

Beyond the Wall

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In an exhibition at two sites in Thailand, Chinese artist Lin Yilin challenged the legitimacy of all official barriers.

SOMETHING THERE IS that doesn't love a wall, /That wants it down, "Robert Frost famously wrote. That implicit urge runs as a motif through the work of Chinese performance and installation artist Lin Yilin. Born in 1964, Lin emerged as a member of the Big-Tailed Elephant group in his native Guangzhou. The four artists—all graduates of the art academy in that southern metropolis, anchor of the then rapidly industrializing Pearl River Delta—gained critical notice with self-curated activities, such as the 1994 "No Room" exhibition in a deserted house, designed to comment on China's frenetic urban transformations. (This occurred during the same period that Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and other experimental artists, first daring to go semipublic again after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crack-down, were staging their guerrilla events in Beijing's East Village.)

For *The Result of 1,000 Pieces* (1994), Lin literally stood in a wall—becoming at once part of the lifeless barrier and, conversely, its living defiance—as he occupied a body-shaped niche among bricks that looked ready to fall in and crush him if anyone attempted to pull out the paper money stuck here and there in the mortarless seams. The next year, in *Maneuvering Across Linhe Road*, he moved a wall, one cement block after another, across a busy street in Guangzhou. *My Imagination of a Great Nation*, performed at Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, in 2001, had Lin, bathing trunks, making swimming motions as he leaned through the breach in a wall of bricks while repeatedly immersing his face in a basin and spewing out water, an action meant to recall of the persistent struggle of immigrants. In 2002, he moved to New York and produced such works as *Basic Content*, a broken wall with spilled-out bricks wrapped in gold paper, and *Our Future*, featuring a huge stone dragon that has smashed halfway through a wall topped by a model of the Empire State Building. In the less optimistic performance *A Kind of Machine Called "Liberation"* (2003), at the Asia Society, Lin lay with his leg trapped in a circle of bricks while a young Caucasian man rode a bicycle around and around on the ring.

Why this preoccupation with barriers and their effect on human and monetary flow? The theme is natural enough for an émigré artist in today's globalized scene. (Lin, who now divides his time between Beijing and New York, has exhibited at major international venues, including the Venice Biennale in 2003, Documenta 12 in 2007 and the Lyon Biennale in 2009.) But one also needs to consider the massive importance of walls, whether material or metaphorical, in Chinese cultural tradition. This is most evident, from the third century B.C. onward, in the Great Wall—symbolic of China's recurring tendency to cut itself off from external influences, just as walls protected its ancient cities. Similarly, courtyard compounds within those cities isolated extended families in their private domain, kept doubly safe by a ghost-baffling "spirit wall" inside the

main entrance. Temple and palace complexes alike were laid out as nested boxes, experienced by visitors as wall after wall after wall. In the aptly named Forbidden City, the seat of imperial power had to be approached gradually, by multiple ritualized admissions to ever more “inner” courts. Later, under Mao’s regime, walls often defined the bounds of the collective, much as they once delineated—as they now do again—private property (or the current Chinese version thereof¹). And of late, according to American scholar Perry Link, the Chinese government has spent around \$76 billion per year on “stability maintenance”—meaning the suppression of controversy and dissent, whether in the streets or on the Internet—thus sustaining, imperfectly, an anti-information bulwark.²

LIN’S LATEST WALL WORKS were erected in December 2010 as components of “Whose Land? Whose Art?,” a solo project organized by curator and critic Josef Ng at two venues in Thailand. (Despite its Land of Smiles reputation, the country—a constitutional monarchy—has its own vexed public-private property issues, and recently witnessed violent political demonstrations [see *A.i.A.*, June/July ’10].)

For his show at Tang Contemporary Art in Bangkok, Lin installed a 33-foot-long brick wall aslant the gallery space, with one half of the titular phrase, in English, painted in block letters on each side of the 8½-foot-high structure. Nearby were two videos that brought the theme home. One shows the artist participating in a protest in which residents of a Beijing art-studio complex strapped their arms to boards, crucifix-fashion, and attempted to block the incursion of demolition workers directed by an irate, redevelopment-minded owner. The other depicts one of the displaced artists returning a few weeks later to the utterly disrupted site. Reinforcing this sense of rootlessness and frustration, another video, its monitor positioned on the far side of the wall, follows Lin himself as he hobbles about near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, with one wrist handcuffed to an ankle.

Being forced out of one’s home and off the land is a common experience in the People’s Republic these days, as urban-fringe areas are continually rezoned for new uses, to the short-term financial gain of the Party (and the sub-rosa profit of individual officials), and enormous public projects like the Three Gorges Dam cause the relocation of millions. This process, riddled with personal and collective traumas, has profound historical resonance, recalling how the centuries-long allocation of land into family-based tenant plots was corrupted by wealthy landlords, who abused the laxation system and were eventually purged in the mid-20th century by Communist cadres. Chairman Mao, in turn, wreaked disaster through collectivization (roughly 40 million people starved during his 1958-60 Great Leap Forward), a “misstep” now being rectified via crony capitalism and its attendant building mania.

Thus the other part of Lin’s “Whose Land? Whose Art?,” a permanent 8½-by-39-foot white concrete wall built amid the rice paddies near the town of Chiang Mai, has a somewhat self-contradictory effect. Visually, it seems at first a classic modernist slab—one that might have been designed by Le Corbusier or Oscar Niemeyer—set incongruously in the lush countryside. It thereby evokes, in its monolithic sleekness and jarring hue, one of the great problems of “progressive” design—a blank imperviousness to the teeming life that surrounds architectural forms, an arrogant disregard for local environment, history and culture.

Closer inspection, however, soon reverses that judgment. Lin's wall, as sensitively proportioned and placed as one by Mexico's "emotional architecture" advocate Luis Barragán, is entirely freestanding and so incapable of keeping anyone from crossing the boundary it marks. Penetrated by a single rectangular cut-through, the piece invites "open window" mind-travel and verbal communication from one side to the other. Its nearly 2-foot width provides an elevated fishing perch for local farmers and children. A steel shaft extending from one side can be fitted with a scale for weighing gathered produce, and the wall's surface is scrawled with the names and body weights of playful visitors.

All this viewer-friendliness is in keeping with the principles of the Land Foundation, which hosts this and other artist projects on two adjacent flooded fields 20 minutes from Chiang Mai, a provincial capital some 435 miles north of Bangkok. Launched in 1998 by artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, the foundation, supported by private gifts and occasional grants, subscribes to a "no ownership" policy that makes its holdings open to anyone at any time. (Area farmers, for example, routinely avail themselves of fruit, herbs and vegetables grown on the Land premises, and the enclave's structures are unguarded, unlocked and largely open-sided.) Over the years, the foundation has sponsored numerous art projects linked to environmental sustainability—a biogas energy experiment by the Danish group Superflex, a solar power scheme by American artist Arthur Meyer, an innovative toilet system by Atelier Van Lieshout from Rotterdam—as well as architectural follies (billed as updated versions of Buddhist meditation huts) by Tiravanija, Lertchaiprasert, the German artist Tobias Rehberger and others. The central pond, along with other lying waters and slow-flowing irrigation channels, corresponds to the agricultural theories of local peasant-philosopher Chaloui Kaewkong, who held that farmland should echo the composition ratio of the human body-in his view, 1/4 matter and 3/4 water.

As Lin's new work attests, all these elements, taken together, add up to a remarkable art-making and art-viewing experience—"relational aesthetics" in an ongoing abode. Truly hardy artist can even arrange an extended "residency" on the Land site, so long as they are willing to pitch camp, without the benefit of electricity or potable tap water.

1 All real estate in China technically belongs to the state and is held by its occupants on long-term lease.

2 Perry Link, "How China Fears the Middle East Revolutions," New York Review of Books, Mar.24, 2011, P.22.