One on One: Pi Li: Going Public
by Carolee Thea

Based in Beijing, 32-year-old Pi Li embodies the new economically liberated China, wearing many hats: he is a critic, art historian and art dealer who co-founded the gallery UniversalStudios-beijing, in addition to advising international private collections and playing golf in his spare time. The gallery, situated beyond the city center, has an attached café where artists and art-people convene informally for drinks, cigarettes, discussions and karaoke. ArtAsiaPacific caught up with Pi Li to discuss his career as well as recent projects such as his role as a member of the curatorial team for the biennial Media_City Seoul in late 2006.

ArtAsiaPacific: You were born in 1975 at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution and grew up in the 1980s when Deng Xiaoping began implementing the trade and domestic reforms that ultimately shaped today's China. Additionally, your father, as a critic and professor at Central Academy, was influential in contemporary art discourse during that period. What is your perspective on the development of contemporary art in China?

Pi Li: The 1980s were the beginning of Chinese contemporary art; it was the first time artists experimented with performance and conceptual art. New art magazines introduced both international and local art to broader audiences. Frankly, many people were surprised that the government allowed these activities. Prior to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, my father, Pi Daojian, who was teaching art history at Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, supported the new magazines and was among the first generation of scholars to follow contemporary Chinese art. In those days, young artists congregated at our home at night to discuss ideas and and philosophies. I was a young and impressionable middle school student and soaked up everything. Following Tiananmen, my father was criticized and the magazines were shut down.

AAP: Were you always interested in pursuing art as a career?

PL: Actually, my father encouraged me to study economics or media, but I went to Central Academy, graduating in 1996. By 1994, I was already writing criticism on contemporary art and cultural issues when two pioneering commercial contemporary art galleries opened, Red Gate and Courtyard. Courtyard offered me a job as assistant director and eventually sent me abroad to study at the Contemporary Art Center of Glasgow in the UK. Glasgow had a strong alternative and artist-run scene, and being there made me think about opening a non-profit art space in Beijing.

When I returned, I quit my job and became an independent curator. In 2001, around the time of the third Shanghai Biennale – the first to include international artists – I was offered a teaching job at Central Academy.

AAP: The third Shanghai Biennale was a benchmark event, wasn't it?

PL: Yes. Curated by my former professor Hou Hanru, it was a revolutionary project in that it was the first such exhibition in China to attempt a global perspective. Since then, the government has incorporated contemporary art in its cultural programs and asked art professionals to curate shows. However, it has become clear that such exhibitions serve propaganda purposes.

One exhibition for which I was an assistant curator, "Alors la Chine?" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2003, provided a troubling experience. We were asked to curate an official exhibition, but the French museum officials treated the artists arrogantly, ignored the curators and censored proposals containing naked bodies or violence. The exhibition that emerged,

although beautiful, was replete with exotic political coatings confirming the French imagination of China rather than representing the Chinese perspective.

AAP: Second-guessing the ethicalness of your multiple roles as critic, curator and gallery owner might represent a hypocritical Western bias. Perhaps with the current market boom, one is tempted to test the limits of certain international practices.

PL: One of the reasons I came to open a gallery, UniversalStudios, is that I lost faith in large institutions such as biennials or art fairs. My impetus came also from the Chinese government's funding of international official art while ignoring local art organizations. When I first met my partner, Waling Boers of Berlin's BüroFriedrich Gallery, we exchanged ideas and decided to open a non-profit gallery in Beijing. We first founded the 798 Gallery in Beijing and moved shortly to our present space, a huge renovated warehouse.

At first we wanted to create a not-for-profit space [a non-profit must be registered and demands a 15% tax]. Now, UniversalStudios has evolved into a project space in which we curate exhibitions and invite others to organize shows, but also sell art.

AAP: You were recently on the curatorial team for the biennial exhibition Media_City Seoul, organized under the theme "Dual Realities." The exhibition is a public event that seeks to integrate new technologies and contemporary trans-disciplinary art. Did the curatorial team consider how technology affects the role of the artist?

PL: The Internet and multimedia have become part of our lives; the physical world and virtual reality are now closely interrelated and integrated. "Dual Realities" approached new concepts of physicality with an artistic language of diverse and creative ideas.

AAP: What is your stance on corporate support of new media experimentation?

PL: I think most Asian companies, such as Samsung and SONY, support art as a way to dress up their products. In 2000, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara London curated the first Media_City Seoul, which was quite a spectacle. I was in fact influenced by your interview with Barbara in your book, *Foci: Interviews with 10 International Curators* (2001), in which she talked about the Fluxus media artist Nam June Paik, whose work was purely art oriented. We [the curators] liked this idea and took on a low-tech approach, one that emerged from the artist. Also, our budget was only one million dollars where former budgets were more than 10 million.

AAP: Who were some of the artists in your show and how did they relate to the theme?

PL: Lo Din, a very young artist, did a performance for the opening. Using a video camera, he projected scenes onto a canvas or wall and they were then quickly painted using brushes and fluorescent paints. As the performance continued, the impossibility of this attempt was captured in unbroken time and became a massive, roughly-drawn and entangled landscape panting.

Yan Jun addressed the prevalence of cheap pirate DVDs in China. Yan collected 3,000 DVDs and brought them to the exhibition, where visitors could choose among them for free. There were also 20 monitors playing illegal DVDs, set up in such a way that the videos? music, dialogues and special effects could be seen simultaneously.

Timothy Jaeger+Alex Dragulescu's RESPAM–inbox (2005) is a net.art platform for the collection and cultural integration of unwanted abject data such as solicitous spam emails. It highlights the idea that spam threatens to turn the once utopian cyber landscape into an abyss of junk mail. Also, Matthew Briand's installation deposited viewers in a space that created the illusion of being in a virtual reality simulation program. Actually, the room was filled with a 5-centimeter thick layer of talcum powder illuminated by a green laser.

AAP: Did you include any of the artists you represent at Universal Studios?

PL: I know, it's hard to keep the balance. I may be criticized, but if I don't show the artists I work with, then that's also unfair because I really believe in them. I don't think we should hide this connection and so I plan to stop curating major exhibitions.