



The Path to Authenticity: A Study on Material Symbols and the Artists Authentic Self-Generation from the Perspective of Heideggers Theory of Modernity

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Abstract: In an era where artistic production is increasingly subsumed by industrial logic, homogenized paradigms, and commercial mechanisms, many contemporary creators find themselves in a state of self-loss. This paper investigates how artists can achieve authentic selfhood and resist modern alienation through their material practices. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's existential ontology and his critique of modernity—specifically the concepts of Dasein, authentic/non-authentic existence, the "they" (das Man), and the "ready-to-hand" (Zuhandenheit)—this study reinterprets the entire artistic process, from material selection and physical labor to the consolidation of personal symbols, as a comprehensive pathway toward authentic existence. Moving beyond formalist readings of material art, this research establishes a tripartite argument: (1) artists' deliberate choice of materials is an act of existential positioning that resists homogenizing discipline; (2) the embodied labor of creation awakens self-awareness and re-establishes a vital connection to life experiences; and (3) the long-term use of distinctive material symbols serves as a tangible testimony of authentic existence. Through in-depth case studies of Wang Guangle, Feng Fang, Chen Guanzhong, and Na Wei, the paper demonstrates how these creators, despite their different backgrounds and media, navigate the transition from non-authenticity to self-realization. This research concludes that material art practice is not merely a stylistic choice but a profound philosophical and therapeutic strategy for artists to cultivate inner awareness, anchor their identity, and find existential meaning within the alienating conditions of modernity. The findings offer both a novel theoretical framework for the study of material art and practical guidance for artists seeking to transcend creative conformity.

Keywords: Heidegger; Material Art; Authentic Existence; Embodied Labor; Chinese Contemporary Art; Phenomenology; Materiality; Dwelling.

1. Introduction

Contemporary artistic production has undergone profound transformations under the accelerating forces of globalization, technological innovation, and commercial expansion. International biennials, art fairs, digital platforms, and global gallery networks have dramatically increased the circulation of artistic ideas and materials, enabling artists to access an unprecedented diversity of media and creative resources. However, this expansion has simultaneously generated an increasingly standardized artistic environment characterized by industrialized production, market-oriented evaluation systems, and homogenized aesthetic expectations. Within such circumstances, artists often find themselves navigating institutional preferences rather than personal experience, resulting in creative practices that privilege visibility, market recognition, and curatorial acceptance over individual existential inquiry.

This contradiction reflects a broader philosophical problem concerning the relationship between modernity and human existence. Martin Heidegger argued that modern society encourages individuals to surrender their unique possibilities of being by conforming to anonymous social norms, a condition he described through the concept of das Man ("the they") [1]. Rather than consciously determining their own existence, individuals frequently adopt socially accepted behaviors, values, and judgments, thereby entering a mode of inauthentic existence (Uneigentlichkeit). Although Heidegger developed these concepts primarily within the context of ontology rather than art theory, they offer remarkable explanatory power for understanding the contemporary artistic condition. Many artists today experience increasing pressure to adopt internationally recognizable styles, commercially successful materials, or institutionally favored themes, thereby risking the gradual erosion of their individual creative identities.

Material practice occupies a particularly significant position within this discussion. Materials constitute more than physical substances employed to realize artistic concepts; they mediate relationships between memory, place, bodily experience, and cultural identity. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship frequently interprets artistic materials from perspectives emphasizing either formal aesthetics, technological innovation, ecological sustainability, or the agency of matter itself [2]–[5]. While these approaches have substantially expanded the theoretical understanding of materiality, they often overlook the existential relationship between artists and the materials with which they continuously engage. The question is therefore not merely what materials signify, but how sustained material engagement contributes to the formation of artistic selfhood.

Recent developments associated with the "material turn" have further emphasized the vitality of matter and challenged traditional anthropocentric understandings of artistic production. Bennett's concept of vibrant matter [4], Ingold's anthropology of making [5], and Barad's theory of agential realism [6] collectively demonstrate that materials actively



participate in processes of meaning production rather than functioning as passive carriers of artistic intention. However, these perspectives frequently relocate agency from the artist toward matter itself, leaving insufficient room to examine the phenomenological experience through which artists encounter materials as extensions of their own existence. Heidegger's ontology provides an alternative perspective by emphasizing practical engagement (*Zuhandenheit*), embodied experience, and the unfolding of existence through worldly involvement [1].

This paper proposes that material artistic practice should be understood as an existential rather than merely aesthetic process. Specifically, it argues that the selection of materials, repetitive bodily labor, and the long-term stabilization of material symbols collectively constitute a pathway through which artists resist the homogenizing forces of modernity and cultivate authentic existence. Instead of treating artistic materials as stylistic devices or symbolic representations, this study conceptualizes them as ontological mediators connecting personal history, bodily memory, temporal experience, and existential responsibility.

To develop this argument, the paper examines four contemporary Chinese artists whose practices demonstrate distinctive yet comparable relationships with materials: Wang Guangle, Feng Fang, Chen Guanzhong, and Na Wei. Although differing considerably in media, professional backgrounds, and artistic contexts, these artists share a common commitment to developing sustained relationships with materials rooted in individual experience rather than institutional convention. Through comparative philosophical interpretation, the study identifies a recurring developmental trajectory that begins with alienation from dominant artistic paradigms, proceeds through deliberate material selection and embodied labor, and culminates in the formation of stable material symbols representing authentic artistic identity.

Accordingly, this paper addresses three central research questions:

1. How does material selection function as an existential decision through which artists resist the homogenizing logic of contemporary art institutions?
2. In what ways does embodied material practice facilitate existential awareness and self-transformation?
3. How do recurring material symbols materialize and preserve authentic artistic identity over time?

By answering these questions, the study seeks to establish a new theoretical framework that bridges Heideggerian existential philosophy and contemporary material art, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions concerning authenticity, materiality, and artistic practice in the twenty-first century.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Materiality Beyond Formalism: From Medium to Ontology

Material has traditionally occupied a fundamental position in artistic creation, yet its theoretical interpretation has undergone substantial transformation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Classical art historical approaches generally regarded materials as neutral media through which artistic ideas were expressed, emphasizing technical mastery and formal innovation. Modernist criticism, represented by Greenberg, further reinforced the autonomy of artistic media by advocating medium specificity as the defining characteristic of artistic value. Although influential, such perspectives largely reduced materials to aesthetic functions while neglecting their broader experiential and existential dimensions.

The emergence of the "material turn" significantly challenged these assumptions. Bennett argued that matter possesses an intrinsic vitality capable of influencing human actions rather than merely receiving them [4]. Similarly, Ingold proposed that making should be understood as an ongoing dialogue between human practitioners and active materials rather than as the imposition of predetermined forms upon passive substances [5]. Barad further extended this perspective by introducing the concept of agential realism, suggesting that matter and meaning emerge through continuous intra-actions rather than existing independently [6]. Collectively, these theories transformed material studies from object-centered analysis toward dynamic relational ontologies.

Within contemporary art scholarship, increasing attention has also been devoted to craft, process, and embodied making. Adamson emphasized that craft practices reveal forms of knowledge embedded within manual labor rather than abstract conceptual thinking [7]. Brown's "Thing Theory" similarly encouraged scholars to reconsider objects as participants in cultural experience rather than passive commodities [8]. These contributions have substantially enriched discussions surrounding materiality by emphasizing process, embodiment, and relationality.

Nevertheless, despite these important theoretical advances, most material-oriented studies concentrate primarily upon the agency of materials themselves. Comparatively little research investigates how artists' long-term relationships with particular materials contribute to the development of existential identity. Material engagement therefore remains insufficiently examined as an ontological process through which artistic subjectivity is continuously constituted.

2.2 Heideggerian Ontology and Artistic Practice

Phenomenology offers an important philosophical foundation for addressing this limitation. Husserl emphasized lived experience as the basis of consciousness, while Merleau-Ponty further demonstrated that bodily perception constitutes the primary mode through which humans encounter the world [9], [10]. These phenomenological insights significantly influenced subsequent theories of artistic experience by emphasizing embodiment rather than detached observation.

Among phenomenological philosophers, Heidegger provides perhaps the most comprehensive conceptual vocabulary for understanding artistic material practice. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger introduced *Dasein* as the being whose existence is fundamentally characterized by "being-in-the-world" rather than detached subjectivity [1]. Human existence unfolds through practical involvement with things, relationships, and environments. Accordingly, *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand) describes the pre-reflective engagement through which tools and materials become integrated into meaningful activity, whereas *Vorhandenheit* (presence-at-hand) refers to detached theoretical observation.

These distinctions possess direct relevance for artistic creation. During creative practice, artists rarely experience materials as isolated objects possessing abstract physical properties. Instead, materials become extensions of bodily movement, memory, habit, and practical understanding. Clay, wood, pigments, textiles, or industrial waste are encountered through repetitive bodily interaction, gradually acquiring personal and existential significance. Artistic labor therefore exemplifies Heidegger's conception of practical engagement more profoundly than detached aesthetic contemplation.

Heidegger further argued that modern technological society increasingly transforms beings into resources available for efficient exploitation, a condition later conceptualized as *Gestell* (enframing) [11]. Within contemporary artistic production, similar tendencies emerge through standardized industrial materials, commercial exhibition systems, and institutional evaluation criteria. Consequently, artistic practice becomes vulnerable to what Heidegger described as *Verfallen*, the fall into anonymous conformity governed by *das Man*. Authentic artistic creation therefore requires not isolation from society but the recovery of individual responsibility through conscious engagement with one's own possibilities of existence.

Although Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" has inspired extensive scholarship concerning artistic truth and world disclosure [12], comparatively few studies have examined how artistic production itself functions as an existential process preceding the finished artwork. This omission becomes particularly significant when considering artists whose practices revolve around repetitive material engagement rather than symbolic representation alone.

2.3 Chinese Contemporary Material Art and the Research Gap

Studies of contemporary Chinese art have primarily emphasized historical transformation, political discourse, globalization, and cultural identity. Wu Hung documented the emergence of experimental artistic practices during China's post-socialist transition, demonstrating how artists negotiated rapidly changing social conditions [13]. Carol Yinghua Lu highlighted tensions between collective narratives and individual artistic agency within contemporary Chinese art institutions [14]. More recently, Peggy Wang and Paul Gladston have further explored globalization, transnational identity, and institutional development in Chinese contemporary art [15], [16].

Parallel developments have witnessed increasing scholarly interest in artists employing local materials, recycled objects, traditional craft techniques, and site-specific installations. Such practices are frequently interpreted through ecological criticism, cultural memory, or regional identity. While these perspectives illuminate important socio-cultural dimensions, they seldom examine why artists repeatedly return to particular materials throughout extended periods of artistic practice.

Consequently, an important theoretical gap remains. Existing scholarship has largely analyzed either the meanings represented by artistic materials or the social contexts within which materials circulate. Much less attention has been devoted to understanding how sustained engagement with materials transforms the artist's own mode of existence. Specifically, the relationship between material practice and Heideggerian authenticity remains insufficiently theorized, particularly within the context of contemporary Chinese art.

This study addresses this gap by integrating Heidegger's existential ontology with comparative case studies of four contemporary Chinese artists. Rather than interpreting materials merely as symbolic carriers of cultural meaning, the paper conceptualizes artistic material practice as an existential process through which artists negotiate alienation, cultivate embodied awareness, and gradually establish authentic forms of dwelling within modernity. This perspective not only extends Heideggerian aesthetics beyond artwork interpretation but also contributes a new theoretical model for understanding material art as a process of existential self-formation rather than simply material experimentation.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Heideggerian Framework for Authentic Material Practice

The present study adopts Heidegger's existential ontology as its principal interpretative framework because it provides a coherent philosophical vocabulary for understanding artistic creation as a process of existential self-formation rather than merely aesthetic production. Instead of considering artworks as isolated cultural objects, Heidegger situates human existence within an inseparable relationship between the individual, the world, and material engagement. Artistic practice therefore becomes a mode of being-in-the-world, through which artists disclose both the world they inhabit and their own possibilities of existence [1].

Three interrelated Heideggerian concepts are particularly significant for this research.

First, *Dasein* emphasizes that human beings exist through practical engagement rather than detached observation. The artist is not an external observer manipulating inert materials but an embodied subject whose identity develops through continuous interaction with the surrounding environment. Consequently, materials cannot be understood solely as physical media; they become existential partners participating in the unfolding of artistic identity.

Second, Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence provides a philosophical explanation for contemporary artistic alienation. Within institutionalized art systems, artists frequently encounter pressures generated by commercial galleries, biennials, curatorial preferences, academic evaluation, and global market expectations. Such pressures encourage conformity to dominant artistic languages and diminish individual creative responsibility. Heidegger conceptualized this condition as the dominance of *das Man*, wherein personal decisions are replaced by socially accepted conventions [1]. Authenticity, therefore, should not be interpreted as complete independence from society but as the continuous assumption of responsibility for one's own creative possibilities despite institutional influences.

Third, the concept of *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand) highlights the embodied nature of artistic labor. During prolonged interaction with materials, the distinction between subject and object gradually diminishes. Materials cease to function as passive objects and instead become integrated into bodily movement, memory, rhythm, and practical understanding. This

phenomenological relationship differs fundamentally from detached aesthetic contemplation because existential awareness emerges through repeated material engagement rather than abstract theoretical reflection [9].

Taken together, these concepts suggest that artistic creation is best understood as a dynamic existential process involving material choice, bodily practice, temporal experience, and symbolic stabilization. This philosophical perspective forms the theoretical foundation for the analytical model proposed in this study.

3.2 Authentic Material Practice: A Conceptual Model

Building upon Heidegger's ontology and recent scholarship on materiality, this paper proposes the concept of Authentic Material Practice (AMP). Rather than viewing material selection as an isolated artistic decision, AMP conceptualizes artistic creation as a progressive process through which existential authenticity is gradually established.

The proposed model consists of four interconnected stages

Stage One: Existential Alienation.

Artists initially experience various forms of alienation generated by industrial production, institutional evaluation, commercial expectations, or standardized artistic discourse. Creative practice becomes increasingly detached from personal memory and embodied experience.

Stage Two: Material Choice as Existential Positioning.

Artists deliberately select materials that possess biographical, geographical, or experiential significance. The importance of this stage does not depend upon whether materials are natural or industrial but upon the establishment of meaningful personal relationships with them.

Stage Three: Embodied Material Engagement.

Through repetitive physical labor—including collecting, processing, layering, assembling, carving, or transforming materials—artists gradually recover bodily awareness. Material engagement becomes an ontological practice in which memory, perception, temporality, and identity are continuously negotiated.

Stage Four: Symbolic Consolidation and Dwelling.

Over extended periods of artistic production, recurring material practices evolve into stable symbolic vocabularies. These recurring materials no longer function merely as stylistic signatures but become material testimonies of authentic existence. Artistic identity achieves relative stability through sustained engagement rather than isolated creative acts.

Unlike existing theories emphasizing either material agency or symbolic representation, AMP foregrounds the reciprocal development of artist and material throughout the creative process. Authenticity is therefore understood as relational, embodied, and temporally accumulated.

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in philosophical hermeneutics and comparative case-study analysis. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the study seeks to interpret the existential meanings disclosed through artists' material practices. Hermeneutic inquiry is particularly appropriate because Heidegger's philosophy understands interpretation not as external explanation but as a process through which meaning emerges from lived experience [17].

Comparative case studies enable the identification of recurring existential structures across different artistic practices while preserving the contextual uniqueness of individual artists. This methodological strategy is widely employed in qualitative art research where theoretical generalization is prioritized over statistical representativeness [18].

3.3 Case Selection

The four artists selected for this research—Wang Guangle, Feng Fang, Chen Guanzhong, and Na Wei—represent purposive sampling based upon maximum variation.

Although differing in generation, artistic medium, educational background, and professional trajectory, all four artists demonstrate long-term engagement with distinctive material practices closely connected to personal experience.

The selection criteria include:

1. sustained use of a recognizable material vocabulary over multiple projects;
2. publicly available interviews, artist statements, or exhibition documentation;
3. demonstrated engagement with materials extending beyond purely formal experimentation;
4. significant representation within contemporary Chinese artistic discourse.

These criteria ensure both analytical diversity and conceptual consistency, allowing the proposed theoretical framework to be examined across multiple artistic contexts.

3.4 Data Sources and Collection

The analysis integrates four complementary categories of qualitative evidence to ensure interpretive depth and methodological rigor. First, artist interviews published by museums, galleries, and exhibition catalogues provide direct evidence concerning artistic intention and material decision-making, offering first-person accounts of creative processes. Second, artist statements and exhibition texts offer insights into the conceptual motivations underlying material selection, revealing how artists articulate the relationship between personal experience and material practice. Third, scholarly articles, exhibition reviews, and curatorial essays contextualize individual practices within broader developments in contemporary Chinese art, situating each artist's work within institutional, historical, and critical frameworks. Finally, visual analyses of representative artworks examine recurring material characteristics, production techniques, and symbolic patterns observable across each artist's oeuvre, attending to formal and tactile qualities that textual sources alone cannot convey. Triangulating these multiple sources enhances interpretive reliability by reducing dependence upon any single form of evidence, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how sustained material engagement contributes to the existential development of artistic identity.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

Following data collection, each case is analyzed through four analytical dimensions derived directly from the Authentic Material Practice model.

Dimension A: Existential Alienation

Identification of institutional pressures, commercial expectations, standardized artistic conventions, or personal experiences of creative disorientation.

Dimension B: Material Choice

Interpretation of how selected materials establish biographical, geographical, historical, or existential relationships with the artist.

Dimension C: Embodied Practice

Examination of repetitive bodily engagement, including collection, preparation, processing, layering, assembly, or transformation.

Dimension D: Symbolic Formation

Analysis of how repeated material practices gradually stabilize into distinctive artistic symbols representing authentic selfhood.

Cross-case comparison subsequently identifies common developmental patterns while preserving differences arising from each artist's unique historical and cultural context.

Table 1. Analytical Coding Framework

Analytical Dimension	Heideggerian Concept	Research Focus	Primary Evidence
Alienation	Das Man, Verfallen	Institutional conformity and creative disorientation	Interviews, artist statements
Material Choice	Being-in-the-world	Existential significance of material selection	Artist statements, exhibition catalogues
Embodied Practice	Zuhandenheit	Bodily engagement and phenomenological experience	Production process, visual analysis
Symbol Formation	Dwelling, Authenticity	Stabilization of artistic identity	Long-term artistic practice, recurring motifs

Table 1. Analytical Coding Framework

3.6 Research Trustworthiness and Limitations

Accordingly, the present study does not claim direct access to artists' subjective consciousness. Instead, it interprets publicly documented artistic practices through a Heideggerian philosophical framework, emphasizing interpretive credibility rather than objective verification.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study triangulates multiple forms of qualitative evidence—including artist interviews, exhibition documentation, critical scholarship, and visual analysis—and applies a consistent analytical framework across all cases. This methodological consistency strengthens theoretical coherence while allowing contextual differences to remain visible.

The study focuses exclusively on four contemporary Chinese artists and therefore does not seek statistical generalization. Moreover, the proposed Authentic Material Practice model is interpretive rather than predictive; its purpose is to offer a transferable philosophical framework for understanding artistic self-formation rather than a universal explanatory theory. Future research may extend this framework to artists working in different cultural contexts or compare Heideggerian interpretations with perspectives from new materialism, posthumanism, or affect theory.

4. Findings

This chapter applies the proposed Authentic Material Practice (AMP) framework to four contemporary Chinese artists whose practices demonstrate different yet interconnected pathways toward authentic existence through sustained material engagement. Rather than treating these artists as isolated examples, the analysis identifies recurring existential structures while preserving the specificity of each artistic context. Consistent with the analytical framework established in Chapter 3, each case is examined through four dimensions: (1) existential alienation, (2) material choice as existential positioning, (3) embodied material practice, and (4) symbolic consolidation.

4.1 Wang Guangle: Industrial Materials and the Embodiment of Time

4.1.1 Existential Alienation within Contemporary Abstraction

Since the early 2000s, Chinese abstract painting has become increasingly integrated into international contemporary art discourse. While this integration expanded artistic visibility, it also encouraged the adoption of internationally recognizable minimalist aesthetics, industrial pigments, and standardized exhibition formats. Within such circumstances, abstraction frequently risks becoming a formal language detached from individual experience, reproducing institutional expectations rather than existential inquiry [13], [15].

Wang Guangle's practice emerged within this environment. Rather than accepting abstraction as a purely visual language, he questioned the relationship between repetitive labor, bodily endurance, and temporal experience. His artistic concern gradually shifted from producing images toward experiencing time itself through material processes.(Fig 1)

From a Heideggerian perspective, this situation illustrates the condition of *das Man*, in which artistic production is increasingly guided by established stylistic conventions rather than individual responsibility. The challenge confronting

Wang Guangle was therefore not simply to produce different paintings but to recover an authentic relationship between artistic practice and lived experience.



Fig 1, "Waterstone 201308" – Oil painting on canvas, 180×160 cm, 2013

4.1.2 Material Choice as Existential Positioning

Unlike many abstract painters who employ industrial paint solely for chromatic or formal purposes, Wang Guangle selected construction-related materials because of their close association with his personal experiences and memories of manual labor.

Floor paint, cement-like textures, and repeatedly polished surfaces become more than industrial substances. Through continuous use they establish a biographical relationship between the artist and material, transforming standardized products into personally meaningful media.

This observation illustrates an important modification to existing discussions of authenticity. Authenticity does not arise because natural materials are inherently superior to industrial ones. Rather, authenticity depends upon whether the artist establishes an enduring existential relationship with the material through lived experience.

Such interpretation aligns with Heidegger's understanding of being-in-

the-world, in which things disclose meaning through practical involvement rather than detached observation [1]. Industrial material therefore loses its anonymous character once incorporated into the artist's personal history.

4.1.3 Embodied Material Practice

The repetitive layering process employed in Wang Guangle's *Shouqi* and *Water-Milled Stone* series demonstrates the significance of embodied labor within artistic self-formation.

Each painting requires prolonged cycles of painting, drying, sanding, polishing, and repainting. The physical demands of this process resist the acceleration characteristic of contemporary artistic production. Instead of pursuing immediate visual effects, the artist repeatedly returns to the material surface, allowing bodily rhythm to determine artistic development.

From Heidegger's perspective, such repetitive activity exemplifies *Zuhandenheit*. During sustained practice, materials cease to appear as external objects and instead become extensions of bodily intentionality. The artist no longer confronts paint as an independent substance but encounters it through practical engagement. Artistic knowledge consequently emerges through bodily participation rather than conceptual planning.

The significance of repetition therefore extends beyond technique. Each layer accumulates temporal experience, recording both physical endurance and existential reflection. Time itself becomes materially visible.

4.1.4 Material Symbol and Authentic Dwelling

After years of continuous experimentation, terrazzo-like textures and polished monochromatic surfaces have become Wang Guangle's distinctive artistic language.

From conventional art historical perspectives, such recurring visual characteristics might simply be interpreted as stylistic consistency. The present study proposes a different interpretation. These material characteristics function as manifestations of authentic dwelling.

Heidegger describes dwelling not merely as occupying physical space but as establishing meaningful relationships with one's world [7]. Wang Guangle's persistent engagement with repetitive industrial materials gradually transforms anonymous construction products into a personal existential landscape. Material no longer serves representation; it becomes the site through which time, memory, and bodily endurance converge.

Consequently, Wang Guangle's artistic identity is stabilized not through stylistic branding but through sustained material commitment. Authenticity emerges as an accumulated condition of practice rather than an isolated creative decision.

4.2 Feng Fang: Handmade Pulp and the Reconstruction of Creative Dwelling

4.2.1 Escaping Institutional Modes of Production

Feng Fang occupies a unique position between installation art and film production. Both professional contexts rely heavily upon industrial fabrication, standardized construction methods, and rapid production schedules. Exhibition architecture and cinematic scenography frequently prioritize efficiency, spectacle, and reproducibility over intimate material engagement.

Within Heideggerian terminology, these institutional conditions exemplify technological enframing (*Gestell*), whereby materials are understood primarily as resources available for predetermined functional purposes [8]. Artistic production consequently risks becoming increasingly detached from personal experience. Feng Fang's practice may therefore be interpreted as an attempt to recover a slower, more intimate mode of making. (Fig 2)



Fig 2. Crane Resonance 01, 244 × 489 cm, mixed media, 2014

Through mixed-media installations and immersive exhibitions developed across such series as Migratory Birds, Crane Clouds, and Lament, contemporary artist Feng Fang brings material symbols, embodied labour, and tangible evidence of existence into a unified artistic practice. Drawing on the existential condition of migratory birds that “fly towards death,” he examines the finitude of individual Dasein within modernity. In the immersive exhibition Lament, Feng adopts a cinematic narrative structure, integrating sculptural installations, mixed-media objects, sound, lighting, and moving images. By departing from the static mode of viewing associated with two-dimensional artworks, he transforms materials from subsidiary vehicles of representation into central agents in the investigation of human existence.

4.2.2 Existential Positioning

From the perspective of existential positioning, Feng Fang’s deliberate selection of heterogeneous materials—including paper pulp, coarse hemp, metal, and simulated skeletal sculptures—constitutes an existential decision to resist the homogenising forces of modernity. Modern technology reduces living beings to calculable and consumable forms of standing-reserve. The inherently free migratory lives of cranes and other birds are consequently transformed into objects that can be consumed, neglected, and discarded.

Rather than aestheticising cranes and migratory birds through idealised imagery, Feng uses coarse and weighty materials to construct their gaunt and struggling bodies. The large-scale installation Lament unfolds through multiple layers of simulated bird bones, directly confronting the tragic reality of lives lost along migratory routes. His choice of materials therefore represents more than an aesthetic preference; it articulates an existential position. Feng moves beyond the prevailing visual conventions of popular art and refuses to reduce migratory birds to decorative cultural symbols. Through the heaviness and roughness of matter, he resists the smooth homogenisation produced by the contemporary aesthetic industry. In doing so, he establishes his own existential position and preserves an individual awareness of the finitude of life.



Fig 4, Bird Lament, 400 × 400 × 600 cm, installation, 2020

4.2.3 Embodied Labour and the Awakening of Self-Consciousness

At the level of embodied labour, the processes through which mixed materials are shaped and transformed awaken the artist’s authentic self-awareness and re-establish his connection with lived experience. Feng layers, moulds, and polishes paper pulp, hemp cloth, and metal, confronting through manual labour the harsh realities faced by migratory birds. The cinematic and immersive mode of exhibition is likewise a form of concerned artistic engagement derived from his previous experience in film production design.

Heidegger’s concept of readiness-to-hand becomes evident in this process. The artist does

not approach questions of life and death solely through abstract conceptual reflection. Instead, through practical engagement with materials, he transforms observation of reality and compassion for living beings into a physically perceptible creative experience. Modern society makes individuals particularly susceptible to becoming absorbed in an abstract world of concepts. Manual engagement with materials, by contrast, turns the contemplation of non-human lives into an immediate existential experience. It connects external reality with the artist's inner spiritual world, facilitating the awakening of self-consciousness and the formation of an authentic self.

At the same time, the recurring material symbol of the migratory bird and the crane becomes tangible evidence of Dasein's existence. Unlike fleeting virtual images, Feng has continuously explored the motif of migratory birds for more than a decade, and the symbol has consistently remained attached to physical materials. The soaring forms in *Migratory Birds and Crane Clouds*, as well as the accumulated skeletal structures in *Lament*, preserve within their material textures the artist's sustained reflections on life, death, and the destiny of the community.

Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death suggests that death, as Dasein's ownmost possibility, is precisely what gives weight and significance to existence. The migratory fate of birds flying towards death represents both the life journey of non-human beings and a metaphor for the existential condition of modern humanity. Within Feng's immersive environments, the hard, rough, and irreproducible physical materials retain traces of time and resist the instantaneous disappearance characteristic of contemporary images. Through these material symbols, Feng transforms his understanding of life's finitude into tangible evidence. By contemplating the lives of other beings, he simultaneously questions the conditions of his own existence as Dasein.

4.2.4 Pulp-Based Space as an Authentic Dwelling

Through the existential selection of materials, embodied labour, and the sustained construction of material symbols, Feng Fang's mixed-media practice transforms the death-oriented migration of birds into an ontological form of artistic expression. Confronting the spiritual predicament produced by modernity, he employs materiality to question the authenticity of life and thereby advances the formation of the artist's authentic self.

Through a sustained series of creative practices, the technique of handmade paper-pulp production has developed into Feng Fang's most recognisable artistic language. The significance of these repeatedly employed materials, however, extends beyond the establishment of an individual artistic identity. His installations create immersive environments that encourage slower forms of perception and a more conscious experience of bodily presence, thereby contrasting sharply with the accelerated rhythms of contemporary exhibition culture.

From a Heideggerian perspective, these environments constitute spaces of dwelling. They invite both the artist and the viewer to experience matter as something with which one coexists, rather than as something that is merely consumed through vision. Feng Fang's installations should therefore not be interpreted simply as spatial constructions. Instead, they should be understood as existential environments in which matter, body, memory, and place are continuously renegotiated. Authenticity is consequently not achieved through the completed installation as a finished object; rather, it is generated through sustained participation in material processes.



4.3 Chen Guanzhong: Herbal Pigments, Memory, and Academic Alienation

4.3.1 Academic Standardization and the Loss of Material Experience

For many young artists trained within contemporary art academies, artistic education provides both technical competence and institutional constraints. Professional curricula frequently privilege internationally recognized media, digital technologies, and commercially available pigments that facilitate standardized production and exhibition. While such training enhances technical proficiency, it may simultaneously distance artists from the personal experiences and local cultural traditions that originally shaped their artistic sensibilities [13], [16].

Chen Guanzhong's practice emerged from precisely this tension. Educated within an academic environment emphasizing conceptual experimentation and contemporary visual discourse, he gradually recognized that conventional painting materials failed to establish meaningful connections with his own memories of rural life. Rather than perceiving artistic education as inherently problematic, Chen questioned the implicit assumption that professional artistic development necessarily requires standardized media. This critical reflection marked the beginning of his search for an alternative material language rooted in personal history rather than institutional convention. (Fig 5)

Fig 5, Complete illustrations of certain scenes from the "Words in Formation" section from ancient times

From a Heideggerian perspective, Chen's situation exemplifies *Verfallen*, or "fallenness," in which individuals unconsciously adopt the interpretive frameworks of the surrounding community. Academic conventions become expressions of *das Man*, shaping artistic decisions before the artist has critically reflected upon their existential significance [1].

4.3.2 Herbal Pigments as Existential Reconnection

Chen Guanzhong's response to academic standardization was neither nostalgic rejection nor romantic return to tradition. Instead, he initiated a systematic process of producing pigments from indigenous medicinal plants collected in his hometown. Drying, grinding, filtering, and mixing herbal materials transformed ordinary botanical substances into unique painting media unavailable through commercial distribution.

The existential significance of this decision lies not in the natural origin of the pigments themselves but in the reconstruction of a meaningful relationship between artistic creation and lived experience. Each pigment embodies memories of particular landscapes, family traditions, seasonal rhythms, and childhood encounters with local vegetation. Material selection therefore functions as an ontological act through which personal history becomes integrated into artistic practice.

This interpretation differs from ecological readings that emphasize sustainability alone. Although herbal pigments undoubtedly possess environmental significance, the present study argues that their primary philosophical importance resides in their capacity to reconnect the artist with his own biographical world. Through material engagement, memory becomes physically enacted rather than merely represented.

4.3.3 Embodied Labor as the Recovery of Memory

The preparation of herbal pigments requires prolonged bodily participation. Unlike commercial pigments that are immediately available for artistic use, natural materials demand continuous processes of gathering, drying, crushing, grinding, sedimentation, and repeated experimentation before becoming workable artistic media.

These activities exemplify Heidegger's concept of *Zuhandenheit*. During pigment preparation, the artist no longer experiences plants as botanical objects possessing abstract scientific characteristics. Instead, they become practical companions within an unfolding process of making. Bodily movement, tactile perception, smell, temperature, and seasonal change collectively participate in artistic creation.

Importantly, the labor itself constitutes a form of phenomenological reflection. Rather than recalling childhood memories through conscious representation, Chen re-experiences those memories through bodily repetition. Material practice thus transforms remembrance into lived experience. As Merleau-Ponty suggested, perception is grounded in the body's continuous dialogue with the world rather than detached cognition [10].

4.3.4 Material Symbol and the Reconstruction of Cultural Dwelling

Over time, herbal pigments have evolved into Chen Guanzhong's most distinctive artistic language. Their recurring presence throughout multiple projects represents more than stylistic consistency; it embodies an enduring commitment to integrating locality, memory, and artistic practice.

Heidegger described dwelling as remaining meaningfully within one's world rather than merely occupying geographical space [7]. Chen's pigments establish precisely such a form of dwelling. They reconnect artistic production with forgotten cultural landscapes while simultaneously challenging the increasingly universalized material vocabulary of contemporary painting.

Within the Authentic Material Practice model, herbal pigments therefore function as material testimonies of existential reconciliation. The artist does not simply depict memory; he inhabits memory through sustained material engagement.

4.4 Na Wei: The Cross-Media Juxtaposition of Silk and Canvas and a "Squeezing-Based" Material Practice

4.4.1 The Selection of Materials as Existential Positioning: Resisting the Homogenising Discipline of Modernity through Heterogeneous Media

Heidegger argues that, within the modern technological world, beings are transformed into standing-reserve, while both human beings and art are incorporated into a standardised, formulaic, and reproducible industrial order. Artistic creation can therefore easily become subject to the homogenising discipline of popular imagery, fixed stylistic conventions, and the use of a single medium.

Na Wei's systematic training in oil painting at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts equipped him with a highly accomplished language of realist painting. Nevertheless, he consciously refused to be confined by the label of an "oil painter." After relocating to the Lingnan region, he continued to conduct experiments across different materials. He mounted Eastern silk onto Western linen canvas, painted bamboo and unusual rocks in traditional ink on the silk surface, and used the canvas ground to support oil colour and flat blue-and-white stripes. In the *Unity: Landscape* series, ink, oil paint, and mechanically printed linear stripes are forcibly joined together, bringing two heterogeneous material systems and two fundamentally different visual traditions into direct confrontation.



Fig 6, SuperUnity of Scarlet Tide Landscape Plus, 600 × 200 cm, 150 × 200 cm × 4, quadriptych, Oil on canvas, Chinese ink on silk, and silkscreen colour transfer, 2022–2023

The modern cultural industry produces vast quantities of homogenised images, while the market reduces distinctions between media to consumable signs. For Na Wei, the decision to use silk rather than linen, or ink rather than oil paint, is therefore by no means merely a technical choice. It constitutes an act of existential self-positioning.

4.4.2 The Embodied Nature of Creative Labour: Material Practice as an Awakening of the Self and a Reconstruction of the Living Connection with Experience

Heidegger's concept of readiness-to-hand in *Being and Time* is crucial here. When individuals merely observe images or consume finished artworks from a detached position, objects appear primarily as present-at-hand. Only by engaging in practical activity, concerned involvement, and embodied labour with materials can individuals move beyond everyday absorption and confront their ownmost existence.

Na Wei's distinctive method of "squeezing" provides the most important point of entry for understanding the embodied character of his creative labour. In the *Being Squeezed* carpet series, he does not rely on brushes to depict images. Instead, he physically squeezes paint directly onto the surface, using bodily force to control its flow, accumulation, and formation in order to simulate the woven textures of carpets.

This is no longer a contemplative mode of painting in which the artist sits before a surface and reproduces an image. It is a form of labour involving direct contact among the body, physical force, and the material substance of paint. The viscous resistance of the pigment, the pressure exerted during squeezing, and the speed at which the paint flows must all be perceived and regulated through the body. The entire creative process becomes a continuous negotiation with the material. From the perspective of Heidegger's critique of modernity, the division of labour in modern society fragments and abstracts human activity, separating individuals from the objects and experiences of everyday life and causing them to fall into the numb conformity of the "they."

Na Wei's material practice proceeds in precisely the opposite direction. When his hands encounter the coarse texture of linen, sense the smoothness and fragility of silk, and control the squeezed movement of paint, abstract emotions and ideas are transformed into immediate bodily and sensory experiences. Material labour becomes a medium through which inner spiritual existence is reconnected with lived reality.

In his early *Only Child* series, his reflections on the spiritual difficulties experienced by an entire generation no longer remain abstract concepts. Through sustained engagement with materials, the artist repeatedly recognises and verifies his own emotions and existential circumstances. This process awakens a clear sense of self, reconstructs a vivid and sensory relationship between the individual and the surrounding world, and enables the artist to resist the widespread perceptual numbness of modern life.

4.4.3 Continuously Evolving Material Symbols: Material Traces as Tangible Evidence of the Authentic Existence of Dasein

Heidegger maintains that human beings always exist within temporality and that *Dasein* is continually passing away. One of the fundamental difficulties of human existence is that it cannot be permanently preserved and can easily disappear or be forgotten. The sustained use of a distinctive and individual material system can leave physical traces that serve as tangible evidence of the artist's existential journey, thereby resisting the instantaneity and nihilistic disappearance of existence within modernity.

Many artists frequently change their media and subjects merely to follow prevailing trends. Na Wei's work, however, contains a stable and continuous material trajectory. It begins with the striped imagery in the early oil paintings of the *Blue and White: Isolation* series, proceeds through the cross-media combination of silk and oil painting in his middle period, and develops further in the squeezed-paint series and the mixed-media landscapes of the *Unity* series. Although his forms of media have continued to expand, blue-and-white stripes and the logic of juxtaposing heterogeneous materials have remained consistent throughout more than a decade of artistic practice.

In the contemporary information age, almost any image can be digitally reproduced and instantaneously circulated. Images consequently lose their temporal depth, and existence itself becomes increasingly weightless. Canvas, silk, and accumulated layers of paint, by contrast, possess an irreducible material reality. Within each mixed-media work, the seams

between different substances, variations in the thickness of paint, and accidental traces produced by manual squeezing record the artist's labour, emotions, and existential circumstances at a particular moment.

For Na Wei, the sustained development of this distinctive material language transforms the artwork into material evidence of existence. When viewers confront its physical medium, they can encounter the artist's long process of moving between northern and southern China, settling in Lingnan, and continually investigating questions of existence. Within a modern world characterised by constant change, transience, and illusion, the traces preserved in physical materials anchor the fact that Dasein has genuinely existed and has questioned the meaning of Being.

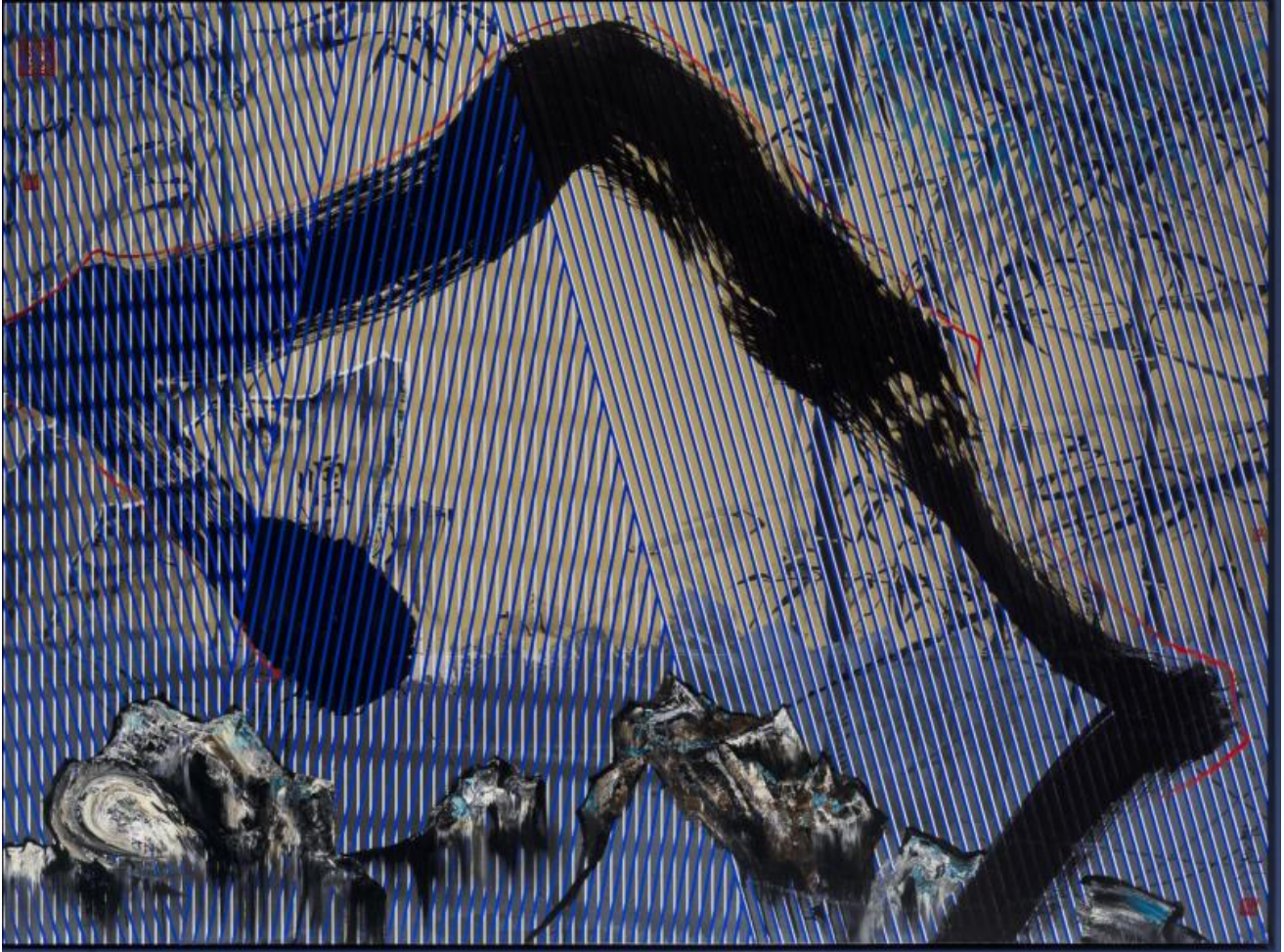


Figure 7, Bamboo, Rock and Landscape Painting, 200 × 150 cm, Oil on canvas, Chinese ink on silk, and silkscreen colour transfer, 2016

Viewed through the framework of Heidegger's theory of modernity, Na Wei's mixed-media practice demonstrates that his deliberate selection of silk, linen canvas, ink, squeezed paint, and other materials extends far beyond formal or visual innovation.

First, material decision-making constitutes an act of existential positioning. Through the tension between heterogeneous media, Na Wei resists the homogenising discipline imposed by the modern art system and mass culture, thereby safeguarding the difference and particularity of individual existence.

Second, the extensive embodied labour involved in squeezing paint and mounting silk enables the artist to escape the perceptual decline associated with modern life. Through practical and concerned engagement with materials, he reconstructs the internal connection between self-consciousness and lived experience.

Third, his long-term and continuously evolving system of material symbols preserves traces of time through irreproducible physical textures, allowing the artwork to become tangible evidence of the authentic existence of Dasein.

In a modern condition in which images are becoming increasingly virtual and the individual can easily dissolve into the anonymous conformity of the "they," Na Wei uses materiality and physical practice to sustain an ongoing inquiry into the nature of existence through painting.

5. Cross-case Discussion

The comparative analysis of the four case studies demonstrates that material practice should be understood not merely as an artistic technique but as an existential process through which artists negotiate identity, memory, and responsibility within contemporary society. Although Wang Guangle, Feng Fang, Chen Guanzhong, and Na Wei employ markedly different materials and operate within distinct artistic contexts, their practices collectively reveal a common developmental structure that extends Heidegger's ontology into the field of contemporary material art. This chapter

discusses the theoretical implications of these findings in relation to existing scholarship on materiality, phenomenology, and Chinese contemporary art.

5.1 Beyond the Material Turn: Re-centering the Artist's Existential Experience

Recent scholarship associated with the "material turn" has significantly transformed the understanding of artistic materials by challenging the traditional view of matter as passive substance. Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" emphasizes the vitality and agency of material objects [4], while Ingold's anthropology of making argues that artistic production emerges through continuous correspondence between maker and material rather than through the execution of predetermined forms [5]. Similarly, Barad's theory of agential realism reconceptualizes matter as an active participant in meaning production [6].

While these perspectives successfully decentralize anthropocentric assumptions, they tend to foreground the agency of materials at the expense of the existential development of the human subject. The present study does not dispute the active role of matter; instead, it argues that the philosophical significance of material practice cannot be fully understood without considering how sustained engagement with materials transforms the artist's own mode of being. In other words, materials do not simply possess agency—they mediate existential self-formation.

The four case studies consistently demonstrate that artistic materials become meaningful only through long-term embodied relationships. Wang Guangle's industrial pigments, Feng Fang's handmade pulp, Chen Guanzhong's herbal pigments, and Na Wei's urban waste each acquire philosophical significance because they are integrated into the artists' biographies, bodily practices, and temporal experiences. Material agency and human existence should therefore be understood as mutually constitutive rather than theoretically opposed.

5.2 Authentic Material Practice as an Existential Process

A second contribution of this research is the formulation of the Authentic Material Practice (AMP) model. Existing studies often examine isolated aspects of artistic production, including material selection, craftsmanship, symbolism, or ecological concerns. The findings presented here indicate that these dimensions are better understood as interconnected stages within a continuous existential process.

Across all four cases, authenticity develops through a recurring sequence. Artists first experience forms of alienation generated by institutional structures, market expectations, academic conventions, or consumer culture. They subsequently establish meaningful relationships with particular materials rooted in personal memory or lived experience. Repetitive bodily engagement then transforms those materials into extensions of perception and practical understanding. Finally, long-term repetition consolidates recurring material vocabularies that function as enduring testimonies of artistic identity.

This process suggests that authenticity is neither an innate psychological quality nor a momentary creative decision. Rather, authenticity is gradually cultivated through sustained material engagement. Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence thus becomes observable not only at the level of philosophical reflection but also within concrete artistic practice. Material labor functions as a mode of existential disclosure through which artists continuously negotiate responsibility for their own creative possibilities [1].

Importantly, these findings also challenge the assumption that "authentic practice necessarily requires natural or traditional materials". Grounded in Na Wei's creative philosophy of constructing spiritual fields from ordinary readymade objects, together with Wang Guangle's exploration of the temporality of materials, neither artist relies on industrial substances or urban waste materials for their creation. Nevertheless, their works manifest the same existential structure identified in the practices of Feng Fang and Chen Guanzhong.

Contributions to Contemporary Chinese Art Studies

The findings also contribute to scholarship on contemporary Chinese art by introducing an existential perspective that complements dominant socio-political and historical interpretations. Existing research has provided valuable analyses of globalization, institutional transformation, urbanization, and cultural identity within Chinese contemporary art [13]–[16]. While these studies illuminate the external conditions shaping artistic production, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the internal processes through which artists reconstruct personal identity.

The present research demonstrates that contemporary Chinese material art should not be interpreted solely as a response to political history or cultural memory. Material practice also represents an ongoing negotiation between individual existence and the homogenizing structures of modernity. The artists examined here differ in generation, education, and medium, yet each employs material engagement to recover forms of dwelling grounded in lived experience rather than institutional expectations.

This perspective broadens current understandings of Chinese contemporary art by connecting localized material practices with universal philosophical questions concerning authenticity, embodiment, and human existence. Rather than positioning Chinese material art as an exclusively regional phenomenon, the study situates it within broader international debates on phenomenology, materiality, and existential aesthetics.

5.3 Limitations of the Heideggerian Perspective and Future Directions

Although Heidegger's ontology provides a powerful interpretive framework, it does not exhaust the philosophical possibilities for understanding contemporary material art. The present study emphasizes authenticity, embodiment, and dwelling, yet other theoretical traditions—including new materialism, posthumanism, affect theory, and actor-network theory—may illuminate different aspects of artistic production. Future comparative research could examine the extent to which Heidegger's emphasis on human existence complements or conflicts with these more recent approaches.

Furthermore, the four case studies were selected through purposive sampling rather than statistical representativeness. Their common existential structure should therefore be understood as an analytical model rather than a universal law

governing all material artistic practices. Future research may expand the comparative framework by including artists from different cultural regions, interdisciplinary practices, or digital material environments.

Despite these limitations, the Authentic Material Practice model provides a transferable conceptual framework for future studies examining the relationship between artistic making, embodied experience, and existential selfhood. By integrating Heideggerian philosophy with contemporary material art, the present study contributes a new theoretical perspective through which artistic creation can be understood as an ongoing practice of authentic human existence rather than solely a process of aesthetic production.

6. Conclusion

The increasing standardization of contemporary artistic production has generated an urgent need to reconsider the relationship between artistic practice and authentic human existence. While globalization, technological innovation, and institutional expansion have diversified artistic media, they have also intensified pressures toward aesthetic homogenization, commercial conformity, and professional standardization. Against this background, the present study has argued that material artistic practice should be understood not merely as a formal or technical process but as an existential pathway through which artists reconstruct selfhood and negotiate meaningful relationships with the world.

Drawing upon Heidegger's existential ontology, this research developed the conceptual framework of Authentic Material Practice (AMP) to explain how sustained engagement with materials contributes to the formation of authentic artistic existence. Rather than interpreting materials as passive media or autonomous agents, the proposed framework conceptualizes material practice as a dynamic interaction between bodily experience, personal memory, temporality, and existential responsibility. Through qualitative comparative analysis of four contemporary Chinese artists—Wang Guangle, Feng Fang, Chen Guanzhong, and Na Wei—the study identified a recurring developmental trajectory comprising four interconnected stages: existential alienation, material choice as existential positioning, embodied material engagement, and symbolic consolidation. These stages collectively illustrate how artists transform material practice into a process of authentic dwelling within contemporary society.

The findings contribute to several areas of scholarship. First, the study extends Heideggerian aesthetics by shifting analytical attention from the completed artwork to the creative process itself. While previous Heideggerian studies have primarily focused on the ontological status of artworks, the present research demonstrates that authenticity is cultivated through sustained artistic practice before the artwork is completed. Second, the proposed Authentic Material Practice model complements recent developments associated with the material turn by reintroducing the existential formation of the artist into discussions that have often emphasized material agency alone. Material and artist are shown to participate in a reciprocal process of co-constitution, in which artistic identity gradually emerges through long-term embodied engagement. Third, by applying existential phenomenology to contemporary Chinese material art, this study provides a new interpretive perspective that complements existing socio-political, historical, and cultural analyses, demonstrating that material practice is simultaneously a cultural expression and a philosophical practice of self-formation.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research also offers broader implications for contemporary artistic practice and art education. The findings suggest that authentic creativity does not depend upon the rejection of technological media or industrial materials, but upon the establishment of sustained, meaningful, and biographically grounded relationships with artistic materials. Consequently, artistic education may benefit from placing greater emphasis on embodied experimentation, material exploration, and reflective making rather than exclusively prioritizing technical proficiency or conceptual innovation. Likewise, curatorial practice and artistic research may adopt existential perspectives to better understand how creative processes contribute to the formation of individual identity within increasingly globalized artistic environments.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The present study examined only four contemporary Chinese artists selected through purposive sampling and therefore does not seek statistical generalization. Furthermore, the Authentic Material Practice model is intended as an interpretive framework rather than a universal explanatory theory. Although Heidegger's ontology provides valuable insights into authenticity and embodied existence, it represents only one possible philosophical perspective. Future studies may expand this framework by incorporating broader geographical samples, interdisciplinary artistic practices, or comparative theoretical approaches involving new materialism, posthumanism, affect theory, ecological aesthetics, or actor-network theory. In addition, empirical research involving artist interviews and longitudinal fieldwork would further enrich understanding of how material engagement contributes to artistic identity formation over time.

In conclusion, this study argues that the philosophical significance of material art lies not primarily in the materials themselves but in the existential relationships cultivated through sustained artistic engagement. Material practice becomes a mode of dwelling in which memory, body, temporality, and responsibility converge, enabling artists to resist the homogenizing tendencies of modernity while continually reconstructing authentic forms of selfhood. By integrating Heideggerian existential philosophy with contemporary Chinese material art, the proposed Authentic Material Practice framework provides a transferable conceptual model for future research on artistic creation, materiality, and human existence in the twenty-first century.

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