

The Trend of the Cao Chang Di Art District as a Place of Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

The Art Districts in China began in Beijing in the 1990s. They are the places where works of contemporary art are produced, exhibited and sold. Cao Chang Di Art District is an art community started by the spontaneous gathering of artists since the end of last century, and famous by Ai Weiwei, who set up his home and studio as a well-known artist in 2000. As art districts spread to the city area from northeast Beijing, Cao Chang Di Art District has relationships with other art districts, particularly the 798 Art District. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the change of the Cao Chang Di Art District, and to explore the features and positioning of the Art Districts in China, based on the view from the Chinese contemporary art perspective. The method of the study depends on literature search and field survey. The results show that: 1) the administrative structure offers basic services and they do not intervene in the exhibition contents or management of arts-related facilities, so that there is a comparatively free creation environment; 2) the creation of new concepts in art work generated by various genres is a main feature of Cao Chang Di Art District; 3) the attention of the society is low because the administrative sector has not enough power to consolidate public relations and large-scale art events. The Cao Chang Di Art District has an allotment of roles as a place of contemporary art on creation, experimentation, exhibition, sales and criticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Cao Chang Di Art District is located in the Cao Chang Di Village of the Cuigezhuang Township, Chaoyang District, Beijing. It is in the northeast in Beijing city and about 17 kilometers away from Tiananmen. Agriculture was the main industry formerly in this village, but urbanization developed rapidly in the 1990s. Laborers moved to Beijing from all over China, and villagers remodeled buildings and rented rooms to fit these migrant workers. The current population of the village is about 30,000, and 96% are migrant residents¹. Ai Weiwei, who was among the original members of Stars Art Group (XingXing, 星星画会), established a gallery named 'China Art Archives & Warehouse' in 1999-2000¹. With Ai Weiwei's great influence, gray brick and the straight design are the main feature of the buildings of the Cao Chang Di Art District. Now, the Cao Chang Di Art District covers an area of about 199800 square meters, and it is intermingled with the residential part of the

¹ 2014.1.6, 中国經濟時報: 農民集体土地上的自主城鎮化

² From <http://gallery.artron.net/class/0-beijing-4.html> [Accessed 2017.8.21]

village. There are 53 galleries making an advance into the Cao Chang Di Art District². The amount of tourists is small because of the few sightseeing facilities and the inconvenient public transportation. Persons interested in art are the main visitors.

2. METHODOLOGY

Literature research and field survey were the main methods used in this study. Literature research includes newspaper articles, publications of fine arts, and web articles. To grasp the use conditions and operation of art facilities, I interviewed an artist, a person involved in a gallery and an administrator in Cao Chang Di Art District by field survey. It is divided into 2 aspects: intervention of the administrative structure and the movement of contemporary art in Cao Cao Chang Di Art District.

2.1 The Trend of the Cao Cao Chang Di Art District

Cao Chang Di Art District development is divided into two periods: the early stage when it was established voluntarily by artists and the stage when it was developed by the traders.

2.1.1 Early Stage of Formation(1990s-2005)

Around 1995, after the Yuan Ming Yuan art village was dismissed, artists moved to the outskirts of Beijing. At that time, the Central Academy of Fine Art moved to “Er Chang”, which was close to the 798 Art District. A small number of academy of fine arts students and artists moved to the Cao Chang Di village, as well as many migrant residents. It is thought that the easiness for artists to move in, together with various factors, was the trigger for which the Cao Chang Di Art District formed in Cao Chang Di Village in the middle of the 1990s, although there is not any record about the artists who moved to Cao Chang Di Village. The district consolidated as an Art District when Ai Weiwei designed and established the “China Art Archives & Warehouse” gallery and the “Fake Studio” atelier on 1999. Because of Ai Weiwei’s international influence and the avant-garde exhibitions in his gallery, more and more artists moved to Cao Chang Di from 2002, and began to rent villager’s apartments and use them as ateliers. After that, around 2005, a professor from Peking University named Sun Liangang who was born in Cao Chang Di Village, through the village committee (administration), advanced the development of the village that had already begun.

2.1.2 Second-stage: the Formation of the Cao Chang Di Art District through the Development of Traders (2005~)

Sun Liangang established areas A,B,C and D in 2005. Different from Ai Weiwei’s “China Art Archives & Warehouse” style and new buildings, areas A,B,C have reconstructed buildings, most were from this village. There are few gray brick construction buildings like the style of Ai Weiwei’s atelier. At present, buildings for art related facilities are constructed in villages and basically followed Ai Weiwei’s design. It can be said that this is the main feature of the space of the Cao Chang Di Art District.

It is different from a township and a town, because the administrative body is a

² From <http://gallery.artron.net/class/0-beijing-4.html> [Accessed 2017.8.21]

village, and there are no rights of land use and no business plan. Therefore, there are no organizations which unify and manage the whole art district. Because the administrative body does not participate in the management of art related facilities, basically including the exhibition contents, there is a free creation environment. The administrative structure of the Cao Chang Di Art District offers only collecting the rent and basic services of safety and health.

2.2.Chinese Contemporary Art in Cao Chang Di Art District

2.2.1 Activity of the Artists

With Ai Weiwei's concept "The wealth of the Chinese mainland is put on a contemporary context as poetic caricature and tradition is overturned"³, experimental art activities are being performed in the Cao Chang Di Art District. Art related facilities mostly share this style, and it is thought that Ai Weiwei's art concept and construction are related to this. For example, the shapes of the buildings aim at simplicity and minimalism "Replica like templates. Design is not important here...it can be said to be a minimalist works, showing some kind of control," said by Ai Weiwei. Other artists are also challenging the possibility that the Chinese contemporary art is expressed by various forms, while having an interest in the Chinese society in the background. For example, a gallery named CCD Workstation, made a documentary film called "Private Memory Project," which was the record from collected data of about 700 people in 4 years until 2012, targeted at the Chinese farmers who experienced the "three year famine". Persons with various viewpoints, not only artists, participated the experimental try of which it can be said: "a document of a private memory is built"⁴.

2.2.2 Art Event

There are two big events in the Cao Chang Di Art District, one is "Beijing Design Week" for the public, the other is "Three Shadows Photography Award" (preceded by the Cao Chang Di Photo Spring of 2009-2012) for the persons involved in art. From 2012, the Cao Chang Di Art District is one of the hubs of the Beijing Design Week, with exhibitions, design atelier openings and performed exhibitions. The Cao Chang Di Art District became a place where general citizens communicate with designers and artists by installation works made there. For example, in 2013, people who have physical disabilities used work for the furniture designer as a "canvas", and drew pictures on it. The special quality of the Cao Chang Di Art District as an "experiment" is also utilized in Beijing Design Week.

"Three Shadows Photography Award" started in 2008. During 2009-2012, the Cao Chang Di Photo Spring event featured exhibitions and other art activities, focusing on photography and video. The Gallery "Three Shadows" sponsored it, and some other galleries participated. After 2012, the "Three Shadows Photography Award" became a big event here and also an important event in Chinese contemporary photography. The feature of this event emphasizes academics, communication with the photographers, the new discovery of a concept of photography and the support young

³ From Ai Weiwei art work 「Sunflower Seeds」 HP: <http://www.aiweiseeds.com/>
[Accessed 2013.12.20]

⁴ From CCD Workstation HP <http://www.ccdworkstation.com/>[Accessed 2013.12.20]

photographers. It provides a multi-cultural communication space in the Cao Chang Di Art District.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Under the influence of Ai Weiwei's advancement, the Cao Chang Di Art District had a unified architecture, and the "place" was inspired by the idea of criticizing Chinese politics and society. With interest in the social background of China and in the art institution as a place to try Chinese contemporary art in a variety of formats, artists came to the Cao Chang Di Art District, created new ideas in their works, and transmitted them in various genres of art works. Artists came from all over the world, forming a new perspective on China's social environment and interacting with Chinese artists, so that an international cultural exchange place was born. The Cao Chang Di Village administrative organization, where the art district is located, has weak administrative powers and is indifferent to art, so that arts-related facility management is basically untouched. For this reason, the Cao Chang Di Art District is a relatively free creative environment. On the other hand, the village committee has no power to organize large-scale art events or do public relations events, so that the attention of the society and the spread to the general citizens are low. The Cao Chang Di Art District inherits the characteristics of "creation place", "experiment place", "exhibition place", "sales place", and "critical place", but as an "exchange place" and an "art business promotion place" it is not enough.

4. CONCLUSIONS

First of all, in China, the government policy and planning for the development of the culture of the country determine, on the promotion of Chinese contemporary art, that the government should approve and support. The major village industry with the cultural creative industry of Cao Chang Di Village need to get assistance from a senior government policy in the future. Secondly, it is necessary that art facilities cooperate, that an autonomy system in the art district is secured, and that support for artists' creation is ensured, while holding events that spread contemporary art.

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