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A Muzzled Chinese Artwork, Absent but Speaking Volumes

By JANE PERLEZ

BEIJING — A wood sculpture of a larger-than-life man's head whose gaping mouth is stuffed with a plug — a piece of Chinese protest art from more than 30 years ago — was supposed to be a star attraction at a retrospective here.

The startling visage, called "Silence," born as a *cri de coeur* against the censorship of the period after the Cultural Revolution in China, was shown briefly during an artistic spring in Beijing in 1979 and 1980, before being banished.

Even today, says the creator of the work, Wang Keping, who lives in exile in France, his signature sculpture is too hot. "Silence" is notably absent from the exhibition of his works from his years abroad at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in the fashionable 798 Art Zone in Beijing.

"If it were part of the exhibit, there would be no exhibit," Mr. Wang said as he showed a visitor dozens of dark-wood abstract sculptures, some of them hinting

An exiled sculptor's retrospective reflects a chill in expression.

at the bodies of men and women, made in his studio outside Paris.

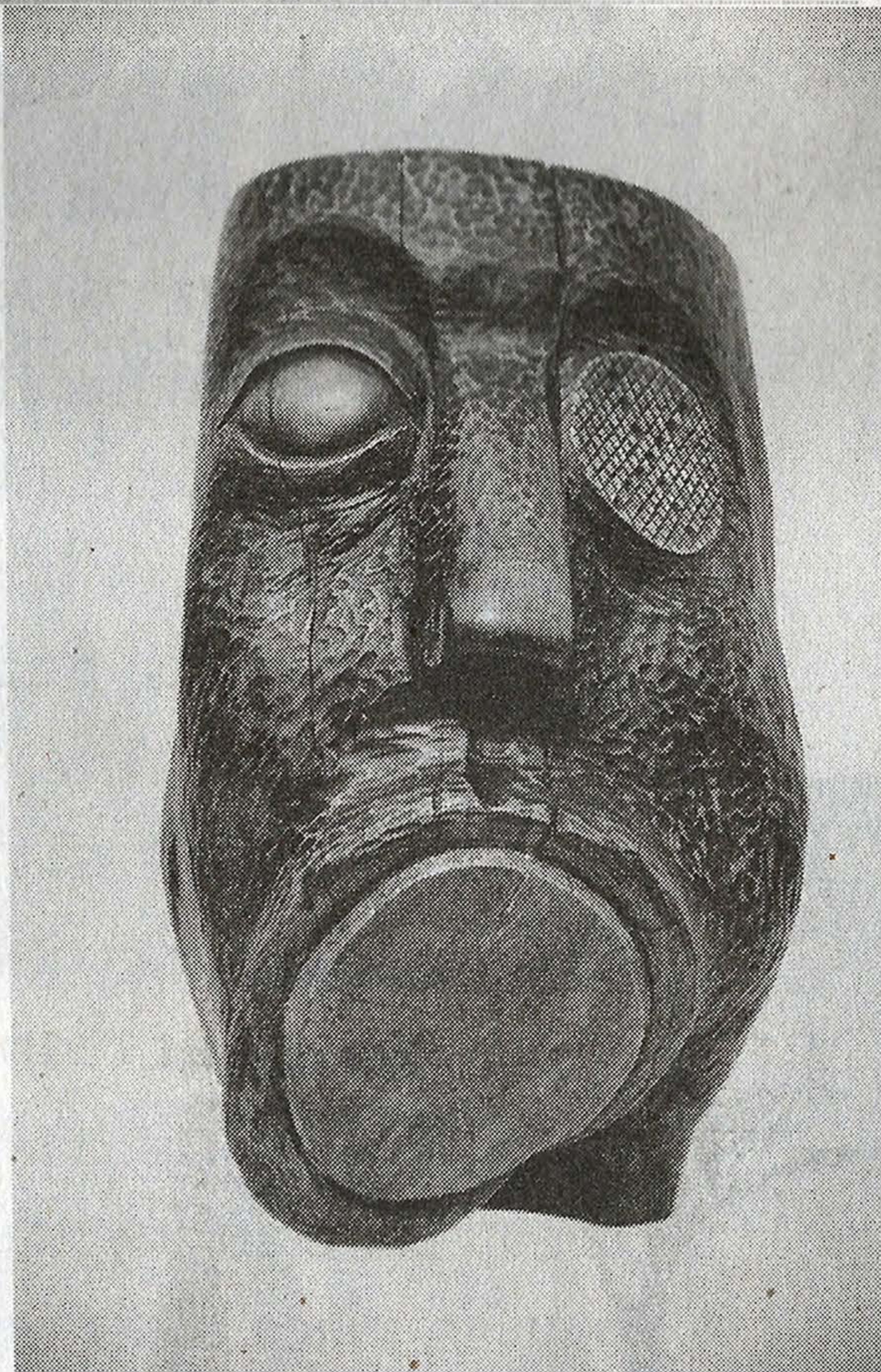
These newer pieces, including two towering black sculptures that in style and shape faintly recall the heads on Easter Island, proved acceptable to the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture. The bureau must see in advance the number and subject of artworks imported for exhibits.

The Chinese authorities were in fact never given a chance to judge "Silence" anew.

The Ullens Center decided that the current chill on expression in China — most obvious in the detentions in recent months of free-wheeling commentators on China's microblog sites — made it unlikely that "Silence" would be accepted, said the director of the center, Philip Tinari. The entire show would have been put at risk if "Silence" were submitted for approval, he said.

Similarly, the organizers of a current show of Andy Warhol's works at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing said they decided in advance not to hang Warhol's well-known depiction of Mao.

Mr. Wang comes from an illustrious Communist background. His father was a writer, and his mother was an actress, and both were favored by the party. From that standpoint, he has an acute antenna for China's changing political moods, and he assesses the current atmosphere as more depressing than the heady days when he led an avant-garde art movement and marched in the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM DEAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

streets bearing a banner that said "Demand for Artistic Freedom."

"One big difference between now and then is that in 1979 and 1980, artists actually believed there was going to be great change in society," he said. "Nowadays, artists believe there won't be any change in the next 20 or 30 years. The artists don't believe they have the strength to change. Their lives are comfortable, but they feel they don't have any freedom of expression."

In the fall of 1979, Mr. Wang,

The Chinese sculptor Wang Keping at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. A work called "Silence," left, was supposed to be a star attraction, but the center did not submit it to the authorities for review, believing it would be rejected.

"Stars" show.

The artists propped their paintings against an iron fence and hung some from trees, and Mr. Wang strung his sculptures across the top of the fence.

Photographs show curious onlookers, dressed in drab Mao-style suits, with one man with flashy sunglasses peering intently at the paintings, woodblock prints and sculptures. There were run-ins with the police, but the museum directors at the time supported the artists.

On Oct. 1, 1979 — National Day — Mr. Wang led a demonstration of about 1,000 protesters that ended up with a speakers' platform on the steps of the Beijing municipal party committee building.

A month later, the artists persuaded the authorities to move the exhibit to a less secretive place at Beihai Park, the largest park in Beijing at the time. The Beijing bureau chief of The New York Times, Fox Butterfield, wrote that it was Mr. Wang's "brazenly political, often grotesque sculptures that stole the show."

In August 1980, the artists secured a show inside the halls of the National Museum. In the 18 days of the exhibit, an astonishing 80,000 visitors showed up.

But soon, another political chill swept through Beijing, and the fleeting liberty vanished. Mr. Wang married a French teacher at Peking University, Catherine Dezaly, and moved to France in 1984, taking with him "Silence," an unflattering sculpture of Mao called "Idol" and dozens of other radical pieces. At about the same time, the now-famous maverick

artist Ai Weiwei, a young member of the Stars group, moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

The exhilaration has long since dissipated, Mr. Wang said. "We felt in those days some people in the Communist Party would support us," he recalled. "Control over the lower ranks was more relaxed."

It was a period when the government was seeking foreign investment and was worried, at least a little, about rebuke from the outside world.

"Now they don't need foreign approval; now they are not afraid," he said. "If they were afraid, they wouldn't do stupid things like arrest Ai Weiwei and crack down on the Internet against people critical of the government."

As the opening of his current show approached, he was tempted, he said, to smuggle the sculptures "Silence" and "Idol" in his luggage on the flight to Beijing from Paris. But he was persuaded not to. "I didn't want to bring trouble onto the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art," he said.

The two pieces were displayed at the Asia Society in Hong Kong this year at an exhibit of art from the Cultural Revolution. Now they are back in his house in France, where he keeps them in a bathroom, safe from theft.

What would have happened if he had stayed in China? "My life would be a lot better," he said. "I would have a big studio, a lot of assistants, a driver and mistress. Chinese artists all live very comfortably, as long as you don't oppose the government."

