Abstract:
In 2007, a UK-based newspaper reported that five of the top selling contemporary artists worldwide were Chinese. Yet less than 10 years before Chinese contemporary art at auction was rare. Where did the market come from? Was its introduction a positive or negative agent of change? This paper considers the period from 1978 to 1989 and examines the impact of the institutional shift, from a centrally planned system to the introduction of economic reform, on the development of contemporary art in China.

The market for art both attracts and repels, and in the 1980s it triggered a vociferous debate. One artist captured the complexity of this paradigm shift. The last section of this paper focuses on Wu Shanzhuan’s 1989 performance Selling Shrimps that not only comments on the enduring entanglements between the state and market, but also reveals art’s new energy source.

Renminbi, by Yu Youhan, 1988, oil on canvas, 100 x 218 cm. Photograph by Carl Brunn. Courtesy of the artist and Ludwig Forum Aachen, collection Ludwig.

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