



Interview with Suvan Geer, 24 August 2017

Suvan Geer is an artist living in Santa Ana, California, whose diverse art works and installations explore ephemera or things on the verge of disappearing. She participated in *Keepers of the Waters (Lhasa)* in 1996. The following conversation was conducted by Cici Wu on 24 August 2017 at Asia Art Archive in America. It has been edited for conciseness and clarity.

Cici Wu: How did you get to participate in *Keepers of the Waters*?

Suvan Geer: I think Beth Grossman introduced me. I knew Betsy from an organisation that she created called No Limits for Women Artists. She knew my art through that, or knew me through that. So we knew each other pretty well. When Betsy went to Chengdu the first time, I knew that she and Beth, and a number of other artists were going; but I wasn't able to go at that time. So when she asked me if I could go with her on her second trip to Tibet, I took the opportunity.

CW: You mentioned No Limits for Women Artists. I remember it was founded in 1985, but when did you join the group?

SG: I don't remember—probably a few years after Betsy started it. I remember going to New York with a group of other artists, and we had meetings at her loft. It was just a wonderful time for women artists to bond together, to look at some of the challenges of making art as a woman, and to support each other. She offered us tools for doing that, partly listening to one another, validating each other, and supporting each other's thinking and big visions. The meetings were held all over the place. By meeting with each other in small groups on a regular basis, we basically formed a network of support for each other.

CW: Before participating in *Keepers of the Waters*, had you gone to China before?

SG: No. That was my first visit, so it was a wonderful opportunity to see China in a way that most tourists don't—to be shoulder-to-shoulder with Chinese artists, to visit their studios, to watch them making art. Then, to watch the Chinese artists making art in Tibet was fascinating because their approach was so different. I was so impressed with the Chinese artists. I found their knowledge of American art at that time to be surprising. It was so deep and so layered. Remember, all the information they were getting was in English. They were translating magazines like *Art Forum*, which is not an easy magazine to read even in English. And when we looked at each other's slides, I could see that they were bouncing ideas off some of the things that they had seen in those magazines. It was clear that they were up to date on what

was going on in America. When we went to their studios, it was clear that they were also doing other things; but not knowing the history of Chinese art, I couldn't recognise what all the ramifications were. I was not only an artist but also an art writer. I think one of the reasons Betsy wanted me to go with her group was so that she could have an outside perspective—not just someone who makes art, but someone who could look at the art that people were making and think of it in the context of the art world at the time.

CW: So what was the art scene like at that time in Lhasa?

SG: There was no art scene in Lhasa. The Tibetan people were pretty much, I would say, “cowed,” meaning they didn't stick their heads up for obvious reasons. We stayed at a Tibetan herders' hostel, a kind of hotel. We stayed there three weeks, I think, until after we completed the project. Then we went up to Lake Namtso. Our room was on the third floor, and all the other people staying there were Tibetans. While we were there, all the nomads had come in because of the Bean Curd Festival, and they performed a Tibetan opera in the courtyard. So, for one whole day, the kitchen was cooking like crazy, outside as well as inside the kitchen. Meanwhile, this opera was being performed by the visiting nomads. Oh, they looked so regal! They dressed themselves in these incredible costumes, and they just started singing in clear beautiful voices. The Tibetans love to sing. If you start singing as you walk down the boulevard, Tibetans would start walking with you and sing along. The opera wasn't something made for a theatre or an auditorium. It was performed in the hotel's central courtyard. It was an amazing experience. I don't know what the Tibetans would call their “art,” but they do create amazing visual spectacles. Betsy asked one Tibetan artist to create and paint a living water mandala. He translated basically the whole of what we were trying to do into this mandala, and he painted it. He didn't quite get it finished, but he was working on it. When we did the final performance down at Lhasa River, we had it up on a stand with banners flying off it, and pots around it with more banners flying. The Tibetan people would come up to it and it was like they were reading it like a newspaper. They would stand there and they would look and nod and look some more. They might not call it “art,” but it was certainly an image conveying information that they could read, much as we read contemporary imagery in a painting.

As for making art, the other thing that I noticed was after we finished in Lhasa and went out to Lake Namtso, we passed through a number of monasteries. The monasteries in Lhasa had pretty much been taken over by Chinese government employees, but when you get out to the remote areas, you could still see pilgrims prostrating themselves one foot after another, in a pilgrimage up a mountain. In those rural monasteries, there are rooms where monks have fashioned incredible things out of yak butter. They were not just candles (although some of them were lit), but ornate sculptures, or strange, suspended things—all made out of yak butter! I mean, it was really quite amazing to look at. It was very dark in those tiny rooms and they smelled of yak, and usually a monk would be sitting in there rocking. I don't know if they would call those sculptures of fanciful beasts and ornate flowers “art,” but certainly it was a very visual experience and very much tied to what they believe and their whole metaphysical structure; it expresses those concepts. We also saw

scrolls and manuscripts and that kind of thing. Those were all inscribed with small drawings, too, like illustrations in illuminated Western bibles, only simpler.

CW: When you were in Lhasa, what was the most urgent environmental issue that concerned you?

SG: Well, the reason Betsy took us to Lhasa was because she wanted to go to the headwaters of the Lhasa River. We were looking at drawing attention to clean water. The river flows down and into China, so the idea was to explore where this water came from. Up in the Himalayas, at what point is it *pure*? And of course what we did was essentially visit the starting point of the river, and in doing so we found that this resource was constantly being used all the way down; by the people to wash in, to water their crops, animals, all sorts of things. And the nomads of course use it to water their cattle. The whole idea of clean water and returning to the source of clean water was where Betsy was at. So that's one of the things that we also thought about with our projects. You can see that in a number of the pieces that people did. One of the Chinese artists—I am afraid I don't remember the names any more—did a wonderful piece right outside one of Lhasa's main streets. There was a bridge that went over the river, and he attached long ropes with brooms on the end of it, and the current would flow through them. Maybe you have the pictures? It looked like the river was being swept clean by these brooms. Beautiful piece, really wonderful. Datong Dazhang did a number of really great pieces.

My piece concerned water, too. We rowed out and placed a gold square made of prayer scarves called Hada on top of the water in the park located below the Dalai Lama's palace. It formed sort of a golden marker, which for the Tibetan people was very significant. When we were done placing it, we rolled it back up and took it away. The Tibetan people who had been playing a card game around the lake were like, "Yeah." Actually, I didn't realise exactly how significant that color was for them for political reasons. I'm an American not really versed in their faith or history and what do I know? I'm just thinking, "Yeah, nice color!" But they're thinking, "This is a reminder that this is *our* water." What I found working as an artist in Tibet was that there was nothing you could do that wasn't politicised. We weren't used to that in America. We're getting used to it now though!



Image: Photograph of Datong Dazhang's site-specific piece *Sweeping River*, Lhasa, 1996.

CW: Could you tell me a little bit about the process of making the gold cloth piece? How did you start with research, and where did this idea come from?

SG: I didn't know what to do because, one, I didn't speak the language; two, I didn't understand the whole political situation (except what Betsy was able to tell me). There was only Betsy, the photographer, and another young artist who was doing the translation for us, so there was only the three of us to really speak with. I didn't have a lot of input coming in, and Betsy was really busy. We would meet with the Chinese and Tibetan artists on the roof of our Tibetan hotel, and we would talk, or try to, but so little of what was said could be translated. And, again, I wasn't really sure how the Chinese government would see our actions or how the Tibetan artists would choose to be visible.

When I started thinking about doing my piece, I simply liked that particular location because, well, it was beautiful. In my mind, as soon as I saw it, I saw this square shape floating out there. So I went to the local market and I started buying gold prayer shawls, and I sewed them together and made one big squarish shape. Then I sewed corks all the way around so it would float. For the installation, I had some help from our group. We rented a boat and rowed out on that lake and rolled the fabric out, rowed away from it, took pictures, and then we rolled it back up. As a final touch we then rowed around the lake and picked up a lot of trash that had blown into the water with the wind. My idea for doing that was simply to show respect for the water, or in some way signify that water was beautiful and should be cared for. I didn't realise the political ramifications of the placement of the scarves. I was mainly thinking about water as being a reflecting space.

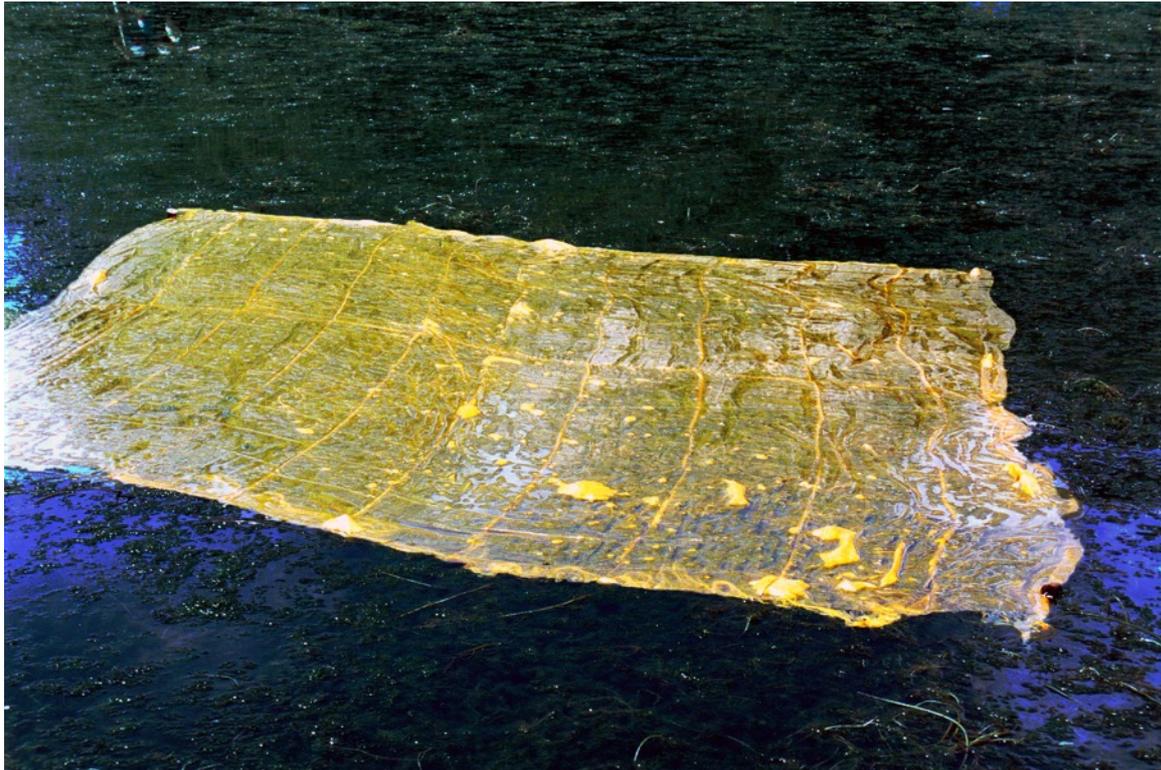


Image: Photograph of Suvan Geer's installation *Square Gold Hada*, Lhasa, 1996.

CW: After you finished this piece, you realised the audience's reactions and then you noticed, "Oh, there might actually be some signs, signifiers of the color..."

SG: It took me a while to figure that out because, again, nobody explained it to me. Nobody there jumped up and said, "Did you know that gold..." And the fact that I was using prayer shawls! Frankly, I was using them because that was the *only* cloth I could find that was the right color. So I was being very pragmatic. But because you're in a situation that's highly politicised, there is nothing you can do that you think is totally benign, when you're using things taken from a culture that is so based on ties between their beliefs and their ruler the Dalai Lama. It's very hard for outsiders to hold that in mind. After I did it, it took me a couple of days of going, "Why was the Tibetan's reaction so strong?" I only realised the meaning after talking to Betsy, and another woman there who had helped pull some of the Chinese artists together. Frankly, there wasn't a lot of time to do that kind of investigation there but I did begin to realise, "Oh my, I tapped into something that probably had more resonance than I knew."

CW: Did the gold cloth piece you made in Lhasa influence your other projects later on?

SG: Actually, I had used the gold square idea—that shape made out of yellow—a number of times before. I've done it out of pine tree pollen on the ground underneath. I suspended a tray full of water that has a glass bottom so that light shines through it. I gave motion to the water, so it creates all these ripples over the top of the gold pollen. It looked like the surface was dancing. It was a meditative

space. People came in, and they sat on the floor next to the square, and they just stayed in there, watching the lights move. So, water, gold, and a square—you could say it was just part of my lexicon.

CW: When was this piece you just mentioned made?

SG: I would say it was probably made in 1989. I can't think of anything that I made as a result of having made that piece in Lhasa. What the whole experience gave me, however, was an understanding of how political art can be, depending on the social and political conditions in which you are living. Only now with what's going on in America am I seeing a sort of resurgence of that kind of art making. When you're not living under a regime that you're trying to comment on without getting in trouble, you don't use these kinds of tools in the same way.

CW: When I was watching the footage of the video that we received from Betsy, I saw that the participants had meetings before you started making the artwork. It seems like you had discussions. So do you remember talking to other Chinese artists, did you make friends with them, did you talk about art or art making?

SG: You know, we tried, but again, there were only two translators at the time, and the one who travelled with us. But she actually had a lot of trouble trying to do the translations, so the other two that were there we relied on quite a bit. They were very busy trying to do a lot of translations. I remember one evening I wanted to talk to one of the artists about what it was like to be a Chinese woman artist, about what they faced, and how was it different in her country and mine. We were going to have a little discussion. So we called over one of the translators and began the discussion, *and he got bored!* We were talking about women artists, and he didn't care! So after, like, oh I don't know, maybe three minutes, he just got up and left! And Yin Xiuzhen (she was the same artist that did that wonderfully evocative piece with the shoes down the river with butter in them), she and I just looked at each other and shrugged.



Image: A close-up photograph of Yin Xiuzhen's installation *Shoe with Butter*, Lhasa, 1996.

CW: What do you remember about speaking with her?

SG: Our translator left, so we just looked at each other. There was nothing we could say to each other. We couldn't say, "For me it's hard," or, "For me it's easy." We couldn't say anything! So that was an inherent difficulty, making friends was very hard. We could smile at one another, we could visit one another's art pieces, and applaud or do a thumbs up. But that's about it. I could talk to the photographer, I could talk to Betsy, but other than that it was very difficult to have any communication.

CW: You mentioned that you were not only an artist, but also a writer, and reviewed artworks. Which artwork or art piece gave you a deep impression or made you think more about the different perceptions of the world between American artists and Chinese artists at the time? Is there anything special that you can remember?

SG: Like I said, they knew more about American art than I knew about Chinese art going over there.

CW: How did you realise that?

SG: Well, when we first got to China, they had arranged for us to show slides to each other. So I was able to look at their art and we don't need words for that, right? I could look at their art and I could see that they knew about contemporary art. They were not doing Chinese traditional art. They were doing something that was very contemporary for the 1990s. I mean, they understood minimalism, they understood abstraction, they understood conceptual art, they understood all of this, and they

were using materials in various ways that was very much about metaphor. So I was looking at their work, and while I couldn't say to them, "Oh my gosh, that reminds me a lot of this artist or that concept..." But I could tell they knew. And when I showed my art, they all turned around and looked at me and went "ah ha," because they got that I understood their work because they could understand mine. We didn't have to talk about that.

CW: So you communicated and connected through the artwork.

SG: And that is what we did when we went to Tibet, too. We went around to see what everybody was doing because they were site specific—we got a kind-of schedule that so and so was going to do this day over there, and so and so is going to do something else over there on the same day, so we would go from one place to another, and see maybe three-to-four pieces. And then the next day, someone might do a piece somewhere else. People did about three-to-four pieces, which is pretty ambitious when you consider we were all working in a strange place. The Chinese artists had brought a lot of their materials with them, but we (the foreign artists) didn't know exactly what we would find. We were basically all just winging it, sort of making it up as we went along. The Chinese artists did a phenomenal amount of work in a very short period of time. And we couldn't talk about it, but we could look at it, and I could understand what it was they were saying, and not just about that situation. I mean they totally got performance, they totally got conceptual work—that was clear. They knew what it was they were doing, and if I could have talked to them, I would have loved it; but it just wasn't possible.

CW: Was there a critical perspective in terms of how you saw their work that you would like to share?

SG: They were very comfortable working publicly. They were very comfortable presenting their ideas, including to the Chinese government (because we had to explain to them what we were doing and had to get permission). They were very comfortable out on the street in a way that I didn't see in a lot of performances in America. I mean, you might have seen some of that going on in New York, but certainly not on the West Coast at that time. A lot of performance was basically being done in museums and galleries and that kind of thing. So I was aware that the works they were doing were very sophisticated and cutting edge. They would do pop-up exhibitions. They would put up a show for a couple of hours in an abandoned space and then it would be gone, because they had to get the heck out of there before somebody called the authorities. That was strictly their own. It was just very specific to their experience of working in a political situation. It was most impressive.

CW: In the *Keepers of the Waters* Lhasa event, most of the artworks are performance art, right?

SG: Well, I don't know if I would say most of them. I would say a good number were actually more along the lines of installation work. But it was all done along a river. Even the work by the Tibetan artists—the last night was the only night we saw the Tibetan artists present work. On that night, they came and they had bamboo poles, assembled in sort of a cross; and they brought them at dusk, just as the sun was

setting. We had been waiting for hours for them to show up. We didn't know what was going on, why they hadn't appeared. Of course, they were being covert. So they showed up with these cross pieces of bamboo, and they put t-shirts on them with a mandala and "Tibet" stenciled on the front. On either end of the "T" was a little lighted lantern where the arms would be. They installed them out *in* the river. So as the sun went down, you could see these shirts, hovering in space and blowing gently in the wind. The shirts said "Tibet" on them. But as the sun went down, you lose the "Tibet." You can't see that anymore. After a while you can't even see the t-shirts. All you can see are the two little lighted lanterns. And then in the morning, everything was gone. Washed away by the river. My interpretation was that those were a metaphor for their experience of disappearing. It was an incredible and powerful piece. That was the only piece they did. It is hard for me to imagine what taking that risk to protest their country's occupation would be like; how much trust they had to put in Betsy, how much trust they had to have in the Chinese artists that were there —that they wouldn't be reported or turned in. That says a lot.



Image: Photograph of a performance by unidentified Tibetan artists that included shirts hung on poles at the end of which paper lanterns were suspended, Lhasa, 1996.

CW: Can we talk a little bit about your identity as a woman? How does your identity as a woman influence your work?

SG: I'm not an artist who makes art about *being* a woman. I know some artists do deal a lot with identity. At the same time, I think that I reference my experience in the materials I use. The references I make frequently have an undertone or a sub-layer that is about the female experience; I can't separate myself. I don't try, but my art has to do with experience, with direct experience; and because I am a woman, a lot of my work has handwork and domestic influences in it. I'm showing in an exhibition right now that's at a local college. I took a series of photographs and I abstracted them. But in there are things like the kitchen sink, eggs, a pantry with things stacked

up. Different things like that, that come directly from my home or what's immediately around me. I have to present my own life.

CW: In your perspective, was it a feminist gesture for you to participate in *Keepers of the Waters*? When you decided to participate in the event, did you consider the participation an extension of your female identity?

SG: Certainly the fact that Betsy, a woman, organised it, and that it was global in scale, makes it a feminist project of female power; but I wasn't going in thinking, "Oh yes, I too will make this a statement of female power."

CW: When you left Lhasa and arrived in Chengdu, what, if any, differences were there in terms of the art scene or the artists that you met?

SG: The art scene in Chengdu was closer to what I recognised as an "art scene." There were a few galleries, there were pop-up exhibitions, there were performances on street corners. It was much closer to what I understood as an art scene. Lhasa to me was like an occupied territory. When we were in Lhasa, we went to a school and we visited an art class. Betsy talked about what it was that we were doing. Everyone there was learning very traditional brush painting—flowers and things like that. They asked her, "Why is it that we should listen to you?" (I don't know whether the class was for Tibetans or Chinese.) She was talking about clean water, she was talking about the environment. They said, "The United States hasn't done too well to the environment." Betsy was quiet for a minute, and then she said, "Who do you want to be like? Do you want to be like us? Then do what we did and make those mistakes. Do you want to do better? Then take this as an opportunity to do better. Make art that changes things." So she was pushing to have them rethink how they were making art.

CW: I just have one last question for you. In 1996 you went to China and you were impressed with the artwork the artists made, and also the energy, the creative energy they had at that time. Do you think it changed in a way that you expected? What are your impressions now?

SG: I don't feel like I know enough about what is actually going on in China now. I will say that it looks to me like they figured out how to do the whole gallery market scene very well. Some artists are able to make a living off it. You also have some very famous artists who, occasionally, we get to see over here. But I really couldn't comment. I am not surprised by the artists we went with who have made big careers, because I thought that they had really solid artwork. I am delighted if artists can figure out a way to have freedom of speech using the metaphor language of art. But they knew how to do that originally. So it's a matter of tenacity. They just stick to it, and that's impressive.