

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Vancouver Art Gallery Forced to Remove Insects and Reptiles from Sculpture in Order to Maintain Artwork's Integrity

VANCOUVER, BC – In order to maintain the integrity of the artwork, officials at the Vancouver Art Gallery will remove the insects and reptiles contained in Huang Yong Ping's sculpture, *Theater of the World* rather than comply with a new BC SPCA order to make further modifications. The installation, to be closed as of the end of business hours Sunday, April 15, is featured in the exhibition *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*. This first major survey of work by the internationally acclaimed Chinese-born, Paris-based artist opened at the Gallery on April 5. Organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, *House of Oracles* showcases a diverse range of artworks from 1985 to the present and will remain on display through September 16, 2007.

Theater of the World, one of 40 artworks featured in the *House of Oracles* exhibition, is a sculptural installation containing insects and reptiles that alludes to the dynamics of power and refers to Chinese cultural traditions. The work deals candidly with subjects that are timely and challenging, raising important questions about the ways humans interact, how different cultures come together and the ways in which humans impact the natural world. Over the last two years, *Theater of the World* was presented in the United States at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. In both venues, the work appeared without modification for the duration of the exhibition.

"Since opening a week ago, more than 5,000 visitors have seen *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* and response from those who have viewed *Theater of the World* has been overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic," said Kathleen Bartels, director of the Vancouver Art Gallery. "Since its creation in 1993, this important and insightful work has encouraged people to think seriously about the dynamics of power in today's society. We strongly believe our role as a major visual arts institution is to present the work of significant local, national and international contemporary artists, and to serve as a forum for dialogue and debate on the issues of our time. The Vancouver Art Gallery remains fully committed to Huang Yong Ping and his artistic vision."

While the insects and reptiles will be removed from the work, the physical structure of *Theater of the World* will remain in order to further present the artist's ideas. Documentation of the events leading to the removal of insects and reptiles will be added to the display. Through public events and other opportunities for feedback prompted by the



Portrait of Huang Yong Ping
Photo: Courtesy of Cameron Witting



Theater of the World, 1993
Metal, wood, insects, reptiles.
Pierre Huber Collection,
Switzerland

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY
750 Hornby Street, Vancouver
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closure of this artwork, the Gallery intends to encourage discussions about freedom of expression, power and censorship.

“It is extremely disappointing that a major exhibition of this important artist’s work has been overshadowed by competing concerns,” said Daina Augaitis, chief curator/associate director of the Vancouver Art Gallery. “We did as much as we could to comply with the recommendations of the BC SPCA, but at a certain point they required more than what the artist was willing to do. We remain committed to the artist’s voice and ideas.”

Huang Yong Ping’s longstanding use of animals follows a tradition that dates back more than 100 years and, more recently, has included such respected artists as Joseph Beuys and Damien Hirst. *Theater of the World* finds its inspiration in Gu (姤), the eighteenth hexagram and chapter of the *I Ching* that represents decay. Gu also describes a magical potion said to have been made in South China prepared by putting together five venomous creatures in a pot for a year, which led Huang Yong Ping to include tarantulas, cockroaches, millipedes, scorpions, lizards, snakes and toads.

The Gallery began preparation for the artwork five months ago by consulting experts and contracting a reptile specialist who took great care in the selection of species to minimize predation. The reptiles and insects included in this installation were bred in captivity in Canada for domestic purposes and obtained through a reputable and licensed animal specialist in Vancouver. A program for the care of the insects and reptiles in the artwork was also developed in consultation with experts to ensure a high level of comfort. This included ensuring temperatures within species parameters; light sources to satisfy both nocturnal and diurnal species; variable humidity levels throughout the enclosure; and water conditioners for treating tap water. Food sources in the enclosure range from crickets, high-protein worms and a variety of vegetable matter, while other species are removed for offsite feeding. Moss, bark, peat moss and sand offer areas to hide and dig; all materials are changed regularly.

After numerous meetings with SPCA representatives and complying with their initial written requests to improve the conditions for insects and reptiles, on Saturday, the Gallery and Huang Yong Ping concluded they were unable to further accommodate the SPCA’s latest order to remove tarantulas and scorpions from the artwork.

Huang Yong Ping has been an important presence in the international art world since participating in the groundbreaking 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth) at the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. He was invited to the 2004 São Paulo Biennale, the 2003 Venice Biennale, the 2001 Yokohama Triennale, the 2000 Shanghai Biennial, and the 1997 Gwangju and Johannes Biennales. He has been included in group exhibitions at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, P.S. 1 and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams. The artist represented France with Jean-Pierre Bertrand at the 1999 Venice Biennale and was a finalist in the biennial Hugo Boss Prize, held at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1998.

Statement from Huang Yong Ping:

Since the first day of exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, April 4th, 2007, *Theater of the World* has received opposition from both the Vancouver Humane Society and the BC SPCA. To avoid further conflict, the Vancouver Art Gallery and I made numerous efforts to improve the living conditions of insects and reptiles as requested by the SPCA, including additional water dishes and soil, changing the lighting, etc. However, it must be stated that *Theater of the World* already met the basic living conditions for such insects and reptiles. On April 13th, the SPCA made five additional requirements,

demanding the removal of all spiders and scorpions. They completely ignored the concept and ideology behind this particular art work, citing instead the doctrines of so-called “animal rights” that violently interfere with the rights of an art work to be freely exhibited in an art museum. Their purpose is to modify the art work into something that resembles a zoo or a pet shop, where each species is neatly separated into different glass boxes in order to present a staged “natural environment.”

In order to maintain the integrity of the artwork, we must remove all the animals in *Theater of the World* but leave behind the emptied physical structure, and to do so as a sign of protest.

Huang Yong Ping
April 14th, 2007, Paris.