



BEIJING CONFIDENTIAL XING DANWEN

A nomadic Chinese photographer brings to light her private images from the wild-youth days of Beijing's 1990s avant-garde.

BY RICHARD VINE

"SEE WAY OVER THERE, where those high-rises are? That was the East Village once. Basically a dump."¹ Photographer Xing Danwen (pronounced *shing dahn-wen*) gestured toward the new urban vista that spread beyond the window of the second-floor coffee shop of the Westin hotel in Beijing's northeastern Chaoyang district. Now home to the relocated Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) as well

Right, Xing Danwen: *Image 0*, 2004, from the series "Urban Fiction," 67 by 95 inches. Above, detail.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, C-prints on Diasec. Courtesy the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco.

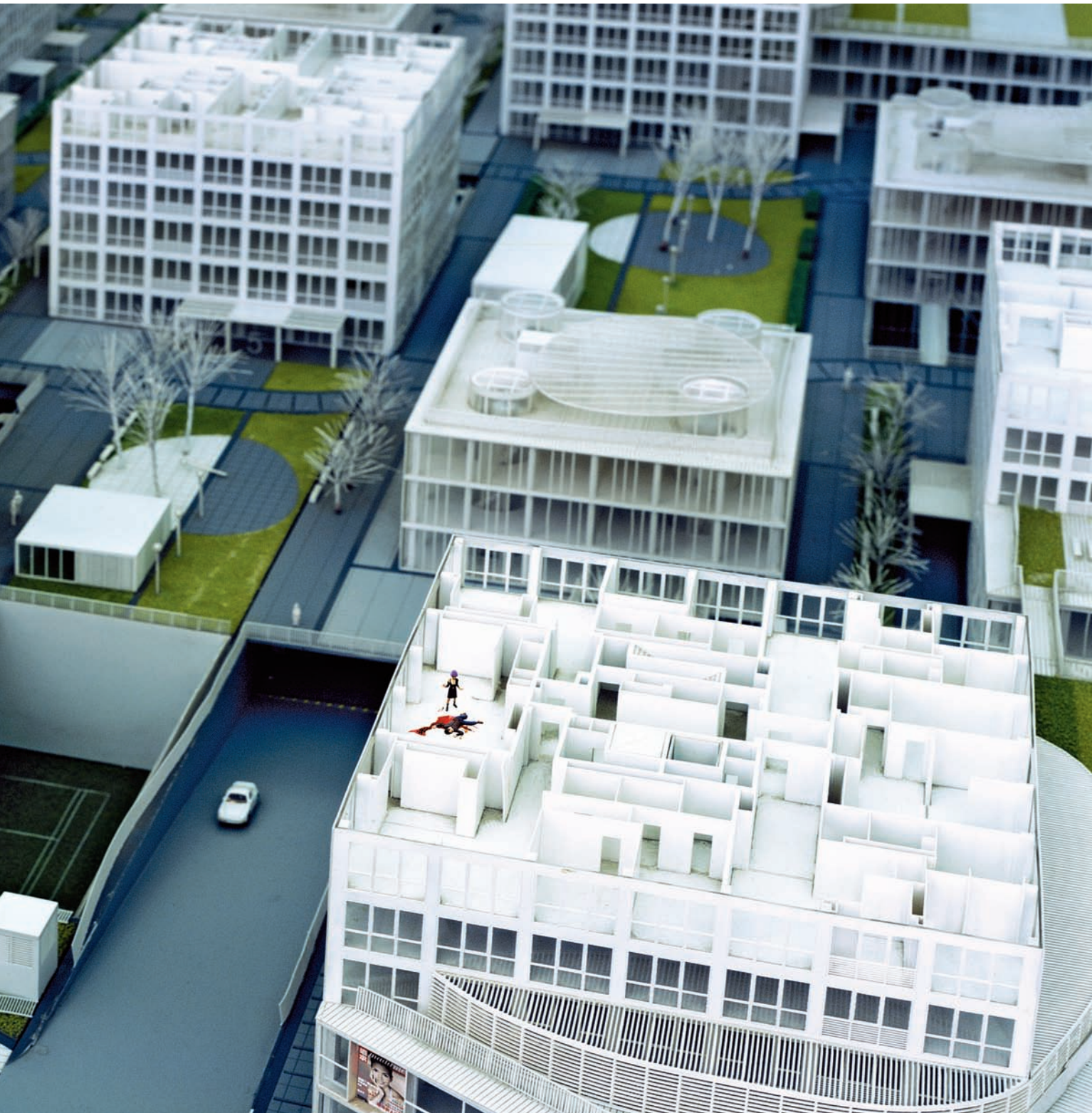
CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Solo shows by Xing Danwen at Ooi Botos, Hong Kong [through Feb. 27]; Modern Chinese Art Foundation, Ghent [through Feb. 18]; and Haines Gallery, San Francisco [Feb. 18-Mar. 27].

as the 798 and Caochangdi gallery districts, the area is, as she went on to say, "all changed now"—a phrase that could serve as a veritable mantra for post-Mao China, for its avant-garde art scene and for her own transformed career.

Earlier that day last August, we had joked together over some of Xing's recent publicity—"how can *China Vogue* make me look so bad, in an







THE “DUPLICATION” SERIES SERVES AS A MORDANT COMMENT ON THE DEHUMANIZING EFFECT OF TAILORING ONESELF TO PRECONCEIVED SOCIAL ROLES.

ugly dress?”—while discussing the stages of her evolution from bohemian documentarian to deliberate, soulful orchestrator of straight photographic images to author of deftly fabricated digital tableaux and animations. That artistic journey, from reportage to ever greater artifice and personal control, reflects the development of Chinese art photography in general since the late 1970s. And it has taken Xing, in roughly 15 years, from the edge of the East Village “dump,” where many of China’s most daring young artists once struggled to survive, to a two-story apartment in one of the city’s elite residential towers, a refuge in which she now creates much of her work and administers a nonstop international exhibition schedule.

To date, the 42-year-old Xing has been known, both within China and abroad, primarily for the images she made during and after her 1998-2001 MFA stint at the School of Visual Arts in New York. These works are nearly all, in various ways, concerned with the profound sense of dislocation now felt in China, with its recent history of sudden, titanic socio-political shifts—from a 2,000-year-old empire to a fledgling republic (1911) to Communist dictatorship (1949) to one-party state capitalism (1978).

XING’S FIRST WIDELY EXHIBITED WORKS, shot exclusively in black and white, are elegiac meditations on lost worlds and broken ties. *Scroll* (1999-2000) consists of two long horizontal strips of moody, deliberately blurred images from Beijing—widely separated swimmers, nearly empty streets, people sitting forlornly on park benches—all conjoined, jerky film-strip fashion, in stark contrast to the natural flow of traditional scroll paintings. The slide-show installation *Sleepwalking* (2000), similarly disjunctive, features stills from New York fading in and out of each other to a mix of old Chinese and new electronic music.

Xing’s shift from nostalgia to a more vivid social critique occurred hand in hand with her adoption of color. The “disCONNEXION” series (2002-03) is composed of disconcertingly gorgeous close-ups of electronic waste: mounds of circuit boards, plastic cords and computer housings, rendered with sharp all-over focus and luscious chromatic saturation. Although the images reflect the mass dumping of high-tech refuse from Japan, Korea and the U.S. in southern China (where many of the devices were originally manufactured using low-wage labor), the sense of ecological and economic protest is balanced by the sheer formal beauty of the large-format shots, their “found” compositions exhibiting a kind of Ab-Ex sublimity.

An eerie quality entered Xing’s work with the “Duplication” series (2003), each shot depicting a pile of sorted doll parts: Caucasian adult male heads, bald baby heads, detached infant arms, female heads with wildly spread pale blond hair. These images, which for Westerners might evoke the Holocaust, could very well suggest other associations to Chinese viewers cognizant of their country’s

grim history of street decapitations and female infanticide. Mercifully, a vestige of the playful aura of toys clings to the dismembered dolls, giving the pictures a surrealistic tinge, rather than a strictly macabre air. The shots serve, Xing says, as a mordant comment on the dehumanizing effect of tailoring oneself to preconceived social roles.

During travels in Europe, the artist was struck by the worldwide uniformity of contemporary city architecture, especially high-rise residential blocks. Her somewhat Laurie Simmons-like response was “Urban Fiction” (2004-08), in which stylishly dressed “live” characters are digitally inserted into architectural models of luxury apartment buildings. (Real-estate offices in China are studied with elaborate scale mock-ups, and units are often sold long before the structures are complete.) The domestic scenes played out by the “residents” (many of them Xing herself in diverse guises) range from the mundane (sunbathing) to the melodramatic (murder), and suggest that the foibles of the human heart cannot be fundamentally altered by China’s recent upscale housing frenzy—contrary to promotional materials that, in a bizarre twist on both ancient spiritualism and Mao-era utopian propaganda, rhapsodically describe high-rise residency as a new, more elevated state of being. On the contrary, as art historian Madeline Eschenburg has pointed out, living in self-enclosed, vertically stacked spaces, singly or with only a spouse and one child, is profoundly disorienting to many Chinese city dwellers accustomed to life in horizontal courtyard buildings and *hutongs*, long-lane complexes shared with extended family members and intimate neighbors spanning two or three generations.²

This concern with isolation and lost identity is paramount in “Wall House” (2007), which resulted from Xing’s artist residency in the high-concept Wall House designed by U.S.-based experimental architect John Hejduk (1929-2000). Constructed in Groningen, the Netherlands, the dwelling is bisected by a solid, free-standing wall that separates work areas from living spaces. In addition, the residential components are layered in such a way that one can move from one room to another only via a stairs next to the wall. Thus every change of activity requires a change of location: inhabitants are forced to think about their every function throughout the course of the day.

Xing commemorated her time in Hejduk’s stark interior in digitally manipulated photographs and video pervaded by signs of loneliness and uncertainty. Views through the windows show not Groningen but Beijing. In one shot, the artist perches alone on a couch, wearing a pale blue synthetic wig. In another, she sits, back to the viewer, in a simple chair, facing a small picture window that reveals an eight-lane Beijing expressway clogged with traffic; a cell phone sits forlornly on a table in the foreground. Perhaps the most telling image in the series presents a partially clad woman gazing into a bathroom mirror, where she sees “herself” fully dressed and wearing the incongruous blue wig. And a bedroom shot provides the environment for an animated projection of a young

Opposite, *Image 2*, from the series “Duplication,” 2003, 58 1/4 by 47 1/4 inches.

THE ANOMIE OF THE “WALL HOUSE” IMAGES IS FAR FROM THE CULTURAL ROOTEDNESS AND ARTISTIC COMMUNALITY IN WHICH XING ORIGINALLY THRIVED.

woman who rises from the edge of the bed and wafts about an interior space seemingly more real than herself.

These studies in alienation have earned Xing exposure in many international galleries as well as major institutions such as the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Whitney Museum, New York; the Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark; the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; and the National Gallery of Contemporary Art, Seoul. Yet the pictures' anomie, like the wanderings that engendered them, is far from the cultural rootedness in which Xing began and the artistic communality in which she originally thrived.

Perhaps that is why the artist has now decided to exhibit her earlier, Nan Goldin-style images that record China's 1990s underground arts ferment—first in a solo show (focusing on Beijing's famous East Village performance art scene) that opens this month at Haines Gal-

lery in San Francisco and, later, in an exhibition and book titled *Xing Danwen: A Personal Diary—China's Avant-Garde in the 1990s* (covering experimental film, theater, rock 'n' roll and dance, as well as the visual arts) to be launched at Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, in spring 2011.

XING WAS BORN IN the provincial city of Xi'an during the second year of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). In the spirit of the times, her parents (both engineers at a state energy company) gave her a personal name, Danwen, that she says translates as Red Culture. Growing up near the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 B.C.)—with its famed terra-cotta army [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '09], discovered in 1974, when Xing was seven—did not inspire a love of ancient artifacts and tradition in the future artist. In fact, she came to feel



Opposite, *Image 1*, from the mixed-media series "Wall House," 2007, photo transparency on lightbox, 47¼ by 63 inches.

Right, *Image 2*, from "Wall House," photo transparency on lightbox, 31½ by 39⅞ inches.



strongly that "we must make our own history now," a sentiment common at the time of Mao's concerted push to eliminate the "four olds" (old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas), though Xing would eventually give the directive an avant-garde spin that the Great Helmsman would not have welcomed.

Xing studied oil painting (aka Western painting) at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, graduating in 1992. There, as in Xi'an, instructors encouraged students to go out with sketchbook or camera to document the noble "hard life" experienced by workers, peasants and soldiers—still considered, a decade or more after the death of Mao, suitable subjects for carefully elaborated studio paintings.

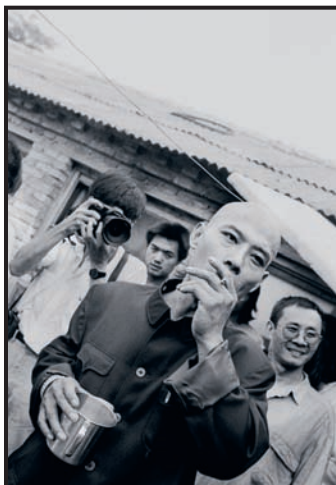
The young Xing elected to travel alone to remote regions, seeking to capture images of coal miners, Tibetan villagers and other members of China's 56 ethnic minorities. Her biggest fear, she admits, was rape. Schoolmates urged her to master kung fu or to carry a knife. "But I was not a large girl," she says. "I knew that any man who wanted to could turn my own knife against me. So I decided to take condoms instead." Fortunately, the precaution proved to be unnecessary. "The people were unsophisticated, even crude by city standards," she recalls, "but also tremendously welcoming and sweet."

Xing obtained her first camera—purchased secondhand, by a friend, at a street market in Hong Kong—in the spring of 1989. Immediately, like most of her CAFA colleagues, she was caught up in the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests. Yet the pictures she managed to take, she con-

siders worthless. "I didn't even know how to load the camera properly. My first roll of film came out blank." Her subsequent shots have been packed away, unseen, for 20 years. "Maybe," she muses, "I should dig those boxes out and take another look sometime."

After her graduation, Xing (who did not have a Beijing residency authorization) was obliged to return to Xi'an and begin work in a government agency issuing arts-and-entertainment permits. As always, her official file—a school and employment record, supplemented by character assessments from state authorities—preceded her unseen, a procedure known to every educated Chinese citizen. The bureaucratic assignment in Xi'an, in return for the "free" college education Xing had received, was slated to last five years. "I knew I would go mad," she says, "if I had to spend every morning in an office, drinking tea and reading the paper—the usual government clerk way—and every afternoon stamping application forms." Instead, she struck a deal with her supervisors. Her name remained on record as an employee, but she departed, a free woman, for illegal residency in the capital—while the Xi'an "office" kept her salary.

The following year (1993), Xing married a German engineer who worked for Lufthansa Airlines in Beijing. During a three-month stay in Germany, she shopped her work around, selling four paintings and securing her first solo photography exhibition (at Gallery Grauwert, Hamburg, 1994) as well as the first publication of her images (a cover story in the Hamburg-based, black-and-white arts weekly *Photo News*). In addition, she won freelance commissions





SOCIAL AND ARTISTIC EXPERIMENTATION REEMERGED IN THE EARLY 1990s, AS CHINA'S BOHEMIANS CLUSTERED IN "ARTIST VILLAGES" ON THE EDGE OF BEIJING.

from such large-circulation German magazines as *Stern* and *Geo*. (Her initial assignment for the latter, a 12-page photo-and-text account of young people training for the Beijing Opera, enabled Xing to buy her first new camera.)

Before this time, Xing had, she says, no notion that photography could be construed as high art. She had been raised first on propaganda imagery, then on workaday photojournalism. Her schools had a half dozen serious photo books but no art photography courses. It was only in the early 1990s, when she was around 26 years old, that three encounters drastically altered her view: a Henri Cartier-Bresson show at China's National Art Museum, a Sebastião Salgado display at the World Photo Press Exhibition in Beijing and a book featuring the photographs of Wolfgang Tillmans. The Tillmans volume, with its casual-seeming shots of youth and drug cultures, finally galvanized her: "If his pictures could be art," she says now, "maybe mine could be, too."



AT THE TIME, XING AND HER HUSBAND were living in a Beijing apartment building near the East Village. The name of the enclave, where young artists shared cheap space with farmers and migrant workers near a large garbage heap, was an homage to New York's bohemian mecca of the 1970s and '80s, but its history was uniquely Chinese.

In the course of the Cultural Revolution, universities and art academies had been closed, and many professors, students and "privileged" urban youths were sent to provincial factories and rural agricultural communes to be "reeducated" by the people. After the Chairman's death in 1976, the academies reopened and vanguard art emerged with increasing force throughout the 1980s, aided by the Open Door policy of Deng Xiaoping, who allowed a massive influx of outside information and initiated market-based reforms that swiftly transfigured China. Mounting artistic experimentation, sometimes referred to as the '85 New Wave [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '08], culminated at the National Art Museum in February 1989 with "China/Avant-Garde," a summa exhibition encompassing 186 artists and 293 works. The show's subtitle and theme, "No U Turn," proved ironic. Two hours after the exhibition opened, the artist Xiao Lu fired two pistol shots at her own installation, prompting security forces to close the show. (Xiao was jailed, along with her boyfriend and accomplice, Tang Song, but released three days later thanks to high-level family contacts.)



"China/Avant-Garde" then reopened, only to close again due to bomb threats (probably faked by another artist, Liu Anping). Coming just four months before the Tiananmen Square massacre, the Xiao Lu incident marked a severe rupture between recently invigorated experimental artists and the once relatively tolerant new government. After Deng sent troops into Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989,



Photos this spread from the series "Xing Danwen: A Personal Diary—China's Avant-Garde in the 1990s," 1993-98.

IN JUNE 1994, “OBSCENE” PERFORMANCES HELD IN THE EAST VILLAGE BROUGHT A TWO-MONTH PRISON LOCKUP FOR ARTISTS ZHU MING AND MA LIUMING.

many experimental artists scattered and went into seclusion, remaining underground for several years.

They re-emerged gradually in the early 1990s, clustering here and there in “artist villages,” the two most famous of which were in Beijing. Yuanmingyuan, on the west side near the emperor’s Old Summer Palace, was favored by painters such as the now celebrated Fang Lijun, Yang Shaobin and Yue Minjun. The East Village, in contrast, drew radical performance artists. It flourished for only about two years (1992-94), with a core group of roughly 20-30, counting artists and event-participant friends. (Intermittent activity by former residents continued here and there for a few more years; the area itself was razed in 2001 to make way for a park.) Setting the tone, three of the most experimental residents—Zhang Huan [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. ’07], Zhu Ming and Ma Liuming—specialized in nude performance, a fact which in the spring of 1994 caught the unwelcome attention of the police.

At the time, Xing—like Rong Rong, the best-known chronicler of the East Village milieu³—was photographing her artist friends almost daily. She also brought occasional Western visitors to share the events and bohemian ambience. The Village performers welcomed sympathetic observers, especially photographers and video-makers, as potential disseminators of their work. Indeed, it is evident in a number of Xing’s images that artistic actions were undertaken expressly for a few cronies and a multitude of lenses.

Xing, simultaneously one of the gang and a nonresident outsider, was once confronted by the influential art photographer Liu Zheng, who angrily accused her of “lacking seriousness.” Xing protested that she could not spend hours “sitting around with the boys, drinking and talking philosophy”; she was much too busy doing something virtually unprecedented in China—establishing herself as a woman artist in her own right, while concurrently maintaining a freelance photojournalistic career and a stable home life as a foreigner’s wife and social partner.

Just how “serious” that triple undertaking could be soon became evident, when local villagers—and then government authorities—reacted with alarm to a series of nude performances in the spring of 1994. In May, according to at least one illustrated account, Zhu Ming—a frail, fatherless, self-taught 22-year-old artist from Mao’s native province of Hunan—went to a nearby area (Xing was not in attendance), stripped naked and had himself buried alive for two hours, breathing and blowing bubbles through a tube. A few hours later, he lay covered with suds in a shallow “grave” near a cemetery.⁴

In early June, Zhang Huan—whose fall 1993 performance on the steps of the National Art Museum had caused the preemptive closing of a student exhibition there—stirred the East Village with his now legendary public latrine piece, *12 Square Meters* (the size of the sweltering space in which he sat for an hour covered with fish oil and honey). It was followed within days by his *65 Kilograms*, in which Zhang—the title refers to the 29-year-old’s body weight at



the time—was suspended in chains from the ceiling of a room while three white-robed doctors extracted 250cc of his blood and dribbled it onto a hot steel pan on the floor.

The next day (June 12), a lithesome Ma Liuming, 25 and noted for his occasional appearances in drag as the beautiful Fen-Ma Liuming, invited a score of friends to join him for lunch in the walled courtyard of a farmer’s house, where the artist lived in a single rented room. With the peasant family away, Ma undressed, made himself up and set about cooking a pot of potatoes at an outdoor gas range. (The effect was not nearly as impressive as that of his earlier *Fen-Ma Liuming’s Lunch I*, in which he had sucked on a tube attached to his own penis.) The performance concluded with Ma boiling his watch and rings, and burying them under a tree. Afterward, eight or nine people were standing around chatting when a police squad—accompanied by a translator—burst through the courtyard door.

Xing, knowing that the film would be pulled from her camera, slipped the exposed rolls into her husband’s pockets—confident that, in keeping with cautious government policy of the moment, a foreigner would not be physically accosted or searched. Everyone was taken to the precinct station and asked repeatedly who had organized the “obscene” events



in the East Village. After a few hours, all but Zhu Ming and Ma Liuming were released.

Xing delivered her pictures the next day to the Associated Press, which broke the story internationally. Several East Village artists were rousted from their quarters, and others dispersed out of caution, at least temporarily. Later Xing visited Ma Liuming in Chaoyang District Prison, bringing fruit and cooked food. These gifts turned out to be unacceptable; only cash and cigarettes could be given to the inmates. Ma, unharmed, said that he was being kept in a large common cell under the protection of the block's lead prisoner, who had taken a liking to him. However, neither Ma nor anyone else in the East Village circle knew where Zhu was being held. (Meanwhile, on June 30, Zhang Huan was set upon and beaten by a pair of unidentified men in a bar.) Later, near the end of the two artists' two-month detention, the curator-critic Li Xiangting, father figure to the Beijing avant-garde, found Zhu in the much less civilized Changping district lockup.

Upon their release, Zhu and Ma were taken to the train station and escorted to their provincial hometowns. Official announcements declared that a "ring of pornographers" had been broken up through deft government intervention. A month later, both artists were back in Beijing. (Zhu went on

to tour internationally, often performing while encased, on land and sea, in a large plastic bubble. Ma blithely walked naked on the Great Wall and conducted a long series of nude performances in China and abroad. Zhang, after many more nude events around the world, today oversees a workshop complex in Shanghai, where some 90 assistants turn out his paintings, prints, woodcarvings and sculptures.) So the cat-and-mouse game continues, to this day, in the People's Republic.

After the East Village arrests, Xing created a remarkably sensitive photo series depicting partially nude Chinese women of various ages ("I Am a Woman," 1994-96). The images have never been exhibited, except for a suite of three black-and-white shots labeled "Born with the Cultural Revolution" (1995), which University of Chicago scholar-curator Wu Hung included in two exhibitions outside China.⁵ Those works show a pregnant young woman standing and lying in a room, apparently an everyday living space, dominated by a Chinese flag and multiple pictures of Chairman Mao.

In 1998, shortly before she left for her studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York, Xing was called on

her mobile and asked to meet with Chinese security agents. She went to the agreed-upon hotel lobby and was immediately escorted to an upper-story room, where she was interrogated for four hours.

"I dressed well, I made my own money, I hung out with crazy artists and foreigners," she recalls. "The cops were sure I was a spy or a prostitute—maybe both." Questioning eventually centered on her contact with a German journalist working for *Der Spiegel* in Beijing. "I know him, of course," she told her quartet of inquisitors, "but not well. He never gave me any freelance work." The agents reminded her of Chinese judicial policy: the more readily you admit your guilt, the less severe your punishment. But she had no guilt, and no more to reveal.

Before letting Xing go, the security men asked if they could take her picture. "No," she said reflexively, then had a flash of inspiration: "I've just been profiled in the journal *Woman's Friend*. The issue, with lots of pictures, is on the newsstands now. If you want to remember me, buy the magazine." ○

Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II, performance in the East Village, Beijing, 1994, from "A Personal Diary," 40 by 60 inches.

1 All direct quotes from the artist are from conversations with the author: Beijing, Aug. 16, 2009; New York-Beijing, via telephone, Dec. 14, 2009. **2** Madeline Eschenburg, "Xing Danwen: Revealing the Masquerade of Modernity," *Yishu*, July/August 2009, pp. 51-66. **3** See especially his deluxe portfolio of over 40 black-and-white photographs with accompanying text by Wu Hung: *Rong Rong's East Village, 1993-1998*, Chicago, Art Media Resources, 2003. **4** Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, Hong Kong, Timezone 8, 2006, pp. 106-08. **5** "Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century" (1999) and, with curator Christopher Phillips of New York's International Center of Photography, "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China" (2004). Both shows had extensive tours.

Works by Xing Danwen will appear in the group shows "Chinese Modernism and U.S. Vernacular," Architecture Center Houston [Mar. 12-Apr. 25]; "Seeing Utopia, Past and Future," Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University [Mar. 31-May 31]; and "Reshaping History," Arario Gallery, Beijing [Apr. 23-May 18]. Her solo "A Personal Diary" goes on view at the Wall Museum, Beijing [September 2010], and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo [spring 2011].