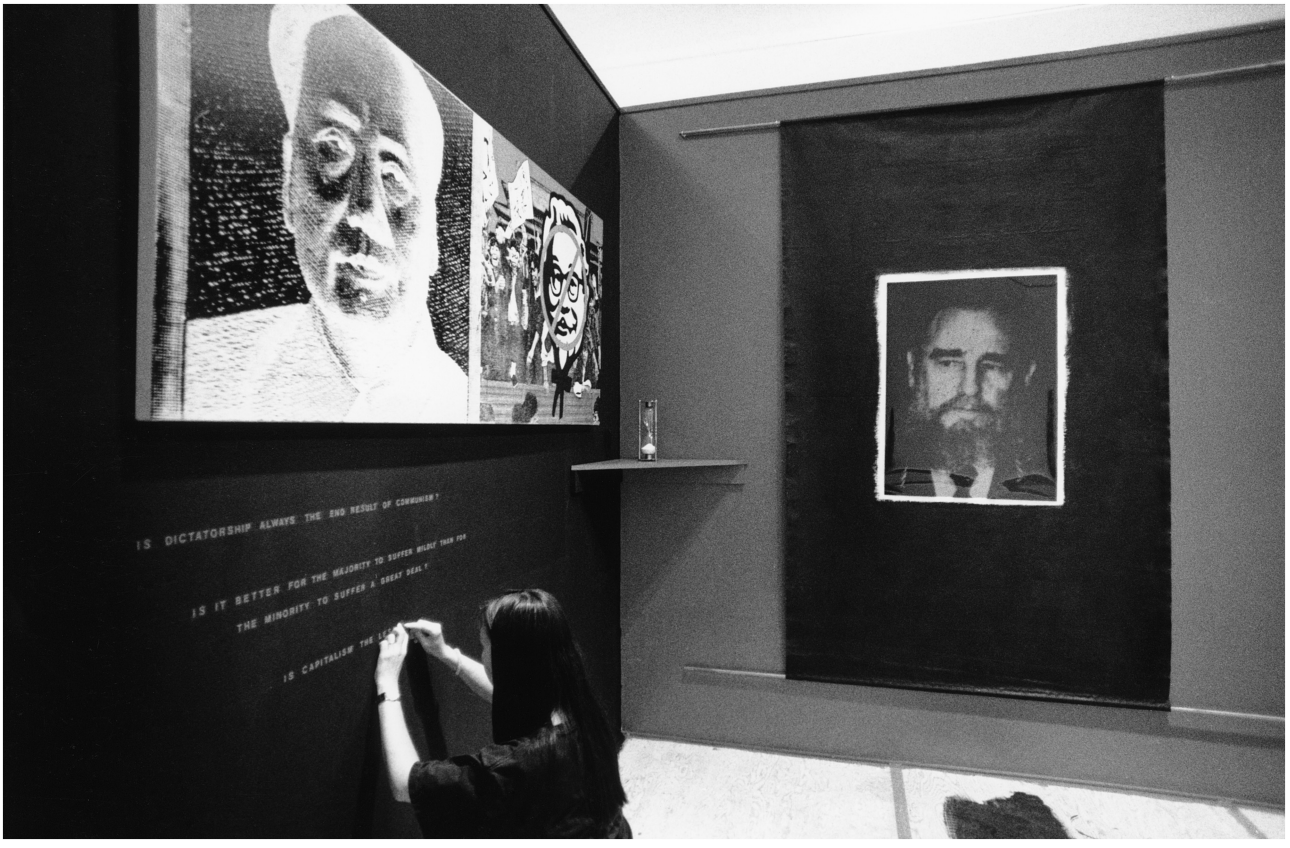
On the opposing wall, an image of Fidel Castro looks askance at both Mao and the protesting students. His likeness is mounted on what looks like a traditional hanging

12 May Sun, *God Bless America*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. Los Angeles: Collection of the artist. Photo: May Sun.

scroll, a format intended to be seen in close quarters. For Sun, Castro and Mao were the main Communist holdouts in a world increasingly defined by the erosion of socialist governments.[71] The angled walls draw attention to the corner, where on a plinth sits an hourglass. The sand has run out, meaning that time has as well. Here the political abstraction known as 'the Left' accordingly becomes transformed into a question of who and what is left. Who is left behind? Who is left alive? Who is left standing?

Sun based her image of Mao on a small woven image that she encountered in San Francisco's Chinatown. Her faded, inverted Mao participates in a global desacralisation where the Chairman's image had become available for artistic manipulation detached from state power. By the early 1990s, Maoism was no longer experienced as living political force, but as cultural residue available for individual negotiation. Mainland Chinese artists treated Mao's likeness as raw material for personal expression rather than sacred state doctrine.[72] Sun delivers Castro and Mao to us as visual artefacts severed from the concrete historical forces that once imparted them with quasi-religious force. Near the likeness of each leader are short texts phrased as questions (*plate 14*): 'Is Capitalism a euphemism for consumerism?' and 'Is Capitalism the lesser of two evils?'

Who's Right, What's Left also surfaces as a self-portrait emerging from Sun's position as a Chinese American artist navigating irreconcilable family legacies. Her personal history was framed by her mother's flight from China to Hong Kong in 1957, and her father's decision to transplant the family to America in 1973. Yet while her parents sought escape from Mao's China, her aunts ascended within the very apparatus that they fled — one becoming Mao's director-general of the Information



13 Detail of May Sun, *Who's Right, What's Left*, installed at Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, 1990. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Manuel Acevado.

14 Partial installation view of May Sun, *Who's Right, What's Left*, at Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, 1990. Photo: May Sun.

Department during the Cultural Revolution, another appointed China's ambassador to Ireland. Sun inherits Mao as both family trauma and political aspiration, a differential inheritance that resists unified historical judgment. Her split inheritance mirrors what Jennifer Lee argues is a key characteristic of contemporary Chinese art, specifically, the persistence of Maoist currents indifferent to art-historical periodisation.[73]

Sun's position illuminates a crucial distinction within ambient Maoism. Where artists like Douglas and Dong encountered Maoism as political strategy and visual vocabulary, artists like Sun and Hung Liu inherited it as biographical fact requiring critical negotiation. These differences in proximity generate distinct approaches to Maoist remanence, with Sun and Liu working through Maoism's residual claims on their own subjectivities rather than deploying its strategies for collective organising.

Sun's work urges us to ask if American art can exist independently of Maoism, or whether the systematic avoidance of Maoist engagement indicates American art's fundamental inability to conceptualise itself outside capitalist frameworks. *Who's Right, What's Left* recalls Andy Warhol's silkscreens of Mao, which moved well beyond deconstructing advertising culture or creating parallels with Cultural Revolution mass circulation. While philosopher Arthur Danto famously claimed that the prints detoxified 'one of the most frightening political images of all time', Warhol's obsessive reproduction of Mao's likeness raises the possibility of a structural interdependence between Maoism and American art that extends far beyond conscious influence or direct citation.[74] Warhol's Mao prints suggest that Maoism operates not as external reference but as constitutive absence; it is the possibility that American art must continuously neutralise to maintain its coherence.

The Mao in *Who's Right, What's Left* neither commands state reverence nor submits to market absorption, but exists in the unstable space between sacred symbol and cultural artefact. At the same time, the work provoked outrage amongst anti-Castro audiences in Miami who objected to what they saw as a morally suspect glorification of Communism.[75] Even when stripped of institutional authority, revolution-affiliated imagery continued to draw strong responses. Yet the work's visual logic tells a different story. Once emblematic of Third World hopes for a revolution that could leap across continents and cultures, the images of Mao and Castro now appear to look askance at one another as if caught in a moment of mutual disillusionment. Sun forces us into the corner — a strange and discomfiting vantage point that proves unexpectedly revealing. Neither fully inside nor outside the gallery space, the corner traps us into seeing obliquely. No vantage point takes in the whole; each view excludes the others. From this unaccustomed angle, the artifice of our political dualities becomes visible not as natural divisions, but as elaborate fabrications with histories and purposes that the usual perspectives conceal. This enforced self-examination materialises the Maoist imperative of self-criticism, or methodical attention to how ideological sediment accumulates in the absence of rigorous positional accounting. The work's interrogative text activates what Mao called the obligation to 'blame not the speaker but be warned by his words'.[76]

The title of the work — *Who's Right, What's Left* — is a linguistic play that immediately dismantles the Cold War's reductive political taxonomies. Its interrogative form underscores how our understanding of 'right' and 'left' depends upon specific vantage points, how these spatial coordinates become political metaphors that disguise more complex relations of power. This work constitutes 'un-Americanness' not as simple opposition, but as critical exteriority to the entire framework through which Cold War identity categories were established and maintained. The claim that Sun makes of the present in 1990 rests neither on the triumph of liberalism nor the 'fall' of Communism, but on her refusal of such triumphalist narratives altogether. Indeed, Sun suggests that the contemporary itself names this suspension of judgment: not postrevolutionary consensus, but a refusal to accept that fundamental questions have been settled.

Who's Right, What's Left indirectly asks whether it is possible to countenance Maoism, or even the likeness of Mao, without defaulting to snap moral judgments by directly asking what is left of a Left that cannot keep grassroots claims to authority from collapsing into full-blown authoritarianism. The words 'Who's Right, What's Left' may have alluded not only to Cold War political taxonomies, but to these very rifts within the Left — the question of proper direction and what constituted the 'real' Left having become as fractured as the movement itself. Small wonder, then, that critic Donna Stein would describe Sun as a covert apostate of an America defined by a cultish 'eagerness to perceive the world in terms of "us" and "them"'.[77]

In his all-too-influential essay 'The End of History', published a year before Sun exhibited *Who's Right, What's Left*, Francis Fukuyama might have been speaking of Maoism in his hyperbolic warning against an 'updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war'.[78] Fukuyama prematurely claimed the 'triumph of the West' which read mostly as a paean to the conflation of personhood with consumerism.[79] Such rhetorical inflation, collapsing political philosophy into apocalyptic fantasy, provides the discursive backdrop against which Sun's more nuanced engagement with Maoist thought must be understood. *Who's Right, What's Left* enacts Mao's insistence that criticism should occur 'in good time' rather than 'only after the event', yet it reveals how such timeliness operates precisely when historical

time itself is out of joint.[80] Being contemporary emerges not as capitalism's final victory, but as the moment when Cold War certainties lose their grip on the real. The hourglass has run out, but this is not the end of history, only the breakdown of the temporal logic that makes it impossible to consider such an end.

Worth revisiting here is Lippard's response to post-Mao China. Bypassing facile denunciation of China's capitalist turn, she opts to engage thoroughly with disquiet, both her own and that of her Chinese hosts. What she registers cannot be reduced to nostalgic leftism or reflexive anti-commercialism, but emphasises something more complex: the sensation of one social order giving way to another while the terms of that transition remain doggedly opaque. *Who's Right, What's Left* refuses the monotonous tale of the Left's stillbirth. It insists upon a different chronology altogether, one that refuses to organise itself around ruptures that others proclaim as universal watersheds. Sun does not mourn what never happened so much as suggest that 'never' is itself a misguided term. The work exists in a present tense that has not finished with the past, where the very question of what constitutes political time remains defiantly open.

Sun's work demonstrates how certain critical procedures, in particular the belief in the necessity of contradiction and the inevitability of struggle, continue to circulate through American art as formal legacies of revolutionary challenge, even when their original political context has been discredited and abandoned. Even when defaced and torn on Los Angeles walls, Mao's likeness continued to organise political response, to trigger historical memory, and to activate ideological positioning in ways that showed how completely depoliticised imagery differed from images that carried the accumulated weight of revolutionary aspiration and authoritarian excess. Sun recognised that even as historical artefact, Mao's likeness continued to perform some of the destabilising work that Maoist methodology had originally intended.

The *Avant-Garde* Is Not Another Cultural Revolution

Where Sun tracks Maoism's persistence through urban decay and historical rupture, Hung Liu demonstrates how Maoist remanence operates through artistic production itself. Lisa Yoneyama's analysis of post-1965 'trans-Pacific Asian immigration' focuses on immigrant subjects who require viewers to 'work even more aggressively at the interstices of separately institutionalised knowledge formations' towards what she calls the 'un-Americanisation of Asian American studies'.[81] But Liu's works reveal how this interstitial demand operates at the level of visual analysis. Her engagement with Maoist legacies emerges from a critical practice of survivorship that refuses both romanticisation and denunciation. To grasp this clearly means seeing her works in perpetual refraction rather than as illustrations of terms that remain beholden to US geopolitics and identity frameworks.

Based on a small black-and-white photograph, *Avant-Garde* amplifies what Liu sees of her younger self fed into the Cultural Revolution image machine as a college student undergoing military training (*plate 15*). Amongst the first of Liu's shaped canvas works, it is a paean to those whose backs are turned, anonymous and faceless, whose images are taken without consent, circulated with impunity and manipulated without mercy, in a word, women. The title draws attention to the military origins of 'avant garde', where in this case those on the frontlines are Chinese women put to work as cannon fodder or blank grounds on which to demarcate physical and ideological territory. Throughout Maoist photography and film, the image of the armed young woman indicated the ordinariness of bodily violence.

15 Hung Liu, *Avant-Garde*, 1993. Oil on shaped canvas, 294.6 × 109.2 cm. San Francisco: SFMOMA.

Largeness has territorial connotations: this is Liu's world which one can visit but never inhabit. There is wryness to Liu's expression absent from the original source photograph. Margaret Hillenbrand observes 'how the Cultural Revolution had been lived in private domains, at the local level, by common people', but that the demographic most interested in reckoning with the Cultural Revolution in the 1990s had been 'educated youth', a group to which Liu belonged.[82] Liu noted that the low resolution of photographs enabled more possibility for speculation accessed only through manual and cognitive labour: old photographs 'have a physicality that I feel through my process [...] Sometimes I look so hard into "What is this?" and I still cannot tell'.[83]

The artist fully understood, however, that the transformation of 'real women' into 'exotic and erotic' objects was as much a part of Maoism and Americanisation as it was of nineteenth-century colonial fantasy. Despite Maoist declarations of gender equality, entrenched preference for sons over daughters was but one of the many instances of diminished citizenship for women. The polysemic nature of photographs opened up space for a different kind of history which Liu sensed well before the tide of academic interest in 'grassroots sources' for retelling histories of everyday life in Maoist China.[84] But if the artwork is itself the battlefield and not merely a surrogate on which to project sociopolitical struggle, it is because of the adamancy of its objecthood. Magnified several times, the image could easily tip over into hyperbole or caricature. For Liu, the risk is justified. Admitting her debt to revolutionary billboards, she states: 'if you want to get your message across, you have to make image big and bold'.[85]

Avant-Garde appears to greatest advantage when seen by a solitary viewer at relatively close quarters rather than by a group. The painting's largeness relative to average human proportions commits the viewer into imagining herself as a bit player in Liu's world of overlapping times: the time when the source photograph was taken, the time of its recovery and rebirth via painting, and the artificial time of the museum that does its best to sap raw emotion from the viewing experience. Even this seemingly intimate encounter operates through Maoist strategies of public address — Liu's enlargement of tiny photographs into billboard-scale paintings activates formal procedures that bypass individual frameworks entirely, transforming solitary viewing into confrontation with collective temporalities.

Avant-Garde emerged during a period when minoritarian artistic production faced a double bind: conservative fears that people of colour might delegitimise

'white culture' as 'un-American', and liberal institutional frameworks that reduced complex artworks to simple political messaging.[86] Liu navigated this terrain by rejecting audience expectations that any Chinese artwork be read merely as a symptom of 'political issues'.[87] As Daniel Martinez observed in conversation with May Sun, the art world often conflated political advocates who used art as 'a vehicle to get their message across' with artists whose work engaged politics through more complex formal means.[88] Liu recognised how Euroamerican institutions transform the particular tensions of artmaking into generalised tokens of political otherness, or what Martinez and Sun identified as the liberal establishment's 'taxonomic quarantine' for difference that it cannot absorb.[89]

What Liu achieved, and what makes her work so difficult for conventional art history to metabolise, was a refusal of the easy binary between Maoist China and American consciousness. She approached Maoism not as exotic other, but as continuous with American states of mind, recognising how revolutionary politics and counter-revolutionary reaction participated on the same historical stage stretching across supposedly impermeable national boundaries. Her canvases enact the undoing of Maoist associations with an essentialised East defined in opposition to a mythologised American West. She takes Maoist legacies seriously not as foreign matter to be exoticised or denounced, but as constitutive currents of the American

16 Hung Liu, *Where is Mao? Meeting President Nixon*, 1988. Pencil on canvas, 30.5 × 35.6 cm. Denver: Denver Art Museum. Photo: Denver Art Museum.

experience itself. This represents a profound challenge to art history's national containers, revealing how what is designated 'un-American' often names what American culture cannot acknowledge about its own contradictions.

Made in 1988, while Liu was attending the University of California San Diego, the series of drawings titled *Where is Mao?* redepicts an iconic photograph of the leader whose face is left a complete blank (*plate 16*). Prompted by Liu's desire to 'paint something that didn't have Mao's face on it', *Where is Mao?* distinctly refuses to give face to a figure who endorsed an identity politics so extreme that it required citizens to participate actively in their own depersonalisation.[90] Neither models of freedom-seeking refugee-immigrants nor loyal foot soldiers willing not only to die, but also vanish, for Mao, the self-portraits make plain the degree to which Liu regarded the exercise of political authority as simultaneously dependent on, and constitutive of, artistic activity.

I am convinced this is why she stated that 'between dissolving and preserving is the rich middle-ground where the meaning of an image is found. The process of painting has become the investigation of a document which stands between history and me'.[91] Liu often depicts figures truncated just below the waist so as to emphasise their hands. This strategy goes against the grain of depicting Socialist Realist crowds so central in Maoist painting. Figures reading mostly as background population or as part of a tableau are enlarged on the scale of Socialist Realist paintings intended for cavernous reception halls or government lobbies.

17 Installation view of Hung Liu, *Avant-Garde*, at National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, 2021. Photo: Mark Gulezian.

There is something deeply strange, even alien, about *Avant-Garde* displayed in a museum, something that speaks to its essential discord with the white cube and all such temples of manufactured neutrality (*plate 17*). Neither quite billboard scale nor domestic snapshot, the enlargement of what had once been a tiny photograph secreted away from censors and the visual orthodoxies of Socialist Realism violates the expected intimacy of personal photography while refusing the bland anonymity that revolutionary painting typically accords its female extras. The effect is markedly unlike *The Struggle for Low- Income Housing*: deliberately made portable, it was built to be part of the furniture, liberated from those specialised precincts where art objects serve their double duty as both cultural agents and market commodities. The conspicuous gap between the work's edges and the museum wall compels us to ask who is left out of the scene, but the deeper question concerns the fundamental estrangement of this image from the antiseptic gallery space that now houses it, a mismatch that seems to indict the very premises of institutional display.

Avant-Garde cannot quite stave off its undead look. Behold, for instance, the unnatural pallor that seems more cadaverous than alive. At first, I mistook this to suggest malaise or even melancholy. But the greys that read so quickly as ash made me realise that Liu paints life being sucked dry. As she told curator Joann Moser of her involuntary exile to what amounted to a forced labour camp in the rural outskirts of Beijing, 'the dew and soil mixture on our clothes and faces made us look like clay figures'.[92] Inanimate things have more life. All the blood seems to have gone into the pinkish purple of the pack that she wears like a harness. The figure looks not so much devoid of colour than it does drained of it; it lacks the combustibility so commonly ascribed to Cultural Revolution-era Maoism.

Close inspection discloses that the marks on the blade recall a sliver of what is another well-reproduced painting, Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunset* of 1872. Here is painterly noise that obliquely defies the paternalistic stilling of sound and movement in many of the best-known Chinese Socialist Realist paintings. Liu painted several small landscapes of an Impressionist bent which she later described as doing what was 'necessary to survive as an artist in Maoist China, to keep a little piece of myself'.[93] 'Piece' invokes the level of disassociation required to survive everyday life but also the violence of being torn to pieces, sometimes literally. In true Maoist spirit, the brush is Liu's weapon. The bayonet that Liu carries was always destined to draw blood; that bright oblong daub of orange lodged in the middle of her knife blade insinuates as much. Thick applications of pink and orange mimic the hues of tender dermis revealed after a flaying.

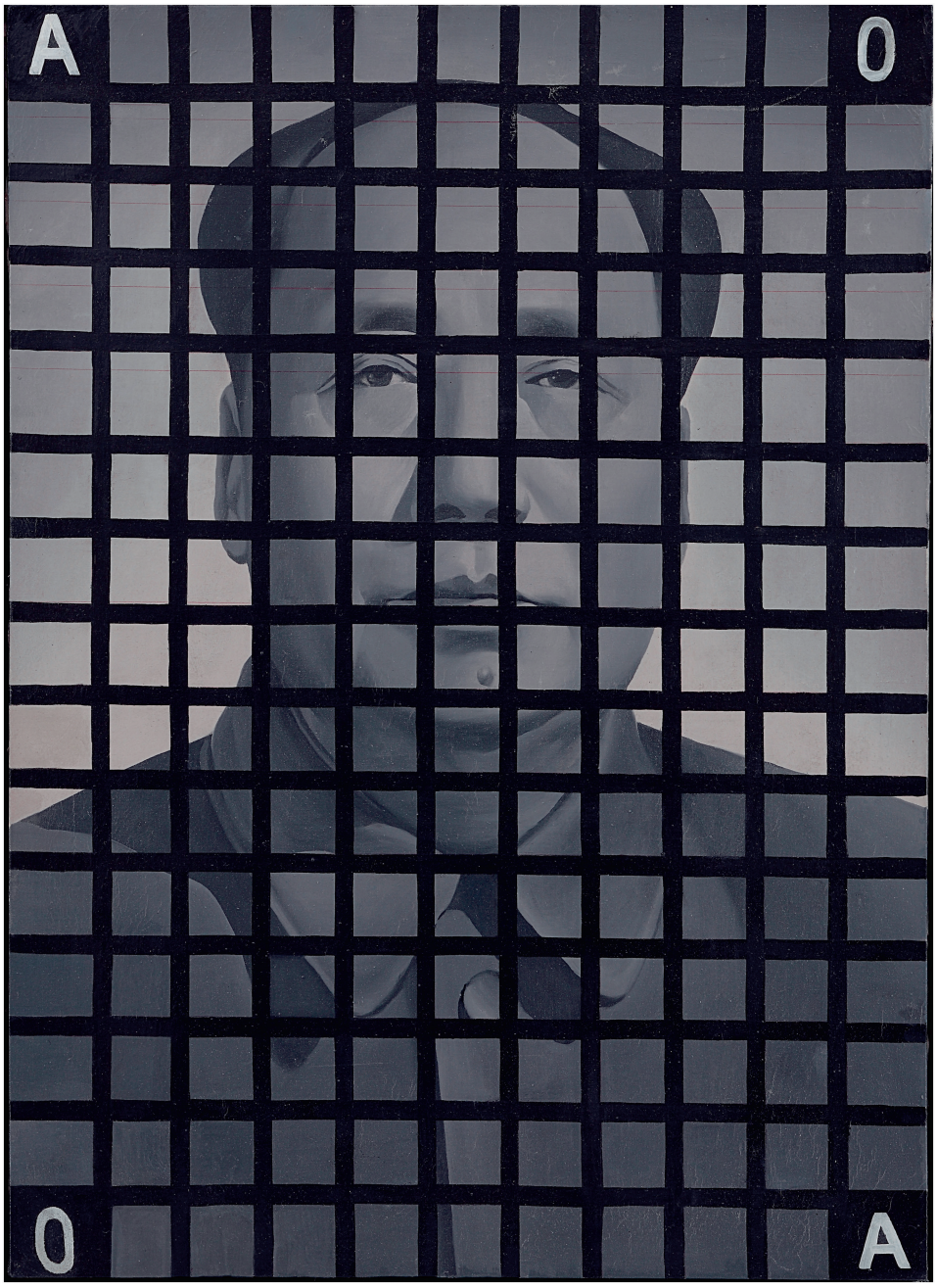
The chromatic register that Liu deploys operates not merely as formal device, but as historical testimony. These colours bear witness to the actual material conditions of political violence — the methodical killings carried out with bureaucratic precision under Party authority, and the grotesque transformation of blood-soaked implements into sacred relics of revolutionary struggle. What we confront in these pigments is not abstract expressionist gesture, but the visualisation of historical trauma made concrete through paint itself. Herself a daughter of a Kuomintang officer forced to bear the officially designated stigma of 'counter-revolutionary offspring', Liu inhabited a social position where death was not metaphorical but imminent. Her class position within revolutionary taxonomy placed her body in direct relation to the machinery of political elimination. What we see in these works is not simply representation of violence but its re-presentation as pictorial problem: how to make paint carry the weight of history without collapsing into mere illustration.

Grey has utmost importance. Liu's grey rejects the false bloom of Maoist faces which she might have described as an unhealthy 'high fever'.[94] Liu herself never spoke about grey directly, but I suspect she might have agreed with Gerhard Richter, another survivor of Socialist Realist authoritarianism when he stated how grey 'makes no statement whatever; it evokes neither feelings nor associations: it is really neither visible nor invisible. Its inconspicuousness gives it the capacity to mediate, to make visible, in a positively illusionistic way, like a photograph. It has the capacity that no other colour has, to make "nothing" visible'.[95] The grey that Liu uses for her own face and body recalls flesh illuminated by the sterile overhead lights of a morgue. Next to Richter's work where grey is smeared with something that feels suspiciously close to vengeance, Liu's cool greys exude an unearthly glow.

Amongst the closest companions of *Avant-Garde* is *18 Octobre 1977*, the series of paintings that Richter created based on images he found in the archives of the magazine *Stern* of what was quite possibly the world's most Maoist group circa 1977, the Red Army Faction better known as the Baader-Meinhof Group. The grey in Richter's paintings has yet to settle into any permanent shape or state. Figures cannot be seen clearly because they never rest. Liu's command of grey operates as a deindividualising technique that disdains both Socialist Realist heroism and liberal self-expression. In lieu of representing personal trauma or multiple oppressions, grey creates formal conditions where such categories become inoperative.

Of her early large canvases of nineteenth-century Chinese women, Liu insisted how 'irony was required to liberate them'.[96] The same requirement applies even more so for *Avant-Garde*. Applying Maoist tactics of drastic magnification to what was one of Liu's only claims to private image making established a space in which she might be able to liberate her work from the captivity of relentless abstractions. Again recognising the coincidence of Maoist and American strategies of identification she states that 'because we had so many "isms" in China, many of which were used as labels to criticise people, I am reluctant to completely adopt the label of "feminist" here'.[97] *Avant-Garde* diverges here from *Mao AO*, an enlarged version of one of the three portraits comprising the tripartite group of Mao portraits that Wang Guangyi exhibited in the short-lived, but seminal *China/Avant Garde* in Beijing a few months before the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 (*plate 18*). Renowned as a precursor to Political Pop, one of the catchphrases of art considered as avant-garde in China, *Mao AO* is rendered in an eerily luminous grey against which Liu's grey tones appear far more subdued. When Wang states that he used the grey to make the work appear more 'historical', it is a sly reminder of the cinematic overkill that flattened anything resembling revolutionary fervour into sentimentality by the end of the Cultural Revolution.[98] The intentional repetition connects the work to the Warhol who made it far too easy to read Mao as surface veneer, no more ontologically different than a reproduction of Marilyn Monroe in a magazine. Wang states how 'Mao was idolised by the people as in a fairy tale. I was trying to make this icon into a normal person; trying to scale him down to normality'.[99]

But scaling down is what Liu refuses to do. In contrast to Wang's deliberately dispassionate treatment — so unlike the grainy, charged portrait that Bereal used in *America, a Mercy Killing* — *Avant-Garde* opens up Maoism as an aperture through which to confront how the vestiges of Maoist rule have infiltrated, and become internal to, the politics of looking and making. Alongside the works of Bereal, Dong, and Sun, Liu's paintings exchange loyalty to narrow definitions of US national interests in favour of doubt that only those believing in a closed-border America would condemn



18 Wang Guangyi, *Mao AO*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 69.5 × 140.2 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Wang Guangyi Studio.

as betrayal. It is such an America that Sue Spaid had in mind when she pronounced 'there's certainly no such thing as "American art"' after seeing Liu's paintings.[100]

Together with the works of Bereal, Dong, and Sun, *Avant-Garde* establishes 'un-American' not as stigma but as horizon — what Paulin Houtoundji calls 'the endless horizon of a common task' beyond both the 'frozen universalism' of US exceptionalism and the 'relentless relativism' that reduces difference to cultural decoration.[101] What emerges is Maoism as counterweight, redistributing art-historical attention away from nationalising pressures.

Yet artworks generate their own gravitational field. Li Zehou, the philosopher of Chinese socialist aesthetics who survived the Cultural Revolution, understood art as 'ceaseless vigorous action'.[102] Such action operates beyond boundaries that 'America'

presumes to police, holding the contradictions of being American in permanent tension. It underscores America not as achievement but as ongoing predicament — not destination but collection of unfinished struggles. 'Un-American' helps stay any cultural revolution that would suppress the abundance of plurality in the name of an America emptied of its worldly interdependencies. These works unsettle frameworks treating belonging as institutional privilege, pointing toward art-historical approaches where recognising the global majorities to which America remains accountable matters more than policing who properly belongs.

Notes

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