Why the Guggenheim's Controversial Dog Video Is Even More Disturbing Than You Think

Ok, what's really going on in this contested artwork, anyway?

Ben Davis, September 29, 2017

Sun Yuan and Peng Yu', *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*. The Guggenheim has been asked to remove the video, which features eight pit bulls on treadmills, from an upcoming exhibition. Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana.

The most shocking fact about the current controversy roiling the Guggenheim is the cataclysmic speed at which it developed.

The article that detonated the crisis, "Where the Wild Things Are: China's Art Dreams at the Guggenheim," a preview of a highly anticipated, art-historically important survey

of Chinese art practices, "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World," was published on September 20 in the *New York Times*.

One day later, the Guggenheim had received such a volume of complaints that it issued a public statement acknowledging concerns around one particular video, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*, documenting a 2003 performance-installation by Peng Yu and Sun Yuan, which involved pit bulls chained to treadmills.

Five days after the initial *Times* story, on September 25, the museum pulled three works from the show—something that museums almost never do, as a matter of principle—citing "explicit and repeated threats of violence."

The whole affair is unsettling on multiple levels:

- The video is definitely disturbing just on its own.
- The way the firestorm spread is disturbing, coming amid stories of how context-warping social media scandals are amplifying social division.
- And finally, the Guggenheim's communications failure in the face of this is disturbing itself—particularly because the institution imagined itself braced to deal with the sensitive material.

Taken together, the affair raises serious issues about how museums can function as spaces of debate for thorny material in present conditions.

To start with the last issue in that list, let's look at the Guggenheim's initial public statement on Sun and Peng's video. It was terse:

"Reflecting the artistic and political context of its time and place, Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other is an intentionally challenging and provocative artwork that seeks to examine and critique systems of power and control.

We recognize that the work may be upsetting. The curators of the exhibition hope that viewers will consider why the artists produced it and what they may be saying about the social conditions of globalization and the complex nature of the world we share.

In essence, the Guggenheim pleaded with an angry public to consider the "artistic and political context"—but didn't offer any.

How was the public meant to assess the “artistic and political context” or “consider why the artists produced it”? The entire premise of “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World” is that this strain of Chinese conceptual art is not very well known in the United States, even by specialists.

Truth be told, I worry that the show was not actually equipped to make the case. In the “Theater of the World” catalogue, Sun and Peng merit a single-page entry. *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* gets a paragraph. Here is its conclusion, where the point of the work is explained:

This highly stylized scenario exposes the relational condition of the abject, illuminating its crucial role in the mediation of power and maintenance of society’s hierarchical structures. In this way, Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other reflects society at large, where through unavoidable participation, subjects are either dominating or subordinated.

That’s one for the Artspeak Hall of Fame. I mean, it is precision-tuned to sound meaningful while explaining nothing of substance.

And here’s what I am afraid of: that the vagueness throughout the Guggenheim’s communications on this is a dodge around the central fact that the show tackles an important but intensely troubling time in Chinese art, one that raises very, very difficult issues of how values move across cultures.

I am no scholar on this area, but here are some bits of context that have been lost in the chaos that are worth mentioning.

1) The Guggenheim catalogue feints not just in its explanation of the performance, but in its description of it as well: “Finding themselves on unstable ground, the dogs instinctively panicked and began to run, which led to a scene in which each pit bull appeared to be running to attack the dog in front of it.”

This sentence’s implication that the aggression was just an appearance is wrong. In an essay on Sun and Peng’s “animalworks” (of which there are many), based on interviews with the artists, scholar Meiling Cheng writes that the dogs were sourced from “a provincial breeding and training institute for fighting dogs.” The animals were grandly transported to the site in eight separate limousines, with human trainers to keep them apart, because they were “so territorial and violent toward each other.”

To further transform the spectacle into something that resembled human athletic competition, the performance was divided into three seven-minute segments: seven minutes of running; seven minutes of rest; and a final seven-minute round of running.

The process of caring for the dogs to get them ready to run was as much a part of the spectacle of *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* as the running itself: “During the intermission, the human trainers cared for the dogs diligently, giving them water and rubbing down their furry bodies to relax their muscles, treating the dogs like star athletes,” Cheng explains.

The whole desired effect was to create equivalence between human and animal sports, using dogs who have been bred to be savage as a prop to make a statement about human savagery. Here is Sun, in an interview with Paul Gladston (from the book *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art*), responding to criticism of the work:

Were the dogs being abused? The answer should be no. These dogs are naturally pugnacious. We only separated them and let them run on the treadmill, which became a sport for the dogs. For those who consider this animal abuse, I don’t understand what they are protesting about. In fact, human nature and animal nature are the same. China hosted the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008. What is the goal of this type of sporting event? Actually, it is a conversion of actual fighting into regulated competition. It’s agreeable to most people because most people are supportive of the convention of the Olympic Games.

(Indeed, the Chinese dog-fighting scene may have actually learned a thing or two from *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other*. According to Cheng, “the dogs’ regular coach found the machines so effective for canine training that he purchased four treadmills from the artists after the show”!)

2) Sun and Peng’s video is a historical document of an event that took place 14 years ago. And whether or not you find it repugnant, the treatment of animals in it is representative of an actual, pronounced strand of Chinese artistic practice, one that was historically important and needs to be understood.

You think *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* is shocking? Consider the artist Xu Zhen, today one of Chinese art’s biggest international stars, the head of an entire art collective-cum-corporation called MadeIn. In 1998, he purchased a cat, strangled it,

then beat its lifeless body to a mangled pulp as a performance. “In order to release my frustration without violence towards the public, the cat was a substitute,” he explained.

Sun and Peng’s early works mark the same extremes. Infamously, Peng’s installation *Curtain* (1999) saw her go to a Chinese wholesale fresh animal market, purchasing an immense quantity of lobsters, eels, snakes, and frogs. Her 10 assistants speared them alive on metal wires to create a dense, writhing, four-by-six tapestry that thrashed out its death throes over the course of the installation.

All this seems incomprehensible, and begs the question of how we reckon with the existence of this tendency.

In another essay on the broader subject of “Animalworks in China,” Meiling Cheng suggests that this gulf in understanding stems from a “radical difference in socioeconomic conditions between China as an unevenly developed country and a typical highly developed nation such as the United States. Because of this difference, we have to be cautious in applying Euro-American values such as animal rights or eco-consciousness to China.”

In rural countries, people live close to livestock and other animals. On the one hand, there is a more direct relationship of human to animal; on the other, there is much less preciousness about these animals, since they are raised for food or as beasts of burden.

Our own particular sentimental hypersensitivity to animal rights issues is due to a combination of factors: we have been mostly urbanized for generations, so the animals we encounter on a daily basis are specifically bred as adorable companions. At the same time, we are a gluttonous, fast-food-obsessed, hyper-capitalist country. Any less-than-superficial acquaintance with the conditions of the industrial food production system triggers revulsion.

Notably, China’s attitudes have evolved as its urban living standards have converged with the West. Just in July, *National Geographic* quoted international animal-rights expert Peter Li on changing Chinese attitudes towards animals (including, specifically, the treatment of dogs):

> *In 1992, Li says, there was only one registered animal protection organization that attended the annual conference put on by the Humane Society and Animals Asia, another NGO. In 2006 there were a handful more. Now, according to Li, at least 200 registered organizations are*

advocating for animal welfare and wildlife protection—not counting the hundreds of animal shelters and rescues that have also sprung up.

In other words, ideas of animal welfare have converged with our own—but only dramatically in the recent past, and outside of the time-frame of "Theater of the World," which spans 1989 to 2008.

It may seem strange to look an artwork from 2003 as a relic of bygone attitudes. However, it is also vital to appreciate just how epochal this time period was in China. It experienced, during the dates of this show, one of the greatest rural-to-urban transformations of any country in the modern era. Hundreds of millions of people moved into the cities—a mass equal to the population of the United States (and then some), all in an incredibly compressed timespan.

Recent Chinese art's particular infatuation with animal-based work appears to have sprung up in this interregnum of changing ideas, as society's ways of thinking shifted, and the unromanticized intimacy of rural China collided with a newly dispassionate and instrumentalized urban view. (Asked about a brutal work like *Curtain*, Sun has replied that the live animals she had used were going to be eaten anyway.)

3) Still, even a sympathetic scholar like Cheng cannot stomach a lot of what Sun and Peng, or many others working in the "animalworks" genre, did. Consequently, two other factors remain to be mentioned in thinking about what it all means.

Among the voracious new appetites stimulated by China's growth was the appetite for contemporary art. Animal-based art, meanwhile, seems to fit a certain hunger for spectacle and novelty, one that was fed as much by the foreign art market and institutions as by endemic Chinese tastes. (The white guy in the background of the *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* video posted online is Uli Sigg, the famous Swiss collector of Chinese art.)

Second, it bears mentioning that whatever the conception of animal rights was in China, such extreme acts were *always* controversial *in China*. That has to be part of their context too. When the artist Zhu Yu, for instance, performed open heart surgery on a pig as a performance art piece called *Happy Easter* (2001), accidentally killing it, the local papers blared headlines like, "Is It Art or Is It Murder?"

This outré genre of art is generally understood as a product of a moment which also included a context of zero political freedom of expression. Critics, both inside and outside of China, have often read the nihilistic extremes of Chinese performance and performance-installation from this period as morbid symptoms of a society wrenched

by stunning change combined with a lack of any sense of political control. Artists put extreme emphasis on symbolizing their command over their intimate environment, leading to all matter of shocking acts.

Indeed, so extreme was this impulse that criticism built to actual government censure. Early in the new millennium, the controversies over the "violent tendency" in Chinese art escalated to such an extent that in April 2001, China's Department of Cultural Affairs issued a policy notice that "sternly prohibits the performance and display of bloody, violent, obscene settings or materials in the name of art." Among those implicitly targeted, Cheng writes, was the "younger generation of the so-called 'Beijing shockers,' also known as the 'cadaver school.' Sun and Peng belong to the latter group."

The anti-Guggenheim animal-rights campaign, in other words, echoes the Chinese Communist Party here—which is, I imagine, why an artist such as Ai Weiwei, who was himself a target of the 2001 policy notice, takes such offense at the removal of the works.

The issues raised by this video and the controversy are very intricate. They bear on how we see this time period and how we view museums themselves—are they just a place for entertainment that should only present things that are lovely or morally agreeable, or does a show like "Theater of the World" also represent a historical examination of another culture and another time? If so, how do you judge that history? Even if aspects of it are deeply troubling or repugnant, should they be presented if they were important?

What is certain is that instead of being an occasion to understand the intricacies of this period in China, the way this controversy has exploded has now projected an incendiary stereotype deep into the public mind.

Just as a point of reference, a decade ago, the show's curator, Alexandra Munroe, set an attendance record for the Guggenheim with her spectacular exhibition of Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang. It attracted 344,389 visitors.

By comparison, almost 750,000 people signed the Change.org petition calling for the removal of the works in "Theater of the World."

In effect, the controversy represents the biggest audience that this show will ever have, the point of the public's maximum need to understand. In that hour, the museum has been unable to educate or illuminate the public. And that fact does not bode well for museums in general in the present.