

International Curatorial Practice and the Problematic De-Territorialization of the ‘Identity’ Show

Deconstructing the Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*

2.1 Introduction

Within western(ized) liberal-democratic contexts exhibitions of contemporary art related to questions of identity and social inequality—which include, but are by no means limited to, the now familiar international survey format—have in the light of theoretical writings by, among others, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, sought to demonstrate the performative—culturally diverse, hybrid and constantly shifting—nature of artistic production and reception. As a consequence, they are widely considered within those contexts to act as platforms for the critical deconstruction of social relations of dominance and, in particular, asymmetrical power relations associated with western colonialism/imperialism. In some cases this deconstructive approach has resulted in the strategic adoption of exceptionalist positions among communities of difference resistant not only to colonialism/imperialism but also the often highly indeterminate and paradoxically universalizing vision of cultural identity promoted by internationally dominant postcolonialist discourses.

Within politically authoritarian contexts wary of the destabilizing counter-authoritarian outlook of deconstructivist theory and practice—such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—the intended significances of exhibitions of contemporary art related to questions of identity and social inequality often differ markedly from those in western(ized) liberal-democratic contexts. While some curators working within politically authoritarian contexts have sought (either overtly or covertly) to promote deconstructivist readings of identity and social inequality, many have, in accordance with locally dominant political discourses, tended to uphold national essentialist/culturally exceptionalist positions as a form of (oppositional) resistance to encroaching/continuing western colonialist/imperialist influence, but without an

accompanying western(ized) understanding of the performatively constructed nature of identity. As Okwui Enwezor has remarked, decolonization and national identity are closely enmeshed:

Decolonization and national identity represent the bookends of two concomitant projects of late global modernity[:] [o]n the one hand, decolonization portends to restore sundered traditions to their ‘proper’ pasts, whilst national identity through the state works assiduously to reinvent and maintain them in the present and for the future.¹

Such discourses are commensurate with assertions of what Benedict Anderson² has referred to as ‘imagined communities’ of nationhood exclusive of others opposed to their shared purposes and discursive manifestations of power. They are also commensurate with Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis³ of the combined role of social identity and state institutions in the context of modernity as a disciplining focus for the assertion of dominant discursive truths and norms.

From an international art-world perspective habitually critical of authoritarianism, deconstructivist readings of identity and social inequality remain a crucial focus for politically motivated forms of artistic intervention. However, as the curators of the Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* (2008), Sarat Maharaj, (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung and Gao Shiming, have argued, it is now possible to view such interventions as having been significantly compromised by the widespread institutionalization of postcolonialist discourses and the concomitant establishment of various managerialist constraints on thought and action associated with the term ‘political correctness’. As Maharaj, Chang and Gao make clear in various writings surrounding the staging of the Third Guangzhou Triennial, the institutionalization of postcolonialist discourses has lead not only

Published in *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, ‘China: Curating, Exhibitions and Display Culture’ 4 (1) (Spring 2015), pp. 6–32.

¹Enwezor (2008, p. 224).

²Anderson (2006).

³Bauman (1991).

Fig. 2.1 Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism (2008), entrance to the Guangdong Museum. Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung



to the reproduction of simplistic conceptions of East-West/North-South relations of dominance, but also to highly scripted forms of artistic production and reception in strong conformity with established art-world regimes of financial support and curatorial gate-keeping.

In this article, I shall seek to develop Maharaj, Chang and Gao's argument by drawing attention to ways in which the staging of the Third Guangzhou Triennial can itself be shown, despite statements by its curatorial team to the contrary, to have perpetuated highly abstract conceptions of identity and social inequality. In particular, I shall attempt to demonstrate how the intended significance of the Third Guangzhou Triennial as a return to searching forms of deconstructive criticism was severely compromised by localized discursive restrictions on public discussion and display in mainland China. Moreover, I shall also attempt to demonstrate that in striving to maintain a sense of critical coherence, the curators of the Third Guangzhou Triennial were compelled to gloss over the particularity of those localized discursive restrictions, leading to a problematic de-territorialization of their own practice. In conclusion I shall argue for a reconsideration of the 'identity' show based in a granular deconstructive attention not only to differing cultural approaches towards artistic production and reception but also relationships between curatorial practices and their localized discursive contexts (Fig. 2.1).

2.2 The Politics of Identity

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, political thinking on the Left was dominated internationally as part of the universalizing high tide of western(ized) modernism by the orthodox Marxian view that conflict between social classes and among the forces of production is, in the 'final analysis', the primary mover of social change. This view was shared not only by those on the Far Left committed to the revolutionary

overthrowing of capitalist and feudal societies, but also, to varying degrees, by those of more liberal-leftist leanings seeking to bring about progressive social change through a combination of public protest, education and democratically supported reform.

Since the late 1960s, however, political thinking on the Left has undergone a significant transformation. Only a relatively small minority of those on the Left would now seek to uphold seriously a fundamental connection between class conflict and progressive social change.⁴ This is in part because of a widespread loss of faith in the possibility of coordinated revolutionary action as well as in the capacity of established communist/socialist states to develop materially successful, non-authoritarian post-capitalist/feudal societies (losses of faith which began to take decisive hold in the West in the wake of the failed European uprisings of 1968). It is also due to the increasingly international turn since the late 1960s towards the critical anti-foundationalism of poststructuralist/postmodernist theory and practice which, among other things, has significantly problematized an exclusive Marxian focus on class differences as a driver of historical change as well as the inherently messianic-idealist tone of Marxian millenarianism. Such changes have led over the past three decades to the setting in of profound doubts over the existence of the Left as a distinct focus for political opposition to the socio-economic status quo.

Among the more conspicuous markers of this seemingly catastrophic transformation of political thinking on the Left is the increasing prominence within liberal-democratic societies since the early 1960s of a highly diverse range of critical discourses on questions of social inequality, often referred to collectively as the 'politics of identity' or

⁴For a discussion of these changes in outlook in relation to radical political thinking on the Left in France during the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Moi (1986, pp. 4–6).

‘identity politics’.⁵ Taken together, this range of discourses—which encompasses critical thinking associated with the feminist, civil rights, gay/lesbian rights and disability rights movements as well as related branches of academic study such as women’s studies, postcolonialism, and queer studies—supports the notion that the relationship between social struggle and progressive social change cannot be reduced simply to the single issue of class difference, but is, instead, contingent upon a shifting multiplicity of intersecting differences in social positioning, related to, among other things, class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, ability and sexuality. As a consequence of the accrual of these identity-related discourses, by the mid-1980s theoretical focus had shifted, as Hal Foster remarked at the time, more or less decisively ‘from class as a subject of history to the cultural constitution of subjectivity, from economic identity to social difference. In short, political struggle is now seen largely as a process of “differential articulation”’.⁶

Somewhat paradoxically, this shift towards ‘differential articulation’ has been punctuated by what might be described as instances of ‘differential dis-articulation’. By seeking to resist traditional restrictions on social behaviour some discourses associated with the politics of identity (for example, those relating to more extreme forms of ‘queer’ activism) have sought to promote distinctly separatist/exceptionalist views of identity that effectively diverge both from the middle ground of established liberal-democratic life and from the Left’s historical adherence to the idea of a collectivist classless society. As a result, where it was once possible to conceive in principle, at least, of a homogeneous politics of the Left converging around a shared belief in the strategic importance of class conflict (one that can be understood to have been continually deferred by persistent ideological disagreements with regard to the means by which a future post-class-based society might be brought about as well as the shape and governance of that society), there is now the conspicuously heterogeneous prospect of an accumulation of differing special interest groups that coexist/commingle without any overarching sense of priority with regard to the realization of progressive social change.⁷

This conspicuously heterogeneous prospect notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to think of the various

special interest groups associated with the politics of identity as wholly uncoordinated in their critical approach towards questions of social inequality. Although, divergent in their *prima facie* interests, within liberal-democratic contexts many of those groups have tended—in the longer run, at least—towards the now critically dominant view that social identity is never made wholly present or stable, but is, instead, constructed performatively in such a way that it persistently traverses and, therefore, deconstructs neat conceptual divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, age, ability and sexuality as well as the asymmetrical power relations imposed upon those divisions by the prevailing logic of western(ized) liberal capitalism/modernity.⁸ Key contributions to the poststructuralist debate on identity include Michel Foucault’s conception⁹ of ‘the care of the self’ and Judith Butler’s conception¹⁰ of ‘gender performativity’.

This state of affairs holds even for ostensibly neo-separatist conceptions of identity such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s conception¹¹ of ‘strategic essentialism’, and Paul Gilroy’s envisioning¹² of a ‘Black Atlantic’, which assert the lived ‘reality’ of shared cultural identity and its usefulness as a strategic focus for politicized resistance to social inequality, while continuing to uphold a performative view of cultural signification. Consequently, it is possible to interpret identity politics’s conspicuously fractured (perspectivist) critique of social inequality not only as a correlative of the highly uncertain way in which—as poststructuralist theory would have it—all forms of meaning (social or otherwise) are constructed through language, but also, in effect, as a concerted deconstructive resistance to social authoritarianism.

From the late 1960s through to the early 1980s, critical discourses associated with the politics of identity occupied positions very much at or beyond the margins of mainstream public life where they served as intellectual rallying points for various struggles against social inequality launched from outside the established political and institutional frameworks of the liberal-democratic state. Consider here, for example, the ideas and actions of the Philadelphia-based group MOVE, who, during the 1970s and 1980s, sought to combine black-nationalism, anarcho-primitivism and neo-luddism in opposition to established bourgeois-capitalist values (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3). In more recent years, however—largely as a result of sustained efforts by special interest groups to raise public awareness of their particular view of social inequality—those

⁵Attitudes associated with the politics of identity were first articulated during the early to mid-1960s by groups, such as the student Nonviolent coordinating committee, that emerged as part of the US civil rights movement (see Kauffman 1990). The term ‘identity politics’ was first used in a statement issued by the black feminist group the Combahee River collective in 1977 (see Eisenstein 1978).

⁶Foster (1985, p. 139).

⁷For a Marxist-influenced critique of this lack of priority, see Roberts (1994, pp. 1–36).

⁸For a comprehensive discussion of differing critical approaches towards social inequality as part of the politics of identity, see Hall (1990, pp. 222–237) and Baker (2011, pp. 215–245).

⁹Foucault (1999).

¹⁰Butler (2006).

¹¹Spivak (1987).

¹²Gilroy (1993).

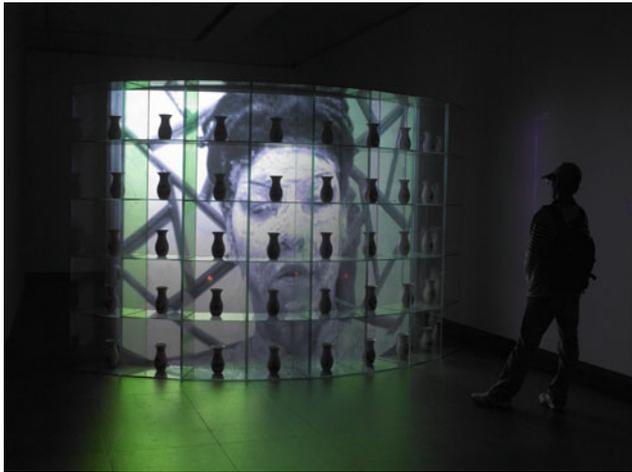


Fig. 2.2 Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Nail Leonard, *Porcelana de China: My Mother Told Me I am Chinese* (2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

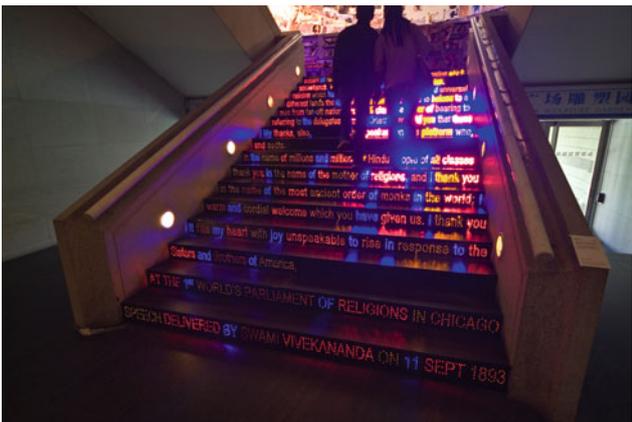


Fig. 2.3 Jitish Kallatt, *speech delivered by Swami Vivekananda on 11 september 1893 at the First World Parliament* (2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

same discourses have not only become an increasingly prominent aspect of mainstream public life, but also deeply enmeshed with the established political and institutional frameworks they once so virulently sought to depose. Key examples of the entry of the politics of identity into mainstream public life include the now high-profile LGBTQ movement as well as the global spread of hip hop and other musical subcultures that once acted as focal points for resistant otherness and that now have a conspicuously ambiguous relationship to mainstream bourgeois-capitalist society.

Within many liberal-democratic contexts (not least those of Western Europe and North America) the increasing

centrality of identity politics has been accompanied by powerful cultural taboos as well as quasi-legal and legal restrictions on prejudicial thought and action, often referred to in relation to the term ‘political correctness’. Over the last quarter of a century, these taboos and restrictions have become something of an institutional/managerialist norm in many parts of the liberal-democratic world, thereby engendering a widespread climate of conformity that significantly problematizes the standing of the politics of identity as a marginalized resistance to social authoritarianism. Moreover, while it is possible to view the assimilation of the politics of identity by the political mainstream within liberal-democratic societies as part of a progressive shift towards greater social equality, its inherently pluralistic outlook can also be interpreted as doubling that of the established ideology of bourgeois liberal democracy/capitalism, which, in persistently seeking to gloss over the often stark material asymmetries of capitalist societies has, as John Roberts remarked, never had any difficulty in derogating “totalizing” forms of knowledge’ nor in ‘singing *paean*s to difference’.¹³ The politics of identity is therefore open to interpretation, in its current form, at least, as having been made subject to a process of negative recuperation by the liberal-democratic mainstream that has brought it into close alignment with what Claire Bishop¹⁴ has identified as the inclusivist tendencies of dominant neo-liberal governmental discourses and associated forms of social control.

In the section that follows I shall discuss the relationship between identity politics and the staging of international exhibitions of contemporary art since the late 1970s. In doing so, I shall draw specific attention to divergent attitudes towards deconstructivist conceptions of identity among curators within the PRC where locally dominant (governmentally supported) national-essentialist discourses on identity exist alongside marginalized critical espousals of the deconstructive precepts of postcolonialism.

2.3 The Politics of Identity and International Curatorial Practice

One of the areas of public life that has been most strongly enmeshed with the politics of identity over the last four decades is that encompassing the production, reception and display of contemporary visual art. From the early 1960s onwards, visual artists and curators of visual art at the forefront of the western (that is to say, Western European and North American) neo-avant-gardes began to embrace a

¹³Roberts, op cit., 18.

¹⁴Bishop (2005, pp. 116–127).

socially and politically engaged view of the possibilities of artistic production as a critical resistance to the then institutionally dominant formalist-masculinist concerns of Greenbergian high modernism.¹⁵ In doing so, they progressively abandoned the grand Marxist (revolutionary) and bourgeois-liberal (evolutionary) meta-narratives that had once informed the thinking of the western historical avant-gardes in favour of a rather more focused micro-political involvement with socialized constructions of the self and social relations of dominance. Exemplars of this shift in sensibilities include the work of artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, Lynda Benglis and Judy Chicago, all of whom have sought to draw attention through their work to relationships between prevailing discourses and social inequality.

A similar shift in attitudes can be understood to have taken place at more or less the same time among radicalized non-western artists and curators who had by then appropriated deconstructive collage-montage techniques—associated with the western avant-gardes—as part of their own practice and who had begun to deploy those techniques as a way of actively resisting the assumed hegemony not only of western high modernism, but also its underlying adherence to western colonialist/imperialist relations of dominance. An early example of this resistance can be found in relation to the work of the Gutai group (formed in Tokyo in 1954) that, despite formal resemblances between the work of its members and French *art informel* of the same period, claimed a resistant, specifically Japanese approach towards the use of materials.¹⁶

As the various discourses associated with the politics of identity first began to coalesce during the mid to late 1960s and into the 1970s, they were consequently seized upon by an increasingly internationally focused multicultural community of avant-garde artists who took them as a conceptual frame of reference commensurate with their own critical thinking and practice. This led to the production of self-consciously resistant identity-related artworks in various parts of the world that were often marginalized or completely overlooked in Western European and North American contexts during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, but which have since been recognized as significant contributions to contemporary artistic practice. Examples here include works by Rasheed Araeen and Robert Gober.

Since the late 1980s, there has been an increasingly active bringing together of identity-related art and international curatorial practice. Although international exhibitions of avant-garde art such as the Venice Biennale (from 1948

onwards) and Documenta (begun in 1955) became established in the immediate aftermath of World War II, those exhibitions were conceived primarily, in the first instance at least, as a focus for post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation based on an upholding rather than a critical problematization of the values of western modernism. In spite of efforts to encompass non-western diversity, such as Harald Szeemann's unsuccessful attempt to exhibit *Rent Collection Courtyard (Shouzuyuan)* (1965), a hugely ambitious socialist-realist sculpture produced in the PRC, at Documenta (1972),¹⁷ post-war international art exhibitions of this sort tended to present European/North American artistic discourses and practices as a progressive cultural norm, thereby excluding as irrelevant or secondary artworks divergent from or resistant to that perceived norm.

Beginning with two discursively related exhibitions, *Primitivism and Modern Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern*, staged at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1984–85), and *Les Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of the Earth)* staged at the Centre Pompidou and Parc de la Villette (1989), this post-war internationalist upholding of western modernist values began to give way to curatorial visions receptive of a more culturally differentiated view of modernist and contemporary art. In the case of *Primitivism and Modern Art* this change in outlook involved a highly scholarly presentation of African and Oceanic art as equal to that of western high modernism. In the case of *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, which was presented explicitly as a critique of the arguably deracinating effects of the formalist approach adopted by the curators of *Primitivism and Modern Art* and which brought together a highly diverse array of 'artworks' together from around the globe, a more decisive shift was made towards the critical inclusion of non-western art as part of an expanded and differentiated history of modern and contemporary art. Although both exhibitions have been criticized for failing to adequately situate non-western artworks in relation to the immediate sociocultural and political contexts of their making, thereby rendering the range of their possible significances partially obscure, they nevertheless became the effective starting points for what is now a familiar conjunction of international curatorial practice with culturally diverse western and non-western forms of artistic production.

The shift from international exhibitions based on the principles of western modernism towards those of a more culturally cosmopolitan kind has arguably manifested itself most prominently in relation to the curatorial form now widely referred to as the 'international survey show'. Beginning with the landmark exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* and continuing through various one-off and recurring

¹⁵For a critical overview of issues related to the conjunction of artistic production and the politics of identity, see Meecham and Sheldon (2005, pp. 237–264) and Wood et al. (1993).

¹⁶Taylor (2005, pp. 11–12).

¹⁷Hung and Wang (2010, pp. 368–378).



Fig. 2.4 Amy Cheung, *To Seek an Invisible Object of Hugeness* (2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

art events, including curatorially refocused manifestations of Documenta and the Venice Biennale, shows of this sort have been staged consistently within western(ized) liberal-democratic contexts since the end of the 1980s as platforms for the exhibiting of contemporary artworks from across the world in a manner that is very much at odds with the Euro-American centrism of western high modernism and that can, therefore, be readily aligned with a postcolonialist critique of western colonialist/imperialist relations of dominance.

The structuring of international survey shows since the late 1980s has varied widely. In some cases, such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, they have been staged as one-off themed events bringing together artworks produced by artists from different nation states. In others, the bringing together of art from different parts of the world has been adapted to the staging of recurring annual, biennial and triennial exhibitions. Survey formats have also been used, as in the case of two highly influential exhibitions of contemporary art from the PRC, China's *New Art Post-'89* (1993), organized by the Hanart TZ Gallery as part of the Hong Kong Arts Festival, and *China Avant-Garde* (1993), staged at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin,¹⁸ to present overviews of art from a single nation state to international audiences (Fig. 2.4).

¹⁸See der Welt (1994) and Schmid (2012, pp. 283–297).

The commonly accepted view of such exhibitions—as seen from the point of view of a now internationalized postcolonialist discourse—is that they not only uphold cultural diversity as a locus of resistance to the universalizing tendencies of western colonialism/imperialism, but also the conspicuous translation/hybridizing of cultural influences involved in the making of internationalized contemporary art as a performative rejoinder to all forms of cultural essentialism. Such positionings are often discussed with reference both to Edward Said's seminal identification¹⁹ of the ingrained structural prejudices of western orientalism, and to Homi Bhabha's related assertion²⁰ that the signifiers of cultural and social identity are subject to the continual possibility of deconstructive recontextualization and re-motivation as a consequence of their mediation through language as the 'Third Space'.

Although a detailed survey of the large and still growing body of literature on the subject of the relationship between international curatorial practice and postcolonialist discourses lies beyond the restricted scope of this article,²¹ a highly thoughtful and perceptive summary of that relationship can be found in Okwui Enwezor's 'The Postcolonial Constellation'. In Enwezor's view, not only is the current artistic and curatorial context 'constellated around the norms of the postcolonial, those based on discontinuous, aleatory forms, on creolization, hybridization, and so forth', it is one that emerges as 'an outcome of the upheaval that has resulted from deep political and cultural restructuring since World War II, manifest in the liberation, civil rights, feminist, gay/lesbian, and antiracist movements'.²² As a consequence of which, argues Enwezor, cultural representation and politics are now conspicuously interrelated:

Representation becomes not merely the name for a manner of practice, but, quite literally, the name for a political awareness of identity within the field of representation. In the context of decolonized representation, innovation is as much about the coming to being of new relations to cultures and histories, to rationalization and transformation, to transculturation and assimilation, and new practices and processes, new kinds of exchange and moments of multiple dwelling as it is about the ways artists are seen to be bound to their national and cultural traditions. Here, political community and cultural community become essentially coterminous.²³

Moreover, argues Enwezor, it is important to recognize the specific, spatially and temporally located nature of cultural discourses:

¹⁹Said (1978).

²⁰Bhabha (1994).

²¹See, for example, Greenberg et al. (1996), Charlotte (2004), Vanderlinden and Filipovic (2005) and Obrist (2008).

²²Enwezor, op cit., pp. 209, 232.

²³ibid., p. 225.



Fig. 2.5 Yang Fudong, *Cyan Kilin* (2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

Curatorial and exhibition systems are confronted with the fact that all discourses are located, that is, they are formed and begin somewhere, they have a temporal and spatial basis, and they operate synchronically and diachronically. The located nature of cultural discourses, along with their history of discontinuities and transitions, confronts curatorial practices with the fragility of universalized conceptions of history, culture and artistic procedures.²⁴

As Enwezor makes clear, this close attention to the temporally and spatially located nature of cultural discourses is necessary to counter any continuing modernist-formalist moves to uphold art as an autonomous category detached from any meaningful social function as well as the equally detached abstractions attendant upon the reduction of art and its public display to capitalist spectacle and the entertainment industry.

When viewed from this perspective, the international survey show can be understood as a potential platform for the acting out of a highly complex and shifting vision of cultural identity. Moreover, it can be interpreted as one with the potential to critically unsettle ingrained orientalist relations of dominance by framing cultural identity as something that is not only multiple and uncertain, but also open to the productive possibility of transformation in the face of changing circumstances of particular time and place. It is consequently possible to view the international survey show as indicative of an interactive renewal of international cultural and social relations beyond the inherent inequalities of western colonialism/imperialism and, by extension, the prospect of a more equal, though still differentiated, non western-centric society (Fig. 2.5).

It would be wrong, however, to think of curatorial engagements with cultural identity as being limited solely to the international survey show format. Since the 1980s, numerous solo and group exhibitions have been staged that, like the international survey show, have acted as a focus for critical curatorial engagements with questions of cultural

identity and associated relations of social dominance. Identity exhibitions of this sort have often gone beyond the expansive generalizations of the international survey show to draw attention to highly specific, geographically located examples of cultural hybridity/performativity. Consider here, for example, the 1996 travelling exhibition *Distant Relations*, which sought to draw attention to dialogue among Chicano, Irish and Mexican artists.²⁵ In spite of their heightened cultural specificity, identity shows such as this have nevertheless remained more or less wedded to the same precepts that continue to govern the workings of the international survey exhibition; that is to say, the notion that cultural identity is shifting and contingent as well as culturally located and that this conjunction constitutes an effective locus for deconstructive intervention.

In recent years, the staging of exhibitions following the established identity show format has extended beyond westernized liberal-democratic contexts to developing parts of the world whose political systems are, by comparison with those of western liberal democracies, rather more authoritarian in outlook. One of the more high-profile instances of this extension is the emergence since the late 1990s of a number of recurring international survey exhibitions within the PRC. These shows, which include the now internationally renowned Shanghai Biennale, are ostensibly similar in terms of their organization to identity shows staged in western(ized) liberal-democratic contexts. However, in terms of theme and critical intent they often depart markedly from the critically deconstructivist concerns of western(ized) curators by focusing on practical themes at the forefront of current ideological thinking within the PRC as part of the country's centrally directed program of industrialization/urbanization. Consider here, for example, successive titular themes used as curatorial foci for the staging of the Shanghai Biennale, which include *Urban Creation* (2002), *Techniques of the Visible* (2004),

²⁴Ibid., p. 224.

²⁵Ziff (1996).

Hyperdesign (2006) and *Translocalmotion* (2008). In the context of a politically authoritarian and, since the mid-1990s, increasingly nationalistic China, this resistance to deconstructivist thinking and practice is not only due to the prevailing instrumentalism of China's ruling Communist Party, but also to continuing cultural tensions inherent to Chinese modernity as well as the demands of late, increasingly international capitalism.

As David Clarke has indicated, since its beginnings during the early twentieth century Chinese modernity has been informed strongly by a desire to uphold China's civilization-specific identity in the face of outside cultural influences as way of avoiding 'some kind of felt deracination'.²⁶ In relation to such tensions, the pervasive uncertainties of deconstructivist theory and practice are clearly problematic since they not only threaten to undercut the perceived separateness of China's cultural identity from that of the West, but also the authority of China's ruling Communist Party (CCP) as a national focus for progressive social and economic development. Among numerous writings indicative of the problematic status of deconstructivist theory and practice in the PRC is the curator and historian, Gao Minglu's essay "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth" in which the author argues against deconstructivism in favour of 'Total Modernity': a closely integrated synthetic relationship between artistic production and reception and the construction of the modern Chinese nation state.²⁷ It should be no surprise, therefore, that political directives on the staging of public exhibitions within the PRC continue to prohibit anything that might be seen to challenge China's cultural, social and/or political integrity.

That said, it would be wrong to categorize all identity-type exhibitions staged within the PRC as totally resistant to deconstructive theory and practice. As the following discussion shows, in the case of the Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, it is possible to identify an instance of curatorial practice within the PRC that not only involves the espousal of deconstructivist attitudes familiar to artists and curators working with western (ized) liberal-democratic contexts, but that also calls for a rededication to the most unsettling and problematic implications of deconstructive theory for our understanding of identity. However, as I shall seek to demonstrate, this open curatorial espousal of a deconstructivist view of identity was not—despite its apparent critical virulence—itself immune to the debilitating effects of localized restrictions on thought and practice within the PRC. Restrictions could have compelled the curators of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* to gloss over the particularity of localized political conditions



Fig. 2.6 Liu Dahong, *Faith on a Horse* (2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, *farewell to post-colonialism*, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

surrounding the staging of public exhibitions in favour of a problematically de-territorialized view of the critical potential of their own practice (Fig. 2.6).

2.4 Deconstructing the Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*

Postcolonialism has always had its detractors among those on the Right who seek to uphold national-essentialist views of cultural identity and sociocultural hierarchy. Recently, however, there are signs that a critique of established post-colonialist discourse has begun to emerge from within the international art world that had previously embraced it as a focus of critical resistance to western colonialist/imperialist relations of dominance. In intellectual terms this critique is strongly associated with emerging discourses related to the concept of contemporaneity, which have begun to cast significant doubts on the universal applicability of western(ized) postmodernist discourses as a means of elucidating the significance of contemporary art. Those same discourses have also extended critical legitimacy to cultural perspectives resistant to internationally dominant poststructuralism.²⁸

Among the material signs of this emerging critique is the playfully titled Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, which was staged at the Guangdong Museum of Art in the south-western Chinese city of Guangzhou close to the border with Hong Kong between 6 September and 16 November 2008. Since its inauguration in 2002, the Guangzhou Triennial has established an international reputation as one of Asia's leading contemporary art

²⁶Clarke (2008, p. 274).

²⁷Gao (2008, pp. 135–164).

²⁸Smith et al. (2008).

events by acting as a platform for the staging of a series of highly ambitious survey shows—*Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art 1990–2002* (2002), *Beyond: An Extraordinary Space of Experimentation for Modernization* (2005), *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* (2008), and *Meta-question: Back to the Museum Per Se* (2011)—each of which has involved the presentation of a curatorial vision critical of conventional artistic, curatorial and/or art-historical thinking.

As its title indicates, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* was intended as a focus for debate relating to the possibility of a departure from the now well established use of the international survey show as a public platform for postcolonialist criticism. According to collective statements issued by Sarat Maharaj, (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung and Gao Shiming,²⁹ the transnational curatorial team responsible for the staging of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, there are two pressing reasons for the joining of this debate. The first is that post-colonialism can, like the politics of identity in general, be understood to have undermined the radicalism of its own critical positioning by supporting the establishment of an ‘institutionalised pluralistic landscape’ associated with the emergence of political correctness. In Maharaj, Chang and Gao’s view, the establishment of this landscape has ushered in strongly normative-managerialist ways of thinking on issues of diversity and multiculturalism that have not only hindered artistic creativity, but also the development of fresh theoretical perspectives on the production and showing of art.³⁰ The second reason given by Maharaj, Chang and Gao is that the establishment of these normative-managerialist ways of thinking has resulted in an unduly simplistic (indeed, ‘false’) dialectical understanding of East–West/North–South relations of dominance, or, as they describe it, a ‘tyranny of the Other’. As Maharaj, Chang and Gao would have it, this simplistic dialectical understanding of cultural difference has, in guiding the construction of the self as a subject solely in relation to ‘the Other’, obscured a necessary understanding that ‘alien existence’ is not simply a matter of ‘living among “the Other”’ but also the “diverse existence” found within every corporeal being [...] the living experimentation that is taking place in each body, and [...] forays into foreign territories within ourselves’.³¹

²⁹(Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung is the Hong Kong-based Director of the Hanart TZ Gallery and curator of the influential 1993 exhibition *China’s New Art Post-1989*. Gao Shiming is Associate Professor of Art History and Head of the centre for Visual Cultural Research at the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. Sarat Maharaj is the London-based academic and curator best known for his scholarly writings on Marcel Duchamp, Richard Hamilton and James Joyce as well as his role as a co-curator of Documenta XI in 2003.

³⁰Maharaj et al. (2008).

³¹ibid., pp. 18–19.

On the basis of this two-part analysis, Maharaj, Chang and Gao then go on to argue that to maintain the radical edge of international curatorial practice it has become necessary to reinstate a more complex, de-institutionalized understanding of difference as well as an “ethics of difference” within the framework of difference in cultural production’. Moreover, they argue that it is also necessary to support the development of a ‘post-West society’ involving a global network of reciprocal (interactive/non-hierarchical) relationships between north, south, east and west set alongside a renewal of artistic creativity, particularly with regard to the immanence of the new media landscape and the unfolding of ‘hyperreality’.³²

As Maharaj, Chang and Gao are at pains to make clear, this call for a departure from the established conventions of the international survey show should not, however, be thought of, despite the ostensible significance of the title *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, as an outright ‘denial of the importance and rewards’ of postcolonialism as an ‘intellectual tradition’. An outright denial of this sort would, they argue, be entirely insupportable because ‘in the real world, the political conditions criticized by postcolonialism have not receded, but are in many ways even further entrenched under the machinery of globalization’ (2008: 2). Instead, it should be understood to signal not only the need for a departure from the established conventions of postcolonialist curatorial practice, but also a return to an earlier more radical poststructuralist conception of identity; in other words, it is a ‘goodbye’ that is, at the same time, a wish that postcolonialism as a critical discourse might continue to ‘fare well’.³³

As a number of commentators have indicated, the extent to which Maharaj, Chang and Gao were able to bring about a departure from the now well-established format of the international survey show through the staging of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* is open to question. As Charles Labelle (2009) indicates, writing in a review of the Triennial, in terms of its final presentation the exhibition was very much like any other museum-based international survey show of contemporary art insofar as it involved the bringing together of a large and technically diverse array of artworks displayed within a series of now standard ‘white cube’ and ‘black box’ gallery spaces. What is more, many of the artworks included in the exhibition had clearly been produced in close, almost illustrative, conformity with the now heavily scripted expectations of established postcolonialist curatorial discourse otherwise criticized by Maharaj, Chang and Gao. Consider here, for example, Maria Thereza Alves’s *Wake in Guangzhou: The History of the Earth* (2008), which presented seed dispersal in nature as what might be seen as a

³²ibid., p. 2.

³³ibid., p. 2.



Fig. 2.7 Wu Shanzhuan, *The Yellow Flight* (1995–2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

generalizing metaphor for social mobility within Guangzhou but without any obvious searching critical engagement with or impact upon actual social praxis.³⁴ What is more, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* can be seen to have shared in a tendency exhibited by other international survey shows of late (for example, the 2006 Sydney Biennale)³⁵ towards a spectacular overcrowding of artworks similar to that historically associated with European salon exhibitions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a result, visitors to *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* were confronted by an overwhelming superfluity (overdetermination) of meaning that arguably veered more towards a spectacular assertion of phallogocentric plenitude (of a sort criticized by Enwezor) than a performative enactment of open-ended diversity (Fig. 2.7).

These problematic adherences to the established conventions of the international survey show, notwithstanding the staging of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, can be understood to have broken new ground in two significant ways. One of these is the decision on the part of the show's curators to hold a series of seven discussions between artists, curators and scholars from the PRC and elsewhere, titled 'Forums in Motion'. These forums, which were staged to 'clarify issues hindering artistic exploration, and to expose new conditions that are gradually becoming central concerns

of the cultural world',³⁶ went some way to addressing perennial curatorial concerns relating to the question of whether artworks included in international survey shows should respond to the authority of an organizing theme or whether the organizing theme should reflect an approach and/or set of characteristics shared by the chosen artworks.

The other way in which the staging of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* can be understood to have diverged from the established conventions of the international survey show is in its use of curatorial sub-themes as an organizational framework attached to discourses unfolding as part of the exhibition's Forums in Motion. These themes, which included Middle East Channel, curated by Khaled Ramadan; East–South: Out of Sight, curated by Sopawan Boonnimitra; Now in Coming, curated by Guo Xiaoyan and Cui Qiao; Tea Pavilion, curated by Dorothee Albrecht; Mornings in Mexico, curated by Steven Lam and Tamar Guimaraes; Mapping Currents for the Third Guangzhou Triennial, curated by Stina Edblom and Asia Art Archive; and Organising Mutation, curated by Leung Chi-wo and Tobias Berger, provided an appropriately multifaceted, sometimes overlapping and ultimately capacious structure for the presentation of artworks that, in some cases, at least, pointed beyond any simplistic dialectical reading of West–East/North–South relations of dominance by presenting enunciation of the post-colonized self through the language of post-colonized others. Consider here, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha's video *Old Land—New Waters* (2007), which engages with post-conflict Vietnamese culture through multicultural indigenous perspectives.

Assessment of the critical reception of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* (both within and outside the PRC) alongside that of the structural sophistication of the exhibition as a realization of the overarching vision of its curators, while important, is not, however, the principal concern of this article. Instead, what follows is an attempt to draw critical attention to the relationship between *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* and the localized socio-political conditions of its staging; conditions which, it shall be argued, can be understood to have significantly compromised Maharaj, Chang and Gao's stated curatorial vision for the exhibition (Fig. 2.8).

A key indicator of the problematic relationship between the curatorial intentions and the prevailing discursive conditions in the PRC is an essay by Gao Shiming included in the catalogue accompanying *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* in which he sets out his personal vision of the exhibition's critical significance. Gao, the only member of the curatorial team responsible for the staging of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* permanently resident within mainland China, begins

³⁴ibid., pp. 168–169.

³⁵See Merewether (2006).

³⁶GZ Triennial (2008).



Fig. 2.8 Qiu Zhijie and the Total Art Studio, *How do I Become a Loser?* (2008), installation view at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, farewell to post-colonialism, Guangdong Museum of Art (2008). Courtesy of (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung

with a series of observations and assertions that can be seen as entirely congruent with the intellectual stance set out in the joint curatorial statement issued by Maharaj, Chang and himself. Gao begins by registering the fact that within mainland China there is continuing resistance to a performative understanding of cultural identity. As he makes clear, this ‘Western perspective’ is widely perceived to be a neo-imperialistic attack on the essential integrity of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation-state.³⁷ Gao then goes on to argue that readers should look beyond the falsity of China’s prevailing national cultural essentialism as well as an ‘anxiety of return’ felt in relation to the pervasively dislocating effects of globalized modernity, towards the acceptance of a rather more complex and unsettling view of the construction of cultural identity as something without clearly defined origins or destinations.³⁸ Gao furthers this line of argument by stating that the construction of cultural identity is not simply a matter of theory, but something that is lived out in practice as part of persistent displacements of meaning brought about by the interface between the phenomenological experience of material reality and the virtual world of new communication technologies.³⁹

Gao does not stop there, however. He goes on to supplement his initial series of observations and assertions by forwarding three related lines of argument that would seem go some way beyond the collective vision mapped out by Maharaj, Chang and himself in relation to the staging of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*. The first of these is that uncertainty not only stretches to our understanding of cultural identity, but also to contemporary politics, insofar as it

is no longer clear, he argues, exactly where, in any context, the division between a polarized politics of the Left and of the Right and, therefore, between ‘freedom or autarchy’ actually lies. In support of this line of argument, Gao cites what he sees as the transformation of communism to radical racism in the context of Serbia’s program of ethnic cleansing during the 1990s (2008: 36). The second of Gao’s lines of argument is that readers should, on the basis of prevailing political uncertainty, resist the institutionalization of restrictive forms of political correctness as well as the polarized politicization of artistic and curatorial practice that has ensued as a result of the influence of postcolonialist discourse. Gao’s third line of argument is that the international survey show provides a highly apposite platform for the promotion of a newly depoliticized (that is to say, a non-politically polarized) vision of cultural identity by dint of its capacity to act as a site for the interactive gathering ‘beyond national frameworks’ of the ‘territories of the world’ as well as ‘different versions of “international” [as] manifestations of desire’.⁴⁰

The position set out by Gao is undeniably an intellectually consistent one insofar as it can be understood to critically undercut the persistence of a simplistic dialectical West–East/North–South view of relations of cultural dominance by extending a deconstructive critique of authority both to China’s indigenous authoritarian nationalism and to the paradoxical standing of institutionalized postcolonialist discourse as a universal focus for cultural criticism. The difficulty with Gao’s argument, however, is that by framing global politics as much of a muchness in support of this double-edged critique he would appear to have left little or no room for engagement with the particular circumstances in relation to which actual relations of dominance take place or, indeed, the possibility of any granular distinction between differing political systems. Gao’s upholding of a rigorously depoliticized view of identity as a critical resistance to authority can thus be seen to point rather worryingly to a radically de-territorialized set of circumstances wherein no further evaluative critique of political difference is deemed to be either possible or necessary.

It is possible to go further in this regard by drawing attention to ways in which Gao’s vision of an effectively featureless global political landscape can be understood to gloss over the particularity of the localized political conditions within mainland China in relation to which *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* and many of its Forums in Motion were staged. Within mainland China there are numerous legal statutes and directives that expressly forbid any public speech or action that might be perceived to undermine the integrity of the Chinese nation state and/or the authoritative

³⁷Gao (2008).

³⁸ibid., pp. 36–37.

³⁹ibid., pp. 37–38.

⁴⁰ibid., p. 41.

standing of the country's ruling Communist Party. These include the formative directive issued in 1949 requiring that all art should conform to the viewpoint of the masses and the strategic aims of the CCP (a directive which, despite an increasing liberalization of culture in the PRC after the death of Mao in 1976, has never been comprehensively rescinded); laws that expressly forbid the making and showing of works of art that challenge the authority of the CCP and/or that undermine the integrity of the Chinese nation state, but that do so through the imposition of vague and ultimately mobile limits which compel artists and curators to adopt a pervasively disciplining panoptical self-surveillance⁴¹; and a Ministry of Culture notice issued in 2001 resolving to 'Cease All Performances and Bloody, Brutal Displays of Obscenity in the Name of "Art"'.⁴² This cumulative battery of laws and directives, as well as the often clandestine means used by the state to police them,⁴³ has created discursive conditions under which most artists and curators working within the PRC, and particularly in mainland China, choose to adopt oblique strategies of resistance involving the careful allegorization/encoding of intended critical significances rather than open resistance to authority.

Among the subjects that have effectively been placed off limits by these discursive restrictions is any public questioning of majority Han Chinese rule over minority ethnic groups such as those in the Tibetan and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Regions in the west of China. While the CCP claims Beijing's sovereignty over such groups as part of the PRC's official status as a multi-cultural state, others, including many among the minority groups themselves, view that claim, as well as the state violence that has been used by Beijing as an assertion of its political authority (e.g. the suppression of the Tibetan uprising of 2008 and the Uighur uprising of 2009), as naked manifestations of Han Chinese colonialist/imperialist rule.⁴⁴ What is more, these restrictions also foreclose any negative discussion of the PRC's growing political and economic involvement with Africa as a means of acquiring raw materials for China's prodigious program of modernization, which is, despite Beijing's continuing protestations to the contrary, open to interpretation as a form of present-day neo-colonialist/imperialist enterprise. As events taking place within public

spaces within the PRC, neither the exhibition *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, nor any of its accompanying Forums in Motion were therefore able to pay any direct/open attention to questions of what might be perceived of as China's own internal and external colonialist/imperialist tendencies.⁴⁵ As a result, it is possible to see the stated curatorial aims of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* as having been severely compromised by an unspoken (unspeakable) subjection to localized restrictions on freedom of speech that prevented any searching critique of authority beyond what is ultimately a simplistic lop-sided dialectical understanding of colonialist/imperialist relations of dominance.

Set against this background, Gao's position and, by extension, that of his curatorial collaborators is one that can be seen to double-back on itself not only by blanking out, but also by effectively becoming complicit with, localized political authority. When seen from this perspective, Gao's deconstruction of political value begins to look more like an obfuscatory generalization than an incisive critical intervention, albeit an understandable one given prevailing discursive restrictions on public expression within mainland China. What is more, it also allows for the title *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* to be reinterpreted beyond the stated intentions of Maharaj, Chang and Gao as an outright and, within the PRC, politically acceptable rejection of westernized influence.

2.5 Beyond the Abstractions of Institutionalized Post-Colonialism

As Maharaj, Chang and Gao indicate, the significance of the title of the Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, is a conceptually ambiguous one. It is not intended to point simply towards a departure from post-colonialist discourse as an institutionalized focus for curatorial thinking and practice, but also a return to a more rigorously deconstructive attention within curatorial circles to questions of identity and associated relations of social dominance. In practice, this signified desire on the part of the curators of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* to exceed current institutional restrictions on curatorial thinking and practice by returning to a more searching deconstructivist view of cultural identity was however, as I have attempted to demonstrate,

⁴¹Catching (2012, pp. 231–249).

⁴²Wu and Wang, op cit., pp. 276–277.

⁴³Catching, op cit.

⁴⁴Tibet was absorbed within the PRC as an autonomous region by force in 1951. It remains a contested space with local activists continuing to pursue independence through public protest and confrontation with the Chinese state. The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region was established as part of the PRC in 1955, prior to which parts of the region had fallen under the nominal control of the Soviet Union. The Uighur region is a historically contested space encompassing numerous ethnic groups and a majority adherence to Islam.

⁴⁵As an invited speaker at the Forum in Motion staged as part of the closing of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* in 2008, the present author signalled in advance a desire to discuss the PRC's own present-day involvement in colonialism/imperialism. The session of the forum concerned was closed to the public and conducted in English (a common way of circumventing legal restrictions on public expression within the PRC). There was also no actual discussion of the topic concerned other than points made in a speech given by the present author.

significantly compromised by localized limitations on public display and freedom of speech within the PRC. One should therefore be wary of accepting at face value the call put forward by Gao for a liberating depoliticization of artistic and curatorial practice as part of the critique of institutionalized postcolonialism. In the context of the PRC this depoliticization looks more like a partial glossing over of than a pervasively critical challenge to established authority—albeit a readily understandable one, given prevailing localized discursive conditions.

Critical attention to specific instances of political authority is, as if we needed reminding, a continuing necessity not just in China but elsewhere; and it is towards such a critical attention that one should now turn with increased urgency as a basis for the renewal of artistic and curatorial purposes. This does not however, I would argue, involve a renunciation of deconstructivist uncertainty, but a revival of a close and abiding deconstructively sensitive attention to the specificity of signified events. It is in relation to this 'grounded' specificity and not, as is commonly assumed, abstracted theorization wherein, I would aver, the

full force of deconstructive criticism inheres. Material events and circumstances are always-already shot through with contradiction and uncertainty as constituents of their very (if ever shifting) particularity. It is this and not the generalized notion of conceptual uncertainty that continues to undermine any supposedly authoritative meaning.

The call for a return to a more rigorously deconstructive approach to questions of identity beyond the limiting abstractions of institutionalized postcolonialism and associated forms of political correctness by the curators of *Farewell to Post-Colonialism* is a highly apposite one. Abstract notions of cultural indeterminacy are neither universally applicable nor automatically effective as a focus for post-colonialist critique. That return should however, not only involve a granular attention, as Okwui Enwezor rightly prompts, to differing cultural approaches as a means of circumventing the socially detached abstractions of bourgeois liberalism and the capitalist spectacle, but also relationships between curatorial practices and their localized discursive contexts, if it is to avoid (a perhaps unintended) complicity with authority.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-662-46487-8>

Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art
Selected Critical Writings and Conversations,
2007-2014

Gladston, P.

2016, XX, 195 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-662-46487-8