

## The Morning Light Underground

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In discussion with am art space founders Deng Yeming and Yu Ji.

AM art space is one of China's few independent non-profit art spaces dedicated to residency projects. Founded by Deng Yeming and Yu Ji (aka Lam & Jam) in 2008, the space occupies a basement in an old residential complex at the intersection of Fengxian and Shimen Er Lu in Shanghai. The co-founders are graduates of the Fine Arts College at Shanghai University; Yu Ji explores the various applications of multiple materials through sculpture installations as well as works of performance art, and Deng Yeming opened a small design studio to support the space's operation costs and produce the space's exhibitions. Since its founding, each year the space has hosted a residency for a foreign artist and an exhibition of the work produced. While creating opportunities for exchange and collaborative exhibitions between local artists and visiting artists, past residents include Peter Vink (the Netherlands), Karen Ann Lee (New Zealand), Sibylle Hoffer (Germany) and others. In 2013, am art space partnered with the Goethe-Institut to jointly select a German artist to complete a two-month residency. The space also occasionally organizes solo or group exhibitions of Chinese artists, including recitals, performances, interactive works, public events, site-specific sound installations, body art works, etc. Randian recently caught up with the co-founders to talk about their intentions for the space, the obstacles they have overcome and their plans for the future.



[See all photos \(5\)](#)

**Randian:** What were your original intentions for am art space? And what made you decide on the villa at Xiangshan Road?

**LJ:** At first it was the French architecture along Xiangshan Road—it just made us want to do something, and so we exhausted our savings on renovations and rent and opened up am art space. Early on, the important thing was to have a space for exchange among a small group of friends. After all, it was our space—it functioned half as an exhibition space, half as an office—and at that time the two of us wanted to continue creating art.

**Randian:** Can you talk specifically about a few projects from that time?

**LJ:** In 2009, New Zealand had an Asia Foundation, and we hosted a simple workshop. Zhao Bo, Liu Wenting, Yang Lujia, Lu Yang, Hu Xiaoxiao and other local artists all exhibited in the Xiangshan Road space, and there were several non-Chinese artists who held exchange workshops. At that time we resembled something of a “salon”; the important thing was that everyone was together, exchanging thoughts—the plan was relatively basic. All kinds of artists collaborated as there wasn't yet a system; we didn't get media promotion. We eventually began to branch out, and in fact developed more of a presence abroad than here. We stressed the importance of artistic collaboration, focusing on performative mediums like happenings, performance, body art, theater and even documentary film. During this period our two separate roles were gradually clarified: Yu Ji focused on the conceptual planning, Lam focused more on operations, including installation, visual elements and design.

**Randian:** am art space is best known for its residency projects. How did you come to develop this focus?

**LJ:** Our plan for the residencies actually began in 2010, and we hosted one person a year. When selecting artists, we usually

looked for people who hadn't traveled. These people tend to approach the unknown of a new environment with an openness to cultural exchange, and the greater the contrast, the more we believe there is for the artist to gain. We usually expect the artists to draw inspiration from their new physical surroundings and incorporate local materials into their project and resulting exhibition. Beyond the work, we of course organize various activities, make introductions and create a comfortable, enjoyable place to exchange ideas. And we don't limit this to art circles—we encourage the artists to explore the local cultures and lifestyles. We want them to have nuanced interactions with the city, to gain new experiences and new perspectives. But back to the project itself—the residency lasts two months and the artist's commitment to the project throughout is crucial.



“What are you doing”, group exhibition by Zhao Bo, Liu Wenting and Yang Lujia, 2008

赵波、刘雯婷、杨璐佳群展，《你在忙什么》，2008

**Randian:** In 2010, you moved to your current underground location at Fengxian Road. How did this new space affect the programs themselves? Why did you choose this basement space?

**LJ:** Certain aspects of the building compelled us to move, and the transition to the new space came to act as a step forward in our development. We absolutely loved the new space at Fengxian Road. It is in the commercial center of Nanjing West Road, it is easy to get to—you didn't need to make a special trip to an art district. The underground space meant that there was no natural light, which made it seem more neutral, more basic than the villa at Xiangshan Road. There were no architectural flourishes, and the cement space seemed like an incubator in which we could follow our artistic inclinations.

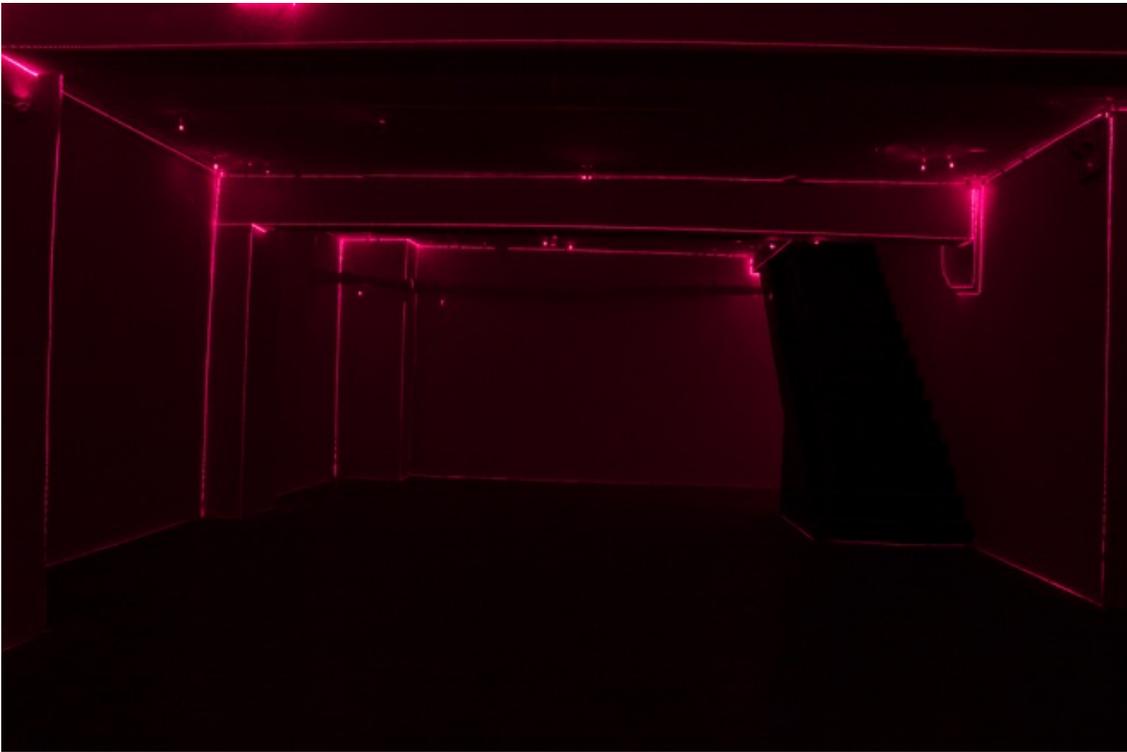
**Randian:** Can you speak in detail about projects that interacted with the space in a particularly strong way?

**LJ:** Our first project this year was Liu Gang's “Space as a Piece”—a work that was conceived through conversations on the nature of space and art space. Liu Gang made a 1:3 miniature of an art space, constructed from the same materials, and displayed it inside the space. In other words, viewers entered the conundrum of a space within a space (although it was in fact a space and a replicated space). Of course, the artist was expressing something beyond the experiential conundrum of the visual and visceral—the work indicated a displacement between art work and art space. The artist was making a deeper inquiry into the concept of an independent space and, from a logical stand point, we also see this as representative of our own approach to the projects at an art space. Also, two years ago the Dutch artist Peter Vink created a piece during his residency in which he arranged one hundred laser pointers to contour the lines of the space in red light—an abstract, simple work with tremendous visual impact.



“As a space, as a piece”, individual project by Liu Gang, 2014

刘钢个人项目，《当空间作为作品》，2014



“AM ART SPACE”, residence project by Peter Vink, 2011

“上午艺术空间”Peter Vink的驻地项目，2011年

**Randian:** Aside from the residency, are there other exhibitions scheduled for the new space at present?

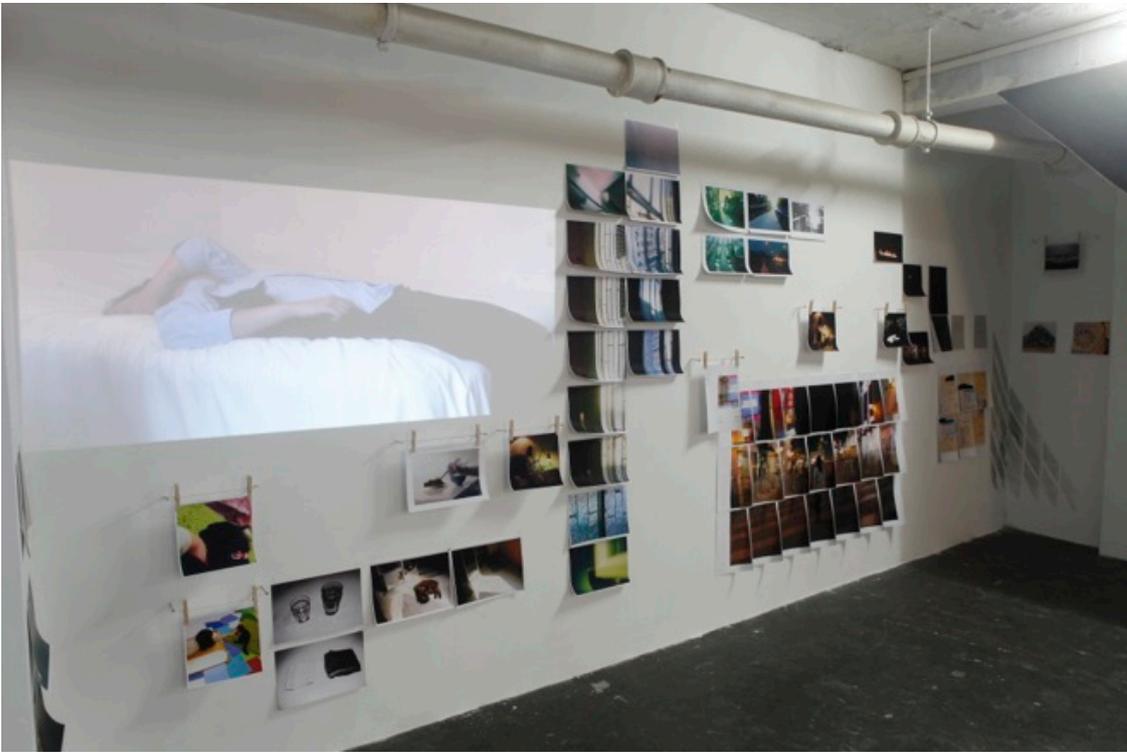
**LJ:** After moving to the Fengxian space in 2010, we started promoting collaborative projects with young curators. Or rather, we supported young people with curatorial aspirations but little experience. Curating an exhibition is a job that requires comprehensive ability and skill; from start to finish, the process is probably more difficult for the curator than the artist. We were willing to create opportunities for younger practitioners in a more spontaneous, independent and untouched space to set young curators on their path. This was our real desire. Curatorial participants included Huang Le, Yao Mengxi and others.

**Randian:** What was the concept behind your partnership with the Goethe-Institut?

**LJ:** Our collaboration with the Goethe-Institut (independent curators could act as a third party) entailed jointly selecting an outstanding German artist and providing a two-month residency for him or her to complete a project. The Goethe-Institut provided a fixed amount of financial support and we were amenable to their direction, aligning with their goal to provide a framework and opportunity for exchange to German artists.

**Randian:** What hopes and expectations do you have for the future and development of the space?

**LJ:** We have always worked according to a “10-year plan,” and right now we still have four more years. In 2018 we should be able to regroup, look back and make plans for moving forward. We’ve grown alongside the space—you could say the space represents our growth. We hope to organize our texts and publish projects, and to have texts to accompany and expound upon future works; additionally, we believe text can transcend a space and furthermore serve as a guide, an explanation and a record of an art space.



“Apartment: A User’s Manual”, individual project by Shi Yijie, 2014

《两房一厅一厨一卫》史毅杰的个人项目，2014



“Residency Project”, individual project by Sibylle Hofter, 2014

《驻地项目》Sibylle Hofter的个人项目，2014年

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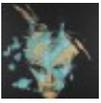
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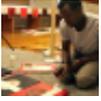
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