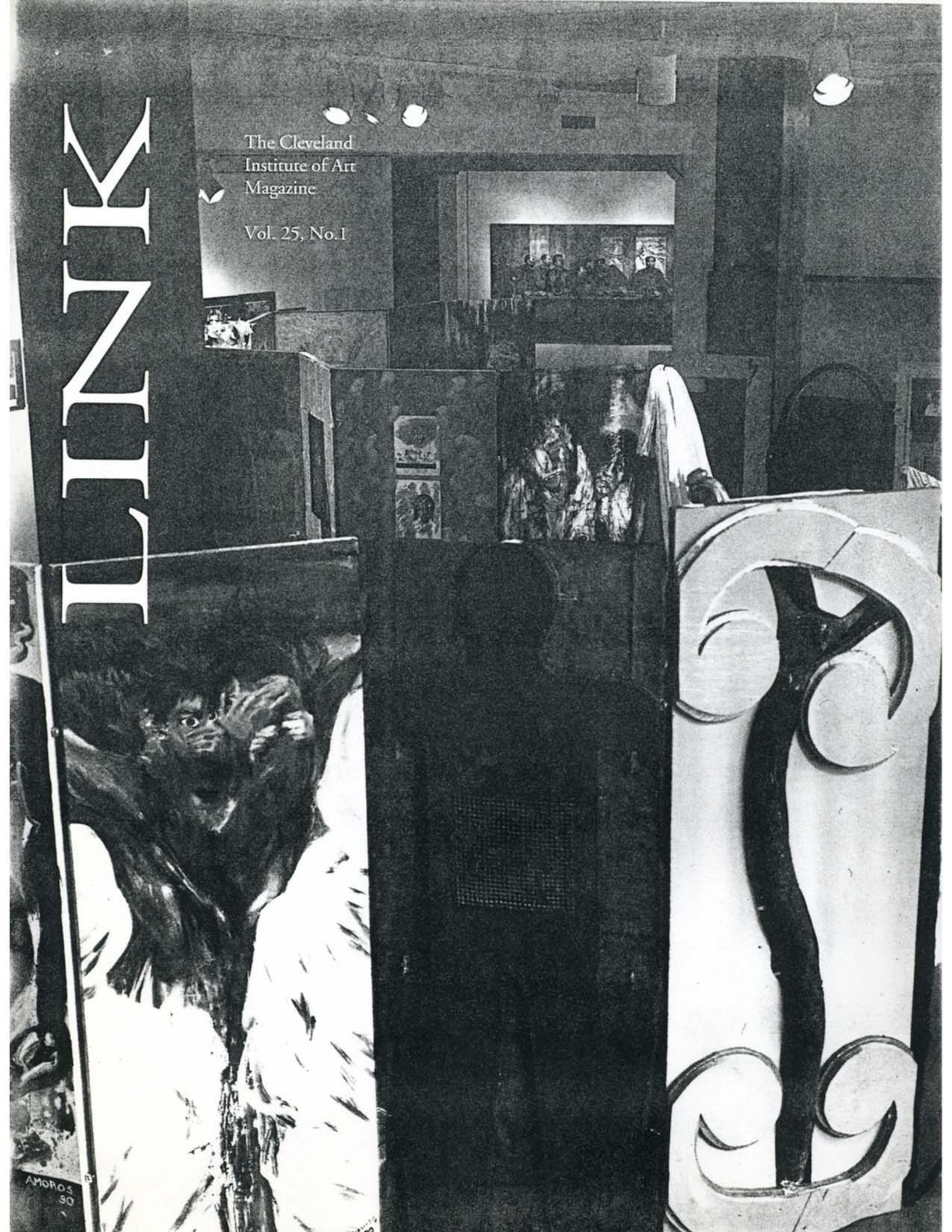


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"C h i n a : J u n e

By Doug Utter

Last year's "African American Abstract Painting: 1945-75" and "Ethnographic Jewelry" exhibitions marked a change in direction toward more multicultural, external programming in CIA's Reinberger Galleries. That direction continued with fall's first show, organized by the Asian American Art Centre in New York.

"China: June 4, 1989..." is a powerfully moving exhibition of political art that re-creates and indicts a tragic moment in recent history. It speaks of demonstrators at the military crackdown in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, and of the frustration of people everywhere who witnessed the atrocities via media coverage. A wide range of spontaneous, deeply emotional works and photo documentation tell the story of students who were injured or killed when they tried to be free. It is an exhibit of truth and blood.

During the spring of 1989, the AAAC kept a close watch on the student pro-democracy movement in China. Sensing that "a profound thing would happen," as AAAC Director Robert Lee recalled, the center was prepared to respond quickly. Immediately after tanks rolled into Beijing on June 4, Lee sent out a call to artists, envisioning a show of protest open to all.

"We formed the idea of allowing each person to submit a door and put their work on it...that way, the idea to link all works together was an easy one to develop, and the exhibition could grow," Lee said.

Images in all formats and media arrived, however. By October, 1989, when the exhibit opened at Blum Helman Warehouse in Soho, it included drawings, photographs, and sculptures, as well as large-scale takeoffs on Picasso's "Guernica" by Ling Ling (aka Billy Harlem) and Leonardo's "The Last Supper" by Zhang Hongtu. More than 70 doors had been assembled. Many were painted, others inscribed with poems, or inlaid and encrusted with everything from photographs to fortune cookies. Hinged together, they began to form a new Great Wall of China, a wall of protest and sorrow, outrage and faith.

Eventually, artists all over the world sent 200 doors. As "China" grew, truth and blood remained the common denominator. New entries extended its unique rigor, and its exposition penetrated ever more surely into a political heart of darkness.

After appearing at PS 1 in New York in 1990, the show travelled to the Hong Kong Art Centre, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), and Austin's MexicArt. In June, 1990, "China" was to appear in the Senate Rotunda of the Russell Building in Washington, DC, as part of a larger exhibit commemorating Tiananmen Square, sponsored by the Congressional Human Rights Foundation and Sen. Ted Kennedy. Shortly before the opening, Lee was told that three works ("The Wall", "The Last Banquet," "The very, very small number of people") were considered inappropriate by the Senate Rules and Ethics committees, and had to be removed.

Vito Acconci's "China Doll Flag" transformed a Chinese national flag into a body bag.

4, 1989..."

Lee did not want to risk embroiling the National Endowment for the Arts, which had partially funded "China," in further controversy; nor would he self-censor an exhibition focusing on freedom of speech. In a no-win position, he withdrew all the "China" works. Surviving this peculiar censorship in the citadel of democracy, "China" gained a new dimension as commentary on repression.

It remains an intimate exhibition, despite its size. Each work bears witness on its own terms, partly because of the great diversity of styles and media. Despite the presence of such art-world luminaries as Leon Golub, Vito Acconci, Barbara Kruger, and Luis Camnitzer, "China" feels homemade. The 38 doors brought to CIA feel improvisational, rough and direct in their impact. They uncoil from their hinges like a restless dragon, linking expressions of shock and anger in emotional unity. These doors are thresholds, suggesting the difficulty of passing from hardship and murder to a better world. But they also symbolize the continuity of resistance to repression in China and everywhere.

One of the more subtly gut-wrenching works in "China" is not a door at all. Byron Kim's "The very, very small number of people" is a conceptual, idiosyncratic piece consisting of a white figure, marked with Chinese medical notations, standing in a wire bird cage mounted on a stand. The cage is encircled by a belt of 54 test tubes, each containing a sample of the artist's blood. This work was censored in Washington because it reminded someone of "voodoo." Whether or not "voodoo" is indeed inappropriate to the Senate chambers, no doubt it was the blood itself that caused offense. Blood is a very personal medium, and reality always bothers someone. The title, too, is evocative: how few people died, yet how many were affected; how personal a thing revolution must always be, how concrete and how ordinary.

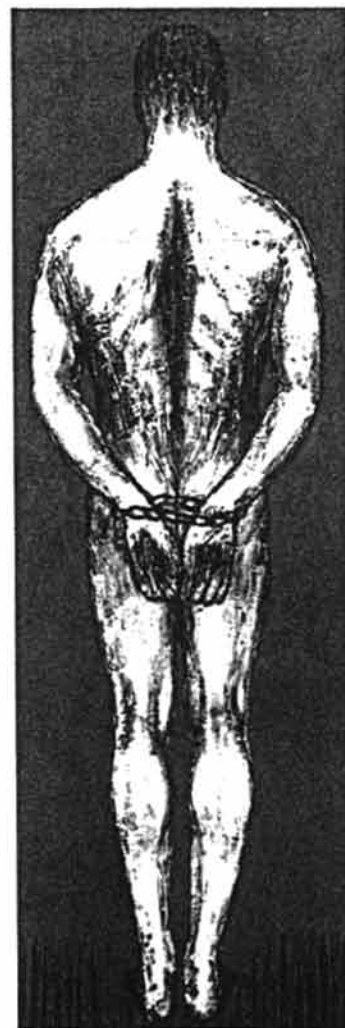
The panoramic sweep of events as seen through history or television is misleading. There is no ennobling drama inherent in human suffering, and this is the point that "China" makes. As one door states, "There is no overview." The grief and the consolation that each work conveys are offered twice: once to us, once to the dead and their families and friends. ♦

Doug Utter, a Cleveland-based painter and art writer, has been published in the *New Art Examiner* and *Dialogue*.



Image courtesy of the artist

"Guernica" by Ling Ling, who was also known as Billy Harlem, reprises the Picasso through Chinese American eyes.



Esperanza Cortes
Untitled, acrylic &
plaster on wood

courtesy Asian American Art Centre



Robert Lee (left), director
of the Asian American
Art Centre, and artist
Hongtu Zhang

courtesy Asian American Art Centre

Democracy meets force and censorship