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Contemporaneity, Media, and Meaning: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Artistic Practices in China and North Macedonia

Abstract: This research examines contemporary artistic practices in China and North Macedonia through a comparative perspective that brings together medium-based and conceptual correspondences within the broader context of globalization. Rather than relying on historical parallelism, the research focuses on works produced after 2000 with the intention to trace how different artistic approaches engage similar concerns—particularly those related to identity, memory, and the shifting nature of visual language. The analysis places Chinese artists such as Cao Fei, Yang Fudong, and Xu Bing in relation to Macedonian artists including Robert Jankuloski, Slavica Janešlieva, and Monika Moteska. While operating within different institutional and cultural conditions, their practices converge around questions of body, memory, and language, articulated through materiality, image construction, and archival and spatial processes. Rather than establishing direct historical equivalences, the study highlights the aesthetic resemblances across different media, emphasizing how artists in both contexts respond to globalization through distinct yet comparable visual and conceptual approaches. Although centered on the contemporary production, these works are understood as shaped by earlier post-socialist transformations that continue to shape artistic and institutional conditions. The paper argues that globalization does not produce homogenization, but rather allows for the emergence of parallel aesthetic strategies that reflect both shared global frameworks and specific local trajectories. By bringing medium, visual language, and conceptual structure into the foreground, the study proposes a model of comparison that prioritizes aesthetic relations over chronological symmetry, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary art in China and the post-Yugoslav contexts.

Keywords: contemporary art; globalization; China; North Macedonia; body; memory; language.

Introduction

In the context of globalization, contemporary art has increasingly operated within transnational networks which have enabled new forms of visibility, exchange, and conceptual translation.¹ However, these processes do not result in homogenized

¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27–30.

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visual cultures. Rather, they have produced complex configurations in which local artistic practices are continuously rearticulated through global frameworks, while simultaneously retaining distinct historical and cultural trajectories.² This tension between global circulation and local specificity becomes particularly evident when examining artistic developments in China and the post-Yugoslav context.

This paper proposes a comparative approach that focuses on aesthetic and medium-based correspondences between contemporary artistic practices in China and North Macedonia. Rather than establishing direct historical equivalences, the analysis centers on works produced after 2000—a period marked by intensified globalization, the expansion of the art market, and increasingly dense connections between artistic scenes.³ Within this framework, artists engage with their shared thematic interests—such as identity, memory, and the transformation of visual language—through diverse yet conceptually comparable strategies.

The study discusses selected Chinese artists working across painting, video, and conceptual practices—Cao Fei, Xu Bing, and Yang Fudong—and Macedonian artists including Robert Jankuloski, Slavica Janešlieva, and Monika Moteska. The artists were selected not as representative figures of national artistic scenes, but as individual case studies whose practices reveal comparable artistic concerns despite emerging from different cultural and institutional contexts. Although their works employ different media and visual strategies, they converge around questions of body, memory, and language, which form the principal analytical framework of this study. In this sense, the comparison is not based on medium equivalence or historical symmetry, but on the identification of aesthetic structures and conceptual correspondences that operate across different visual systems.

Cao Fei and Monika Moteska are paired through their different approaches to embodiment and transformation; Yang Fudong and Slavica Janešlieva through their engagement with memory, temporality, and fragmented narrative structures; Xu Bing and Robert Jankuloski through their investigation of sign systems, interpretation, and the instability of meaning. These pairings are therefore based on shared artistic problematics rather than medium specificity, geographical proximity, or historical equivalence.

At the same time, the contemporary practices examined in this paper are rooted in earlier post-socialist transformations. Rather than marking a closed historical phase, the post-socialist condition can be understood, following Boris Groys, as an ongoing negotiation between ideological residue and contemporary cultural production, where past systems persist in transformed and often invisible forms.⁴ In China, the shift from socialist ideology to market-oriented reforms, particularly since the 1990s, has paved the way for the emergence of hybrid visual languages that remain relevant in today's artistic production.⁵ In North Macedonia, the transitional period

² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 212–214.

³ Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Laurence King, 2011), 6–12.

⁴ Boris Groys, “The Post-Communist Condition,” in *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), 149–153.

⁵ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s–2000s* (Thames & Hudson, 2014), 177–180.

following the declaration of independence in 1991 gave rise to a more gradual and layered development in which contemporary artistic practices increasingly embraced fragmentation, process-based structures, and archival strategies. This development reflected a broader shift away from object-centered production toward relational and socially embedded practices.⁶ These trajectories are evidently different, but do not necessarily render their comparison invalid; rather, they highlight the importance of considering globalization as a framework that accommodates asymmetrical and non-synchronous developments.

By bringing medium, visual language, and conceptual structure to the foreground, this paper aims to move beyond models of comparison based on chronological simultaneity. Instead, it proposes an approach that emphasizes aesthetic relationships as dynamic processes shaped by both global conditions and specific histories of local significance. Through this lens, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary art in China and the post-Yugoslav contexts—that North Macedonia is a part of—have managed to negotiate the intersections of globalization, memory, and visual culture.

Theoretical framework

The comparative approach developed in this study is grounded in the perception and understanding of contemporaneity, namely as a heterogeneous and discordant condition. Rather than assuming the existence of a distinct present time on a global scale, here contemporary art is approached as a field which is structured by multiple temporalities, uneven developments, and context-specific trajectories. In this sense, globalization does not erase diversity, but it rather reconfigures it, thus producing a complex interplay between local circumstances and transnational visual languages.⁷

Within this framework, aesthetic production is not seen as a reflection of well-established cultural identities, but rather as a dynamic process of negotiation. As Nestor Garcia Canclini suggests, contemporary cultural practices emerge through processes of hybridization, where different historical, social, and visual elements intersect and generate new forms of meaning.⁸ This perspective allows for an analysis that goes beyond binary oppositions—such as local versus global or tradition versus modernity—and instead focuses on the fluid and relational nature of artistic practices.

At the same time, the notion of the image itself requires reconsideration within contemporary visual culture. As Mitchell argues, images are not passive representations but active agents that participate in the construction of meaning and social

⁶ Suzana Milevska, *Participatory Art: A Paradigm Shift from Objects to Subjects* (Kontrapunkt, 2023), 23–25, 31.

⁷ Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 6–12.

⁸ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 12–20.

relations.⁹ This understanding is particularly relevant when examining artistic practices that engage with ideology, memory, and the body, as these are not merely depicted but materially and conceptually produced through visual strategies.

In post-socialist contexts, these processes are further complicated by the legacy of the ideological systems and their subsequent transformation. Rather than viewing post-socialism as a permanent historical condition, it can be understood as an ongoing process that continues to shape artistic production. In this regard, Piotr Piotrowski emphasizes the importance of contextualizing art within specific geopolitical and historical frameworks, particularly in regions marked by political transition and cultural reconfiguration.¹⁰

This theoretical framework has facilitated a comparative analysis that does not rely on direct equivalence, focusing instead on identifying aesthetic correlations across different media and contexts. By emphasizing medium, visual language, and conceptual structure, the study proposes a model of comparison that recognizes both the interconnectedness of contemporary art and the endurance of locally specific traits within global cultural dynamics.

Contexts: China and North Macedonia

China: From ideological representation to expanded media practices

Contemporary Chinese art has emerged through a complex trajectory, shaped by the transition from a socialist ideology to a globalized cultural production. While the 1990s marked a crucial moment of artistic transformation—characterized by critical engagements with political imagery and mass culture—subsequent decades have introduced a broader expansion of media and conceptual approaches. This shift has reflected not only in the changes in a specific artistic language, but also the reconfiguration of institutional, economic, and cultural conditions in which art is created and circulated. As noted by Wu Hung, the transformations of Chinese contemporary art since the 1990s are closely tied to broader socio-political and institutional shifts that have redefined the relationship between art, ideology, and public space.¹¹

Following this initial phase, Chinese contemporary art has entered a period of diversification, as artists shifted beyond painting-based practices toward video, installation, digital media, and interdisciplinary forms. This development corresponds to the intensified pace of globalization, the growth of the art market, and the increasing integration of Chinese artists into international exhibition platforms. As Terry Smith suggests, contemporary art in such contexts operates within a condition of “world

⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28–34.

¹⁰ Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (Reaktion Books, 2009), 8–12.

¹¹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 177–180.

currents”, where multiple temporalities and visual systems coexist within a global but unbalanced framework.¹²

Crucially, these developments do not represent a complete divergence from earlier artistic interests. As Gao Minglu emphasizes, contemporary practices in China should be understood not as a rejection of ideological structures, but as their transformation and reconfiguration within new cultural and economic conditions.¹³ Questions of ideology, identity, and collective memory therefore remain a central theme, yet they are articulated through new media and conceptual strategies that have shifted beyond representation and more towards simulation, fragmentation, and performativity.

Thus, contemporary Chinese art after the year 2000 can be understood as a field in which historical legacies and new technological conditions traverse, producing hybrid forms that reflect both continuity and transformation within a globalized visual culture.

North Macedonia: Intermediality, fragmentation, and contextual practices

The development of contemporary art in North Macedonia follows a different, more gradual trajectory, shaped by the political and cultural transformations following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. While the 1990s marked a period of transition, it was during the 2000s and 2010s that a more distinct contemporary artistic language began to emerge, characterized by intermediality, conceptual approaches, and research-based practices.

As Suzana Milevska notes, the Macedonian art scene has long operated in a context of marginality and limited visibility, which has significantly influenced both the artistic production and its institutional development.¹⁴ This position, however, has also fostered a particular sensitivity to context, leading artists to engage critically when addressing questions of identity, memory, and socio-political transformation.

The shift toward multimedia and interdisciplinary practices is further emphasized in the writings of Sonja Abadžieva, who identifies the emergence of new media and experimental forms as a defining characteristic of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Macedonian art.¹⁵ These developments have marked a departure from medium-specific modernist paradigms and signaled the formation of a heterogeneous field in which the boundaries between disciplines have become increasingly fluid and open to experimentation.

In this context, contemporary artistic practices often operate through fragmentation, layering, and the use of archival materials. Instead of producing stable narratives, artists have begun constructing open-ended structures that strongly reflect the

¹² Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 6–15.

¹³ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (MIT Press, 2011), 221–225.

¹⁴ Suzana Milevska, “A Story with Many Beginnings,” in *Manifesta 2* (Manifesta Foundation, 1998), 247–248.

¹⁵ Соња Абацијева, “Мултимедијална уметност во Република Македонија,” In *Визуелните уметности во Македонија - XX век*, кн. 2 (Остен, 2017), 5–7.

complexity of the post-socialist experience. As Nebojsa Vilić argues, these practices can be seen as forms of critical art that question dominant systems of representation and engage with broader cultural and political frameworks.¹⁶

The distinguishing element of the Macedonian context is precisely this emphasis on processes, materiality, and conceptual investigation, with artistic practices frequently moving beyond traditional media and engaging with installation, photography, video, and research-based methodologies. In this sense, contemporary Macedonian art reflects not only the relevant local conditions, but also its position within a broader network of global artistic exchange.

Body and identity: from representation to simulation

Contemporary artistic practices in both China and North Macedonia show increasing engagement with the body, and not as a stable representational form, but as a site of transformation, construction, and mediation. This shift reflects broader changes in visual culture, where the body becomes entangled with technological, social, and ideological frameworks and is no longer understood as a fixed biological entity but as a dynamic and contingent construct. In this sense, the body operates as a critical interface through which contemporary subjectivity is negotiated, produced, and destabilized.

In the work of Cao Fei, the body is frequently displaced into virtual environments and constructed through digital identities that blur the boundaries between what is real and what is simulated. Her long-term project *RMB City* (2007–2011), developed within the virtual platform Second Life, has constructed a speculative urban environment that reflects the rapid transformation of Chinese society under globalization, urban expansion, and technological acceleration.¹⁷ Within this environment, the artist operates through an avatar (China Tracy), embodying a subjectivity that is simultaneously personal, fictional, and collective.

Here, the body is no longer grounded in physical presence; instead, it emerges through performative interaction, networked participation, and digitally mediated environments. This displacement into virtual space may be understood through Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation, where the distinction between reality and its representation collapses, producing a condition in which identity is constructed within systems of signs rather than material presence. *RMB City* does not reproduce an existing city but generates a hyperreal environment that operates according to its own internal logic. In Baudrillard's terms, the project no longer represents reality but replaces it with a self-sustaining system of signs. The avatar therefore becomes not a representation of identity, but a simulation of subjectivity itself.¹⁸ Identity becomes

¹⁶ Небојша Вилић, *Критичка уметност* 2 (ЗП с.из., 2010), 20–23, 31–32.

¹⁷ Cao Fei, *RMB City*, virtual project, 2007–2011.

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1–7, 10–12, 17–19.

fluid, distributed, and contingent upon technological systems that mediate perception and social relations. This shift signals a broader transformation in the ontology of the image: rather than representing reality, the image becomes a space in which reality is actively constructed and reconfigured. As a result, the body is transformed into a mutable interface—simultaneously present and absent—situated between embodiment and abstraction.

A different, yet conceptually related, exploration of the body can be observed in Cao Fei's earlier video work *Whose Utopia* (2006), produced in collaboration with a group of factory workers in the Pearl River Delta.¹⁹ In this project, workers temporarily deviate from the routines of industrial labor by performing gestures, dances, and imaginative acts within the factory. The body here is caught between discipline and resistance, production and imagination, thus revealing the tension between individual agency and systemic control. Unlike *RMB City*, where the body is fully virtualized, *Whose Utopia* places the body within material, palpable conditions even, yet still manages to frame it as a point of transformation and projection.

A comparable yet conceptually distinct approach can be observed in the practice of Monika Moteska, whose work engages with the body through material, organic, and symbolic processes. With projects such as *Embroidery in Stone* (2020), Moteska explores the relationship between the human body, labor, and material transformation, using natural substances and repetitive gestures to construct forms that exist between sculpture, installation, and process.²⁰ The body is here not directly represented but it is imprinted within the material itself, through traces of action, tension, and transformation.

A related strategy is evident in the video installation *Crucifixion*, where the absence of the body is articulated through an interplay of media. The work combines highly detailed drawings of iris flowers—traditionally associated with both dignity and mourning—with a central video element featuring a suspended industrial hook. While the drawings operate in a static, contemplative register, the video introduces movement and sound, generating a tension between stillness and latent violence. In this configuration, the body is never directly represented, yet it is strongly evoked through symbolic, material, and affective associations. The interplay between image and video thus constructs a space in which corporeality is displaced, but persistently implied.²¹

In other works, Moteska employs organic materials—often fragile, perishable, or mutable—to depict processes of decay, regeneration, and instability. The body is thus approached not as a coherent entity, but as a permeable and vulnerable system, embedded within broader ecological and material conditions. This emphasis on materiality introduces a temporal dimension, which is in sharp contrast to the simulated temporality of digital environments. Cao Fei's work points to a continuous, networked

¹⁹ Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia*, video, 2006.

²⁰ Ана Франговска, „Егзистенцијална деконструкција,” in *Моника Мотеска; Везење во камен* (exhibition catalogue) (Национална галерија, 2020), 3–8.

²¹ Франговска, “Егзистенцијална деконструкција,” 3–8.

present, whereas Moteska's practice highlights the endurance, entropy and the measured transformation of matter.

In this context, the body is not simulated, but is rather materially reconfigured, positioned between presence and dissolution. It becomes a site of tension between control and exposure, structure and disintegration, reflecting broader existential and ecological concerns. Instead of constructing alternative realities, Moteska amplifies the conditions of the physical world, drawing attention to the body's limitations and its entanglement with natural processes.

As Sanja Kojić Mladenov observes, Moteska's artistic practice consistently investigates fundamental relationships between life and death, nature and culture, as well as processes of archiving and memory through material traces and preserved remnants of human experience.²² These concerns further reinforce the artist's tendency to evoke bodily presence indirectly, through absence, residue, and transformation rather than direct representation.

The comparison between these practices reveals a shared movement, drifting away from representation and toward construction, yet on fundamentally different trajectories. While Cao Fei prefers to explore and work within digital and virtual frameworks that redefine subjectivity through simulation and networked interaction, Moteska is inclined to engage with material processes that emphasize embodiment, labor, and physical transformation. Both approaches, however, articulate a reconfiguration of the body, placing it as a central category of contemporary art, and demonstrating how identity is no longer given but acquired or produced through complex interactions between media, materiality, and context.

Memory and image: narrative, atmosphere, and fragmentation

The question of memory occupies a central position in contemporary artistic practices, particularly in contexts shaped by rapid social and political transformation. However, rather than a stable narrative, memory is increasingly articulated through fragmented, atmospheric, and non-linear visual forms. In this sense, memory is not simply represented but actively constructed through processes of mediation, displacement, and reinterpretation.

In the work of Yang Fudong, memory is articulated through cinematic language that operates between narrative suggestion and visual ambiguity. His multi-part film *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007) constructs episodic scenes inspired by classical cultural references, yet in the midst of contemporary contexts. Shot in black-and-white and structured through slow, carefully composed sequences, the work produces a suspended temporal space in which past and present coexist without clear hierarchy.²³

²² Sanja Kojić Mladenov, "Landscape Experience—The Banality of Evil: Monika Moteska & Robert Jankuloski," in *Landscape Experience: Jankuloski/Moteska. Pavilion of the Republic of North Macedonia, 59th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia* (National Gallery of North Macedonia, 2022), 16–17.

²³ Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, multi-channel video installation, 2003–2007.

Rather than reconstructing historical memory, Yang Fudong creates impressions that evoke memory as a subjective and unstable condition. His protagonists occupy spaces that appear both familiar and peculiar, suggesting a form of temporal dislocation in which the purpose of memory is not intended to document, but rather it works more as an affective and perceptual field.

A materially and conceptually distinct, yet related, approach can be observed in the work of Slavica Janešlieva, where memory is constructed through layering, material accumulation, and narrative fragmentation. The latter is evident in pieces such as *Grafting* (2007), *Fragility of Life* (2003), and more recently *Inter Spem et Metum* (2024), and the artist has developed complex spatial and visual systems which see the intersection of personal and collective histories.²⁴

Rather than depicting memory as a linear narrative, Janešlieva constructs what may be understood as a multi-layered ‘visual oratorium’, in which different materials, texts, and symbolic elements coexist and interact. In *Inter Spem et Metum*, for instance, the use of organic materials such as feathers, combined with neon textual interventions and reflective surfaces, produces an environment that engages the viewer physically and perceptually. The work does not represent memory directly, but activates it through sensory experience, spatial dislocation, and the confrontation with otherness.

Central to this approach is the notion of the “stranger” or the “Other”, not only as a social category but as an internalized condition. As articulated in the artist’s own discourse, memory is inseparable from processes of self-reflection, displacement, and the negotiation of identity within broader socio-political frameworks.²⁵ In this sense, memory becomes a position where personal experience intersects with collective structures of meaning, shaped by migration, mobility, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

The comparison between these practices reveals two distinct yet conceptually related approaches to memory. While Yang Fudong constructs memory through cinematic atmosphere and temporal ambiguity, Janešlieva approaches it through material layering, spatial construction, and discursive complexity. As Maja Cankulovska-Mihajlovska has observed, Janešlieva’s projects frequently intertwine personal, familial, and collective histories through fragmented narrative structures and layered visual sequences, producing an open and multidimensional field of remembrance.²⁶ The former produces distance through visual suspension, whereas the latter generates proximity through tactile engagement. Yet, both strategies move away from narrative coherence toward open, processual forms of meaning, where memory is not seen as a fixed trace of the past but as a continuously evolving field of interpretation.

²⁴ Ana Frangovska, “A State of Limbo,” in *Slavica Janešlieva: Inter Spem et Metum* (exhibition catalogue), Pavilion of the Republic of North Macedonia, 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia (National Gallery of North Macedonia, 2024), 7–8.

²⁵ Frangovska, “A State of Limbo”.

²⁶ Maja Cankulovska-Mihajlovska, “Slavica Janešlieva: Grafting,” *The Large Glass / Големото стакло* 23–24 (2008/09): 113.

Language and visual systems: Sign, text, and the uncertainty of meaning

Language and visual sign systems represent a crucial field of inquiry within contemporary art, particularly in relation to questions of communication, interpretation, and the construction of meaning. The understanding behind signs is moving away from the view that they are transparent bearers of information. Regardless of whether they are textual or visual, signs are increasingly seen as variable, constructed and context dependent systems that resist rigid interpretation. The work of Xu Bing offers a paradigmatic exploration of language as a visual and ideological structure. His seminal project *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) consists of hand-printed books and scrolls filled with thousands of meticulously invented characters that resemble traditional Chinese script but remain entirely unreadable.²⁷ At first glance, the work evokes the authority, history, and visual density of written language; however, this apparent familiarity is immediately disrupted by its illegibility.

By applying this strategy, Xu Bing exposes the constructed nature of linguistic systems and destabilizes their claim to meaning. Language is revealed not as a neutral medium of communication, but as a system shaped by conventions, power structures, and cultural assumptions. The viewer is thus in a curious position and tasked to interpret the language with great uncertainty, and is confronted with a piece of writing that demands to be read yet resists all attempts at understanding it. In this sense, the work operates as a critical reflection on the relationship between signs, knowledge, and authority, suggesting that meaning is not inherent in the sign itself but is ultimately achieved by a process of interpretation.

A related, though materially and conceptually distinct investigation can be identified in the photographic practice of Robert Jankuloski. In his work, the image functions not as a direct representation of reality, but as a coded visual structure that invites interpretation while withholding the definitive meaning. This understanding also resonates with Nebojša Vilić's observation that contemporary Macedonian photography increasingly shifted from a technical medium toward an interdisciplinary field in which photographic images operate beyond documentation and become active agents in the construction of meaning.²⁸ Through strategies of reduction, minimal intervention, and careful framing, Jankuloski constructs images that appear deceptively simple, yet are charged with latent symbolic and contextual significance. This approach resonates with what Hal Foster defines as the "archival impulse." He argues that archival practices do not simply recover historical information but actively construct new relationships between fragments, documents, and narratives. In Jankuloski's work, photography functions in a similar manner. The image does not operate as evidence, but as an archival structure that reorganizes traces of reality into new constellations of meaning. The archive therefore becomes a productive rather than documentary space.²⁹

²⁷ Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, installation, 1987–1991.

²⁸ Небојша Вилић, *Исчекори: Македонската фотографија 1990–2005* (3П с.из., 2015), 19–23.

²⁹ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (2004): 3–5.

While Foster's notion of the archival impulse provides a theoretical framework for understanding the productive nature of archival practices, curator and researcher Sanja Kojić Mladenov emphasizes the specific relationship between Jankuloski's photographs and collective memory, describing them as investigations of places and objects "saturated with history" and as explorations of the archaeology of space, layered landscapes, and the revival of the "presence of the absent"³⁰.

Rather than presenting clear narratives, Jankuloski's photographs operate through absence, silence, and ambiguity. The image becomes a site of projection, but also of archival reconstruction. As evidenced in projects such as *New Landscapes—Archives of Reality*, Jankuloski approaches photography as a system of collecting, re-contextualizing, and reactivating visual fragments that function as traces of collective memory. Instead of simply documenting reality, the photographic image serves as an active archival structure—both recording and constructing meaning through the process of selection, juxtaposition, and contextual displacement.³¹ In this sense, the photographic image functions analogously to Xu Bing's written constructions: both create systems that appear intelligible but ultimately resist stable interpretation.

While Xu Bing works through the deconstruction of language and Jankuloski through the reduction of the image, both practices reveal the instability of signification as a central condition of contemporary visual culture. Meaning is no longer guaranteed by the structure of language or the indexicality of the photographic image, but is instead contingent, relational, and open-ended.

The comparison between these practices thus expands the notion of language beyond the written text to include visual systems more broadly. Both artists challenge the authority of representation and expose the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and destabilized. In doing so, they articulate a shared concern pertaining to the limits of interpretation, demonstrating how contemporary art operates within a field where signs no longer communicate transparently, but function as sites of uncertainty and critical reflection.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis developed in this study demonstrates that aesthetic similarities between contemporary Chinese and Macedonian art cannot be analyzed and understood through direct historical parallelism or chronological simultaneity. Instead, these associations emerge through shared conceptual concerns that are articulated across different media, contexts, and temporal frameworks.

The analysis demonstrates that globalization does not produce uniformity, but rather a condition of structured heterogeneity. Artistic practices operate within interconnected yet asymmetrical systems, in which similarities emerge not from identical

³⁰ Sanja Kojić Mladenov, interview by Tamara Babić, "Kultura sećanja ima sve veći značaj u kontekstu izgradnje ličnih i kolektivnih identiteta," *Nedeljnik*, June 7, 2024.

³¹ Ана Франговска, "Нови архиви на колективната свест," in Роберт Јанкулоски: Нови пејзажи—архиви на реалноста (catalogue) (Национална галерија, 2020), 3–6.

conditions, but from analogous responses to broader transformations in visual culture, technology, and socio-political environments.³²

Across the three case studies—body, memory, and language—a consistent shift can be observed: from representation toward construction. The body is no longer depicted but mediated and produced; memory is not narrated but assembled and fragmented; language is not transparent but destabilized and rendered opaque. These shifts indicate a broader redefinition of artistic practice, where meaning is not fixed but emerges through processes of interaction, interpretation, and contextualization.³³

At the same time, the comparison reveals significant, equally important differences. In the Chinese context, artistic practices are often shaped by rapid urbanization, technological acceleration, and integration into global networks, resulting in a strong engagement with digital media and simulation. In contrast, the Macedonian context is characterized by a more gradual and materially grounded development, where artistic practices frequently engage with physical processes, archival structures, and localized socio-political conditions.

However, these differences should not be seen as limitations, but as productive distinctions that supplement the comparative framework. The Macedonian context, often positioned as peripheral within global art systems, demonstrates a capacity for critical reflection precisely through its engagement with fragmentation, marginality, and material specificity. Conversely, Chinese contemporary art illustrates how global integration can generate new forms of visual and conceptual complexity, while still retaining links to historical and ideological frameworks.

This comparison suggests that contemporary art operates within a field where meaning is continuously negotiated between global structures and local conditions.³⁴ Rather than seeking equivalence, the analysis proposes a model of relational comparison, in which aesthetic correspondences emerge through shared problematics rather than identical forms. Such an approach allows for the examination of artistic practices across asymmetrical cultural contexts without reducing them to simplified narratives of similarity or difference. At the same time, it should be emphasized that this study does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary art in China or North Macedonia. Rather, it focuses on a limited number of case studies selected for their capacity to illuminate specific conceptual and aesthetic correspondences across different cultural contexts.

³² Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 18–22.

³³ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 35–38.

³⁴ García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 40–42.



Figure 1. Robert Jankuloski, *New Landscapes—Archives of Realities*, 2020, photography, 112x148, photo: Robert Jankuloski



Figure 2. Monika Moteska, *Embroidery in Stone*, 2020, space installation, photo: Robert Jankuloski

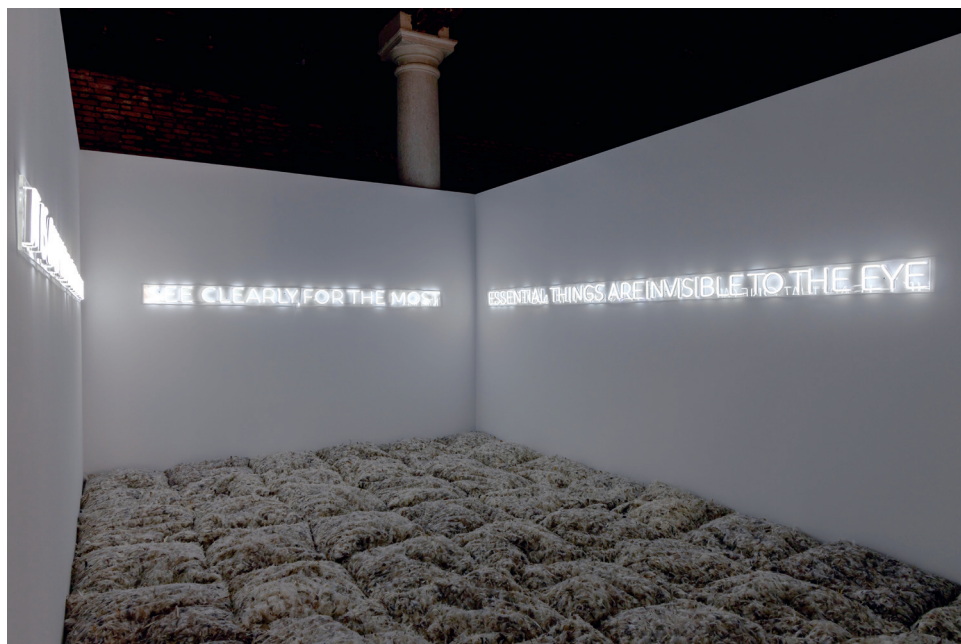


Figure 3. Slavica Janešlieva, *Inter Spem et Metum*, 2024, space installation: duck feathers, neon lights, textile, photo: Robert Jankuloski



Figure 4. Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, Part 3, 05*, 35mm black and white film transferred to DVD; 53 min. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, photo: Yang Fudong



Figure 5. Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia?*, 2006, video still, Courtesy and photo: Cao Fei

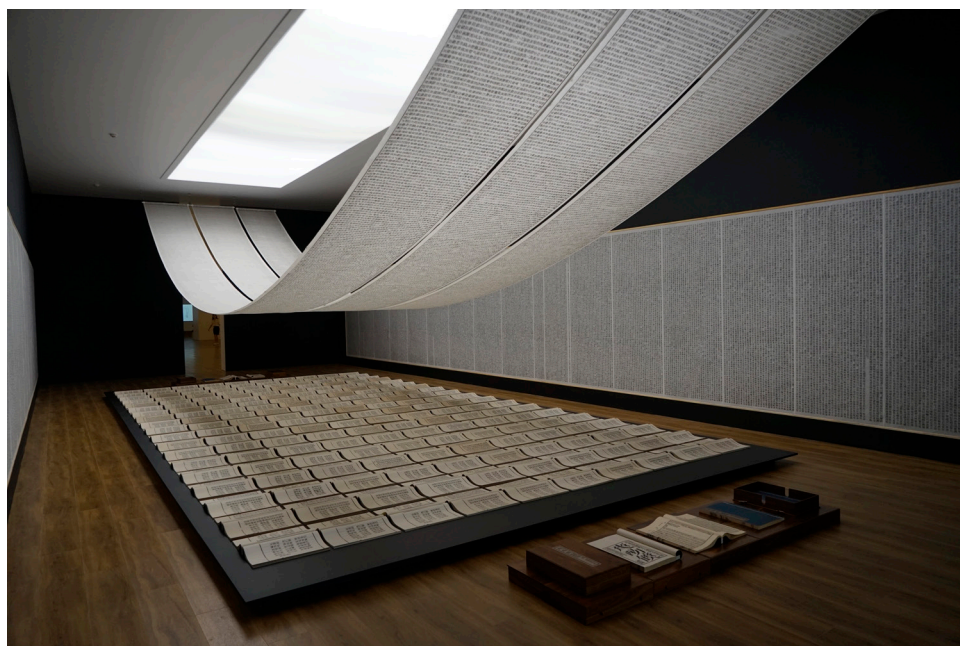


Figure 6. Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991, multi-media installation, installation view, Xu Bing: *Thought and Method*, Museum MACAN, 2019, photo: Xu Bing Studio

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