

ROBERTS & TILTON

Zhao Zhao: *Repetition*
by Sun Dongdong

The "golden age of collecting" is the term the media likes to use to describe the current trend of widespread collecting in China. To be sure, not only are antique and curio markets opening up in every city and town across the country, but programs on collecting and appraisal are popping up on Chinese television as a form of entertainment. The legend of prosperity and the story of a cultural renaissance have gotten wrapped up in this fetish for "ancient things," as "thousands of years of cultural tradition" are transformed into a consumable "object." Each artifact embodies the most fundamental themes of fetishism: "irreducible materiality; a fixed power to repeat an original event of singular synthesis or ordering; the institutional construction of consciousness of the social value of things; and the material fetish as an object established in an intense relation to and with power over the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals" (William Pietz, *The Problem of the Fetish*).

Collectors yearn for a uniquely wise vision, and are dedicated to discovering, within the rivers of history, that ancient object that belongs to them. At the moment their gaze falls on the "object," history becomes condensed into an era style, a flavor of time. If history is synonymous with "oldness," or serves as an aesthetic reference system, does that imply a certain rift in time and space within the individual consciousness? The interest in the artifact trumps history, using a certain temporal taste to complete, within a lifestyle (a closed system), self-affirmation, while evading the continuous narrative of space. Thus, it contains the individual's spontaneous response to "cultural identity" and "tradition," but it is difficult to bestow it with conceptual momentum. Instead, it serves as a foil to the negative state of "self-contraction," as well as the self-construction of that sense of security without a setting. Yet as soon as the setting is drawn in, we discover that we still live under a certain shadow of history.

Zhao Zhao's *Repetition* is a projection of the obliteration of history, silent and yet unsettling. How this work is understood depends on the standpoint of the viewer—the main body of the work appears in a minimalist form: a one meter cube comprising dozens of stone blocks of different sizes. Aside from differences in size, material and color, there are no other clear differences between these blocks, all confined within a single set of dimensions. But this constrained, rational appearance is actually the result of violence. From the artwork explanation or documentary photographs on the wall, the viewer learns that each stone block

was in a previous incarnation a damaged ancient Chinese Buddha sculpture. The artist purchased them and brought them together at a stone carver's shop in Hebei Province where, on the machine bed, after bright sparks and specks of flying dust, their original markers of status, era styles and traces of time were cut away by a spinning blade. It is as if the stones have gone through a cycle, becoming once again "new" materials waiting to be carved.

Zhao Zhao, however, decided to halt this expectation. In his eyes, the surfaces of these stones have been bestowed with a new ideology by modern machinery, leaving behind the traces of industrial civilization. We could of course call this artistic sophistry. But Zhao Zhao's use of the term "new" actually serves to endorse the "old." *Repetition* is not an installation combining Futurist ideas with Minimalist style. It is more of a work of project art, opening up a temporary public setting through a "radical" act. In this setting, Zhao Zhao uses his own "destruction of the old" to place China's dynastic politics and modern politics together within this new square meter cube. These Buddha statues were already damaged before the cutting in one of China's many historic campaigns to destroy Buddhism, perhaps long ago in the "three disasters of Wu," or more recently in the "destroy the four olds" campaign during the early days of the Cultural Revolution. Whether it was in the former, being replaced as the state religion, or the latter, being treated as a symbol of the feudal superstitions of old ideas and culture, they were all the objects of violence under the "renewal" engaged by the system of authority. The place-markers of civilization and barbarism, new and old, are constantly shifting, but political violence plays out again and again in history. Another thing that constantly repeats is the authority system's top-down rehabilitation of the so called "old." Just as those tattered Buddha statues have been bestowed with new power, and returned to social life, Zhao Zhao's individual violence in *Again* is his rejection and mockery of this benevolence—"this is what you really want." Here, Zhao Zhao is not rejecting the object but openly resisting that taming of the individual will to freedom transmitted by the mythos of history.

For the object, or perhaps the product, we see in *Repetition* the fate of "faith" to constantly descend, and sometimes to pace about in the valley of primal desire. In this day, "utopia" no longer has the power to ignite passion for the future, and every social ideology has lost the dignity it once enjoyed in the past. When the people come to feel that all they can hope for is their own everyday lives, then things become their most faithful companions. Consumption is a new path to redemption. We use sales and trades to judge the values (prices) in the world, including those broken ancient Buddha statues. Thus, for many people, the radicalism of *Repetition* lies not in Zhao Zhao's destruction of "culture," but in his cutting away of their basis for appraising the world.