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| The Grass Society (草草社) |
| Caocaoshe |
| The Grass Society, or Caocaoshe, was a formal group of ink painters founded in Shanghai in 1979. Qiu Deshu (仇德樹, 1948-) founded the group and was its youngest member. Chen Jialing (陳家泠, 1937-), once a teacher of Qiu’s, was the group’s co-founder. From the 1950s to 1990s it was possible to practice art outside the Socialist system. The underground art movement included senior artists condemned by the Cultural Revolution and unofficial artists who had given up state employment. After Mao’s death in 1976, local arts administrators began exploring problematic exhibition themes with no political focus in mediums such as watercolours, considered unsuitable for Socialist Realist art. Caocaoshe emerged within this environment. |
| The Grass Society, or Caocaoshe, was a formal group of ink painters founded in Shanghai in 1979. Qiu Deshu (仇德樹, 1948-) was the founder and youngest member of the group. Chen Jialing (陳家泠, 1937-), once a teacher of Qiu’s, was the group’s co-founder. From the 1950s to 1990s it was possible to practice art outside the Socialist system. The underground art movement included senior artists condemned by the Cultural Revolution and unofficial artists who had given up state employment. After Mao’s death in 1976, local arts administrators began exploring problematic exhibition themes with no political focus in mediums, such as watercolours, considered unsuitable for Socialist Realist art. Caocaoshe emerged within this environment.  Originally called ‘Independent Artists Team’, they were advised to change their name as it suggested the ideals of the USA’s Declaration of Independence. Nonetheless, artistic independence and individualism were the overriding principles of their practice. Their manifesto described their aspirations: ‘grass – symbol of the strongest life force in nature… so widespread, so ordinary and resilient, yet it brings to the world year after year luxuriance and hope.’ Members were committed to innovation within the medium of ink. Their use of painting as a vehicle of self-expression, in opposition to official art, connected with the ideology of the Chinese literati. Moving beyond imitation of both Chinese and Euro-American art, their experiments detached form from content and led to abstraction.  Qiu Deshu learned to paint at the Luwan District Children’s Palace. During the Cultural Revolution he shovelled coal at factories and was an accomplished Red Guard painter with work shown regularly in Shanghai exhibitions. In 1977 he transferred to the Luwan District Cultural Centre to manage exhibition planning and implementation. His own work employed vivid colour with a tangible sense of movement to convey a sense of vibrancy and harmony.  [File: Rhythm.jpg]  Figure 1: Qui Deshu, *Rhythm of Stream*, 1979. Ink and colour on paper. 77.5 x 77.5 cm. Collection of Carolyn Hsu-Balcer and Rene Balcer.  <http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/conversation-with-qiu-deshu/>  Co-founder Chen Jialing trained at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou and later taught at Shanghai Art School, his academic background adding legitimacy to Caocaoshe. The subject of his work was the lotus, a Buddhist symbol of purity, formed with puddled washes and skilfully controlled dry ink. Other members included unofficial artists Chen Juyuan (1939-) who wrote Caocaoshe’s manifesto, Jiang Depu (1937-), and a group of former students from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts: Pan Feilun (1937-), Zhu Yinling (1939-), Xu Yinghuai (1937-) and Zeng Mi (1935-), and artists Guo Runlin (1940-), Dai Dunbang (1938-), and Yuan Songmin (1927-).  The Grass Society’s first and only exhibition was scheduled to run from February 16 to March 9, 1980, at the Luwan District Cultural Centre. Titled *The Grass Society: Painting Exhibition for the 1980s,* it was targeted by censors prior to even opening. The event was shut down prematurely by the Movement Against Bourgeois Liberalism, which criticised the work for ‘abstract tendencies’, which were equated with political subversion. Qiu Deshu was subsequently removed from his position at the Cultural Centre, and the group disbanded; however, core artists continued practice as individuals. |
| Further reading:  (Andrews)  (Deshu)  (Shen, Andrews and Qiu) |