



# The Sculpture Olympics 2008

BY ZHU YILANG



Along with the Olympics came the sculpture games—the International Olympic Sculpture Symposium in Beijing 2008. One of numerous activities held in conjunction with the Olympics this year, the symposium was sponsored by the Beijing Municipal Government and administered by the Beijing Urban Sculpture Office (BUSO) and the China Sculpture Institute (CSI).

One of the few events for sculpture held in China for the Olympic year, the symposium's goal was to respond to the slogan of the games: "People's Olympics." In contrast to other exhibitions, the selected works were added to the city's permanent collection—an honor for the artists that also promoted the field of sculpture. Perhaps most importantly, this convening of the field encouraged interactions among different cultures while giving international artists a chance to come to Beijing and gain an understanding of Chinese life and culture.

Since the 1990s, there have been many international sculpture symposia held across China. The most recent Beijing symposium was held six years ago. In order to make the Olympic symposium unique, the program was divided into two parts: a juried, international, open call for artists, run by BUSO, and an invitational, run by CSI. The application process for the juried exhibition ran from November 2005 to February 2006, and more than 2,800 works from five continents were submitted. The jury made an initial selection of 438 pieces, nearly 30 percent from artists based outside of China. Then, at the beginning of 2007, BUSO's jury decided on 81 pieces for the final list, 25 from abroad and 56 from China.

CSI planned to invite about 20 international sculptors to participate in the symposium. To begin the process, Fan Dian, chairman of the National Gallery of China (and also an art critic), organized a committee, including Yin Shuangxi, Sun Zhenhua, Wang Mingming, Zeng Chenggang, Sui Jianguo, Zhao Meng, Sun Wei, An Yuanyuan, Yu Huayun, and Wu Helin, among others, most of whom are well-known art critics or sculptors with broad international views and contacts. CSI also formed a special art council. The first step was to solicit nominations from arts organizations, museum officials, critics, and committee members. These names were then ranked by the art council according to their qualifications and their works. The next step was to invite the chosen sculptors to make proposals. The list of sculptors and works was reviewed and refined by the council, and the final list featured 19 artists from the U.S., Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Japan, France, Romania, Switzerland, South Korea, Bulgaria, and the U.K., including Bruce Beasley, whose sculpture has been exhibited widely in the U.S., Europe, and Asia, Johannes Pfeiffer, a well-known environmental artist in Europe, Jonathan Borofsky, whose public art is recognized around the world, and designer, theorist, and landscape architect Charles Jencks.

Above: Elyn Zimmerman, *Suspended Arcs and Sections*, 2008. Steel and granite, 488 cm. Left: John Atkin, *Strange Meeting*, 2008. Marble, 2.5 x 2.5 x 2.5 meters.

The BUSO symposium was held in September and October, 2007, the beautiful season in Beijing. The participants were all placed in factories according to their material requirements and provided with several assistants. Work on the CSI invitational sculptures, on the other hand, began right after the art council's decision. These pieces were fabricated according to the sculptors' detailed designs, and the artists themselves were invited individually to Beijing to supervise the final touches. The first to come was South Korean sculptor Mutation, in December 2007; American sculptor Elyn Zimmerman arrived last, in May 2008. The pieces are sited in the Olympic Park Central Area, the Olympic Forest Park, and Chaoyang Park, as well as at two theaters and two gymnasiums in the area.

BUSO and CSI also organized various academic meetings and forums for the participants in order to promote interaction, increased understanding of Beijing, and international friendship. The largest event was the International Forum on Public Art, held in the Olympic Area at the end of October 2007. In March 2008, Jencks lectured on "Critical Modernism" at Beijing University. Chinese colleagues were quite moved when Elyn Zimmerman and Swiss sculptor Ralfonso (Ralf Gschwend), who were in Beijing in May 2008, donated money to relief efforts in the aftermath of the Sichuan province earthquake.

Jonathan Borofsky's *People Tower* is one of the largest symposium works. At a height of 20 meters, it fits comfortably into the scale of the Olympic Park Central Area. An accessible theme and varied colors create a monument that affirms human capability. Jencks's *Wu Chi* focuses on larger topics—the cosmos, energy, time, and space—in a 25-meter-diameter landscape design. The public is invited to walk into this sculpture/landscape in the form of a black hole, participating in the work and its popularization of science. Israeli sculptor Dina Merhav's *Totem* features three carved mythical animals standing on each other's backs, representing a relationship among different cultures. U.S. sculptor John Van Alstine's *Circles of Inclusion—Rings of Unity* uses circles as its basic elements, and Caroline Ramersdorfer, a sculptor from Austria, begins with a square in her *Seed of a Unified Spirit*. Both works have a vivid presence.

Among the Chinese sculptors, Wen Lou adds a new vocabulary of sharp angles and sloping lines to his signature use of bamboo in *Sculpture Development of the Three Dimensions*. In contrast to his usual realistic style, Sui Jianguo takes on the simple square in the minimal *The Earth*; the polished limestone textures reflect the variety of nature. Zhu Shangxi's *Love* not only embodies the beauty of love, in two pairs of figures sitting on (and supporting) a bench, but also gives the public the chance to be part of the work. Zeng Chenggang's *Torch Relay*, a realistic depiction of the Olympic torch passing, hand to hand, from Greece to China, from West to East, is the only sculpture that expresses the Olympic spirit directly.

The Beijing Olympics was a festival not only for people who love sports, but also for those who love sculpture. In this two-part symposium, each participant's good will and enthusiasm (as well as the artworks) created a moving experience for those of us in Beijing, as well as for Olympic visitors. When we look back, in the future, we will surely treasure these precious opportunities for interaction among different cultures, different approaches to art, and different ideas to make the world a better place.

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Top to bottom: Beat Kriemler, *Two Folds into One*, 2007. Bronze and copper tubing, 450 x 450 x 480 cm. Zhu Shangxi, *Love*, 2007. Stainless steel and cast iron, 220 cm. Sui Jianguo, *The Earth*, 2007. Marble, 200 cm.

