

The Short Comings of "Hair-itage": A closer look at Wenda Gu's united nations

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Introduction

The contemporary Chinese artist Wenda Gu's prolific artistic repertoire begins pre-Communist China. Dormant since 2007, Gu's work in the 1990s and 2000s propelled him into international fame as an installation artist. His *united nations* project spanned 15 years and 14 countries and incorporated hair as a means of uniting viewers. Gu's fascination with globalization and a universal society that blurs cultural lines and connects all humans inspired the show. He acknowledges that a "utopia of unification" can never exist in reality, but believes that it can and will exist in the art world through his *united nations* series.¹ These installations did not always garner a positive response, specifically his first exhibit in 1993 in Łódź, Poland (Figure 1). Once opened, this exhibition lasted half a day before public outrage regarding the insensitivity of the piece forced its closure. The controversy surrounding Wenda Gu's *united nations* pieces provides evidence of the limitations artists face when trying to create globally accessible or 'universal' works of art through the use of corporeal materials. Controversies in Poland, Sweden, Italy, and Israel highlight the shortcomings of trying to utilize corporeal materials as means of connection without fully acknowledging the cultural relativity of their symbolic meaning. Through his search for the philosophically universal, Gu encourages us to forget the culturally particular, thus reducing entire cultures to simple shared concepts such as hair and leading to misinterpretations of his work. Gu's insensitivity to the different symbolic valences surrounding hair not only renders his project null but also undermines his original purpose.

¹ Wenda Gu, "Face the New Millennium: The Divine Comedy of Our Times," in *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, ed. Mark H. C. Bessire (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003), 30.



Figure 1. Wenda Gu, *united nations-Poland monument: hospitalized history museum*, History Museum of Łódź & The Artists Museum, Łódź, Poland, 1993

Wenda Gu prides himself on his dedication to showcasing a “utopian ideal of universalism” through art.² Inspired by Nietzschean humanism and semiotic theory, Gu feels that his art works act as “models of universal culture,” epitomized through his *united nations* project.³ Started in 1993, this project composed of site-specific materials spanned 14 countries by its end in 2007. Gu collected hair from the country in which the exhibit took place in order to capture the essence of the people, implying that hair transcends time and space and connects all humans in a collective way. Some installations included hair solely from the country of exhibition, and other times these pieces were part of larger group projects or transnational exhibitions. The name of the project stems from its inspiration, as Gu believes that the United Nations’ “utopian purpose is to create a better world by unifying its different races and culture.”⁴ While he feels that this will not occur in his lifetime, he also believes that art serves as a way to obtain the imaginary and thus create a world in which the viewers become not citizens of their respective countries, but citizens of the world.⁵

Gu’s *united nations* series takes myriad forms, but all utilize hair as the primarily material. Beginning in Poland in 1993, his works exhibited on five continents by the year 2000. Gu fluctuates between aesthetic expression such as the fake calligraphy in his *canadian monument: the metamorphosis* (Figure 2) and conceptual expression such as in his *holland monument: v.o.c.-w.i.c* (Figure 3). In his *canadian monument*, Gu combines several writing styles such as Hindi, Chinese, and Arabic in order to form a visual effect mimicking “‘misunderstanding’ as the essence of our knowledge concerning the universe and material

² Geo Minglu, “Seeking a Model of Universalism: The United Nations Series and Other Works,” in *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, ed. Mark H. C. Bessire (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003), 20.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Simon Leung et al., “Pseudo-Languages: A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 92.

⁵ Yan Zhou, *Odyssey of Culture: Wenda Gu and His Art*, 2015 edition (Springer, 2015), 101.

world.”⁶ He then creates these fabricated characters out of hair and hangs them on large hair curtains throughout the venue. The hair acts as a thin thread, allowing Gu to finely weave brown-hued curtains that stretch from floor to ceiling. Gu layers the characters on the curtains using thick bunches of dark brown hair in order to emulate calligraphic writing. The viewers appreciate the aesthetic value of this finely constructed and work-intensive piece. This lies in stark contrast to his *holland monument*, which incorporates Dutch hair curtain walls, hair rooms, and hair carpets mixed with pages of Dutch colonial history books. Again, Gu utilizes hair as a thread, but in this instance he covers the room with thickly woven hair sheets, entirely consuming the viewer’s visual field. Gu haphazardly spreads pages of the Dutch colonial history books around the venue, allowing them to stand out in contrast to the floor to ceiling hair. Through this piece, the hair represents a communal substance to which all viewers can relate and sympathize on a conceptual level. The viewers prefer the overwhelming experience of the exhibition rather than the aesthetic aspect. Intended for the Dutch viewer, *holland monument* questions the colonial behavior of the Dutch East India Trading Company and makes subtle references to globalization. This vacillation between themes contributes to a decreased potency in Gu’s intended meaning, as the hair becomes less significant when expressed aesthetically versus conceptually.⁷ Gu’s irresolution in artistic expression mirrors his changes in the message of the piece.



Figure 2. Wenda Gu, *united nations- canadian monument: the metamorphosis*, Morris & Helen Belkin Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, 1998

⁶ Gu, “Face the New Millennium: The Divine Comedy of Our Times,” 30. Note: Gu writes in all lowercase letters, so quotes from this essay possess grammatical errors.

⁷ Zhou, *Odyssey of Culture*, 114.

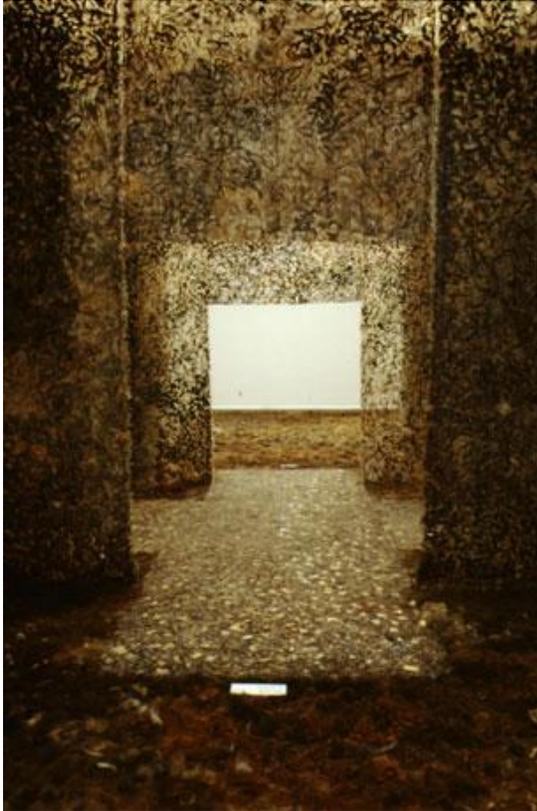


Figure 3. Wenda Gu, *united nations-holland monument: v.o.c.-w.i.c.*, The Kroller-Muller Museum, The Netherlands, 1994

Gu's flexibility in meaning hints at his reductive view of cultural understanding. In his essay on the exhibition he states, "[sic] strongly relate to the historical and cultural contexts to create monumental installations and land art to capture each country's identity."⁸ He believes that researching beforehand and talking to local residents provides him with enough information to capture the essence of a country in an installation. Several times in his essay he discusses the idea of "otherness" and his status as a stranger in a foreign land.⁹ This realization, however, does not translate to his work, as his idea of a universal art form through hair still prevails. He appears to select the cultural differences that suit his purpose and ignore others. For example, when discussing hair as an artistic medium he says, "for some native Americans hair was and still is considered as 'the location of the soul.'"¹⁰ Gu utilizes cross-cultural examples in order to propel his thesis: the idea of hair as a reverential and uniting corporeal material. He acknowledges his position as an 'other' in the creation of these installations, but he makes little effort to explain the negative consequences of this dynamic.

⁸ Gu, "Face the New Millennium: The Divine Comedy of Our Times," 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰ David Cateforis, "An Interview with Wenda Gu," in *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, ed. Mark H. C. Bessire (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003), 17.

Two exhibitions in particular emphasize Gu's misunderstanding of the cultural climate due to his myopic focus on the universal: the 1993 *united nations* show in Łódź, Poland, and the 1996 *united nations* show in Sweden in conjunction with a joint Russian-Swedish exhibition. The 1993 exhibition took place in the History Museum of Łódź where Gu turned the space into an abandoned hospital and covered it with Polish hair (Figure 4). White cribs stood in the corners with white sheets covered in female hair placed inside them. Gu spread clumps of hair down the staircase and all over the floor, also covered in white sheets. Along the floor he displayed books about history, religion, literature and politics. This installation opened in the morning and by the afternoon public upset forced the exhibition to close. The clumps of hair strewn around a hospital-like setting reminded the public of the Nazi occupation and evoked painful and traumatic memories. The location of this exhibit should have triggered an increased level of sensitivity for Gu, but his reductive approach to culture blinded him to the potential effects of the exhibition. Łódź once possessed the largest Jewish cemetery in the world and is within a close radius of concentration camps. Gu's *united nations* possesses uncanny similarities to the holocaust remembrance museums located in concentration camps such as Auschwitz (Figure 5). Art Historian Gao Minglu says of the incident, "The symbolic meaning is logically perfect for Gu in a theoretical way, but it is also logically unacceptable for the local audience who are faced with an emotionally challenging memory of the city's history."¹¹



Figure 4. Piles of human hair at the Auschwitz museum, Oświęcim, Poland

The second controversial installation also only lasted one afternoon. Gu's participation in the Russian-Swedish exhibit of 1996 proved strange from the beginning (fig 5). Many of the Russian artists found it peculiar that a Chinese artist took part in the exhibit designed to show renewed relations between Russia and Sweden.¹² This exhibition, however, did not get taken down per the request of the audience; instead, one of the Russian performing artists destroyed the walkway of Swedish hair-curtains when Gu briefly left the room. Originally along the entryway hung floor to ceiling curtains of woven hair, but after the destruction, only piles of hair remained.

¹¹ Zhou, *Odyssey of Culture*, 108.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

This artist acting on the feeling of many, felt that Gu's inclusion in the exhibition "totally negated the basic ethical imperatives of the project."¹³ Gu attempted to make his piece out of Russian and Swedish hair, but the Russians prevented him from collecting hair in the country. The intention was to unite the two countries through a simple corporeal material to which both sides could relate. This idea only existed in theory because when executed it conveyed a different meaning to the Russian viewers as they felt offended at a foreigner's claim to understand their cultural nuances. Gu's attempt to reduce cultural conflict to something as simple as hair once again elicited a poor reaction due in part to its reductionist idealism.

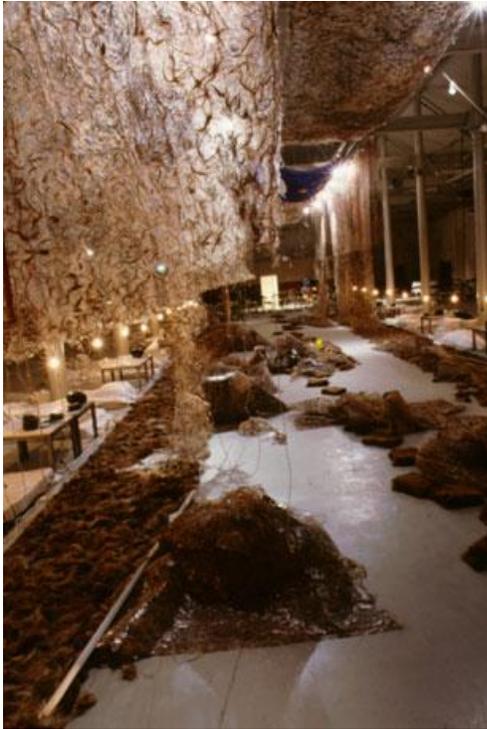


Figure 5. Wenda Gu, *united nations-Sweden & Russia monument: Interpol* (post-destruction), Center for Contemporary Art & Architecture, Stockholm, Sweden

Gu's argument for the use of hair as a universally accepted and understood material also raises questions. While, in theory, hair exists as something that all humans possess and thus connects them as humankind, in reality, cultures have fostered deep and complex associations with hair making comparisons more difficult to draw. This has already been exemplified in the failure of Gu's *polish monument* exhibition. Further examples are necessary, however, in order to underscore the importance and vastness of these differences and consequently the limitations of Gu's work. In his essay on the *united nations* series, Gu appropriates the term "hair-itage," first used by a critic in response to Gu's work.¹⁴ Gu considers hair akin to "human nature" and quotes a curator who "viewed hair in a universal light."¹⁵ This view of hair can be considered a shallow

¹³ Wenda Gu, "The Cultural War," *Flash Art*, 1996.

¹⁴ Gu, "Face the New Millennium: The Divine Comedy of Our Times," 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

misinterpretation. While all hair exists universally within cultures, the treatment and associations highlight differences rather than unity. At a chemical level, hair contains unique and differentiating DNA, further separating individuals. Hair and its associations separate humans from animals, but it does not connect cultures to each other.¹⁶

The countries in which Gu displayed his “hair-itage” pieces have modern and historically different views of hair. Gu installed one of his pan-cultural exhibitions in Japan in 2003 (Figure 6). This piece consists of all of the flags of the world made out of hair from different countries. Like all of the pieces in this series, this one takes up the expanse of an entire room. Created for a biennale, this exhibition traveled to Singapore and China as well. Japan historically possessed a unique symbolism based on hair and its consistency over the centuries renders it a “deep and fundamental” complex.¹⁷ Hair in Japan ranges from representing sexuality, in terms of the binary between fertility and vitality, to disease and death.¹⁸ Hair features prominently in Japanese poetry and artwork, with a woman’s long black hair representing her fertility and beauty (Figure 7). This symbolism, however, derives from the religious idea of *tama*, or the animating spirit residing in the body.¹⁹ Because of this association, an understanding of Japanese religious symbolism becomes necessary in order to comprehend the symbolic significance of hair. This overall positive connotation with hair lies in stark contrast with hair symbolism, for example, in the Hindu belief system thus further suggesting the error in Gu’s assumption of the universality of hair. Hinduism associates hair with the polluted, dirty, and disruptions of the social order.²⁰ This leads Hindus to keep their hair coiled and coiffured as a means of pollution control. Hair also serves as an offering to Lord Vishnu via a tonsuring ceremony, adding yet another valence to hair symbolism in India. Thirdly, India’s cosmopolitan fashion industry encourages hair as a fashion statement over a religious symbol.²¹ A viewer of one of Gu’s hair installations could possess myriad associations and interpretations of the piece. Comparing cross-cultural connotations of hair becomes increasingly complex and further emphasizes the idealism in Gu’s theory of universalism through corporeal mediums. Gu’s appropriated theory of “hair-itage” forgoes the particular in order to focus on the universal, but by doing so reduces cultures to generalities that, as the controversies around his work show, are inaccurate.

¹⁶ Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, eds., *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, English Ed edition (Oxford ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁸ Gananath Obeyesekere, *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (Albany: State Univ of New York Pr, 1998), 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Biddle-Perry and Cheang, *Hair*, 164.

²¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 6. Wenda Gu, *united nations: man & space*, Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Japan, 2000



Figure 7. Chobunsai Eishi, *Parody of The Three Vinegar Tasters*, 1821

Gu's existence as a transnational artist has provided him a sense of overconfidence in regards to cultural understanding. In response to the uneasy reaction he garnered from views in his *Italy monument* piece for the series, Gu states "[sic] remain a constant stranger to all the local races and their histories...they see me as a foreign intruder which automatically distances me from them."²² This specific installation dealt with the theme of Catholicism, once again

²² Gu, "Face the New Millennium: The Divine Comedy of Our Times," 41.

encroaching on a sensitive subject in order to capture the essence of the culture and place it into Gu's universalism-driven ideology (Figure 6). Gu acknowledges his outsider status, but as someone who claims awareness of what post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha would consider an "in-between" state that he inhibits, he tries to ignore it when creating his works.²³ Bhabha feels that the in-between exists as someone who has the ability to "bring newness into the work" through his or her combined and enriching experiences being a participant in different cultures.²⁴ Gu takes a more Barthesian approach, as he tries to isolate his identity from his works and let them stand independent of their creator. What results from this approach has been already stated throughout this essay: reductive works misunderstood by the very cultures Gu has tried to emulate.

Gu also succumbs to the "friend argument" fallacy when referencing the sensitivity displayed in his work, specifically his initially controversial *Israel monument* piece (Figure 8).²⁵ For this exhibition, Gu collected hair from people all over Israel and placed large sections of hair on quarried rocks placed in the desert. The hair lies in large dark clumps splayed over tan boulders. Gu organized dozens of these monoliths in a single-file line, equidistant apart. Once again, the audience felt that this held to close a comparison to Nazi concentration camps and organized a protest in the Tel Aviv airport upon Gu's arrival. In response, Gu claimed that "at one point when the Jews were escaping from Europe during the Second World War, there was no other country that would open their door to them, but they went to China. I know this history in Shanghai."²⁶ The "friend argument" refers to a phenomenon that has garnered use in the past few decades as a means of explaining someone's unexpected ability to empathize with something else. For example, one understands someone else's plight because they have a friend who experienced something similar. Gu utilizes this argument to explain why he understands the sensitivity related to his *Israel monument*. He believes that he understands the Jews' struggle because of his connections with Shanghai. He also felt that because of the story of Samson in the New Testament, the Jews would associate hair with power. When this piece ended up rejected, Gu claims that misunderstanding "is an important spiritual phenomenon of humans by which we may be able to balance our spirit."²⁷ While it is not a new phenomenon for artists to embrace multiple interpretations of their work, it is peculiar that Gu does not mind a reading that counters the philosophically derived intention of the project. More accurately, it appears as a poor interpretation of a culture through essentialist research rather than an example of "an important spiritual phenomenon of humans."²⁸

²³ Homi K. Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation," *Kunst and Museum Journal* 5, no. 4 (1994): 69–70.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bradford Plumer, "Rick Santorum: A Brief History of the 'Some of My Best Friends' Defense," *New Republic*, June 16, 2011, <https://newrepublic.com/article/90059/gop-rick-santorum-best-friend-defense>.

²⁶ Zhou, *Odyssey of Culture*, 110.

²⁷ Cateforis, "An Interview with Wenda Gu," 149–150.

²⁸ Gu, "Face the New Millennium: The Divine Comedy of Our Times," 30.



Figure 8. Wenda Gu, *united nations-Israel monument: the holy land*, Israeli Cultural Minister & the Artists Museum Tel-Aviv Center, Israel, 1995

Gu's theories based on Nietzschean humanism and semiotics fail him when trying to create "visual forms of intelligence of humankind and models of universal culture."²⁹ While the reception of his work is not always negative, his methods prove questionable in their effectiveness. Artists too focused on the philosophically universal can forget the culturally particular, as Gu exhibits in his poorly conceived pieces in places such as Poland and Sweden. In theory, *united nations* unite the viewership, but, in reality, a lack of attention to the culturally relative significance of the corporeal material and Gu's role as an outsider removes the potency and instead showcases the lack of cultural understanding in today's globalized world.

²⁹ Minglu, "Seeking a Model of Universalism: The United Nations Series and Other Works," 20.

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