CHINESE WHISPERS

Recent Art from the Sigg and M+ Sigg Collections
19.02. – 19.06.2016

A cooperation of

KUNST MUSEUM BERN

Zentrum Paul Klee Bern
Founded by Maurice E. and Martha Müller and the heirs of Paul Klee
“Chinese whispers”, or telephone, is the name of a game in which children arrange themselves in a line or a circle, and one child whispers a message to the next child until the last player says it out loud. The amusement comes about through the increasing corruption of the original message. As an educational exercise the game demonstrates the development of rumors or misunderstandings and reveals the volatility of oral transmissions in general. It therefore lends itself all the more as a metaphor for dealing with contemporary art from China – art that is foreign to us due to cultural, historical, and political differences yet which is becoming progressively familiar, because global networking and the art market’s voracious appetite for new forms of expression have long since brought contemporary Chinese art to the West. The principle of the distorted echo in the children’s game can in many respects also be made use of for cultural relations between the West and China, as well as for the multifaceted and parallel manifestations in contemporary Chinese art.

The exhibition features around 150 works of contemporary Chinese art from the last fifteen years. The works are part of the collection of Uli Sigg who, as a businessman and former Swiss ambassador, lived in China for many years. In the early 1970s he became one of the first to engage with Chinese artistic activity. In 2005 the Kunstmuseum Bern showed Mahjong, an initial survey of Chinese contemporary art which was brought together by Uli Sigg in a way that was both comprehensive and, at the time, internationally unique. Much of this collection can be seen as a nucleus of recent Chinese art history, and will from 2019...
on be housed in the new museum “M+” in Hong Kong. *Chinese Whispers* now provides the continuation of *Mahjong* in two museums covering an area of 4,000 square metres. Since the earlier exhibition Chinese art has become established in the international art world, and younger artists are addressing different themes and issues. The exhibition invites you to discover a piece of unknown China in the diversity of Chinese art that ranges from installations via videos to paintings and works on paper. *Chinese Whispers* also inquires into the global quality of Chinese contemporary art and its relationship with tradition. It shows us how artists perceive current living conditions in China, and how they find their bearings in western-style turbocapitalism.

The exhibition is therefore divided into four themes that belong to two areas. On the one hand, these demonstrate how Chinese artists work out an artistic stance between the West and the East as well as between progress and tradition that does not fall victim to global monotony but self-confidently seeks to unite both without seeming provincial. On the other hand, expression is given to the impact of the drastic change in China’s urban space, in the handling of resources, and in the documentation of recent history, as well as in the persiflage of the political system or emotional introspection.
Floorplan Zentrum Paul Klee
(Groundfloor)
# Traces of Change

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<tr>
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<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ai Weiwei, ♂</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Beijing and Berlin</td>
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<td>7/8</td>
<td>Cao Fei, ♀</td>
<td>1978</td>
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<td>Cao Kai, ♂</td>
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<td>Chen Chieh-Jen, ♂</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Chen Wei, ♂</td>
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<td>Chi Lei, ♂</td>
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<td>Chow Chun Fai, ♂</td>
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<td>Chu Yun, ♂</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Ding Xinhua, ♂</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Yichuan</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>He Xiangyu, ♂</td>
<td>1986</td>
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<td>Hu Xiangqian, ♂</td>
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<td>Jing Kewen, ♂</td>
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<td>Li Songhua, ♂</td>
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<td>Li Songsong, ♂</td>
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<td>Mao Tongqiang, ♂</td>
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<td>Qu Yan, ♂</td>
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<td>Shen Xuezhe, ♂</td>
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<td>Shi Guorui, ♂</td>
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<td>Song Dong, ♂</td>
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<td>Song Ta, ♂</td>
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<td>Sun Yuan / Peng Yu, ♂</td>
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<td>Wang Qingsong, ♂</td>
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<td>Wang Wei, ♂</td>
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<td>Zeng Han, ♂</td>
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<td>Zhao Bandi, ♂</td>
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Since China’s first economic opening under the reformist party leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the country has experienced a revolutionary change unlike any other in recent human history. Strengthened once more as the result of the “open-door policy” of the 1990s, everything was modernized, and entire cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, were transformed, forcing people into widespread domestic migration. As a countermove to growing prosperity and improved educational, working, and health conditions, the traces of Communist and traditional China were erased and families uprooted. Many artists address this violent upheaval in their work, as well as the question concerning the way in which recent history can be represented in the relationship of tension between monopolized People’s Party opinion and international openness. At the same time, in the 1990s Chinese art was influenced by the introduction of new media (video, photography, performance), the use of materials alien to art (parts of human and animal bodies), as well as new notions of art that found expression in the term experimental art. Focus was placed on questions of identity, and political criticism was occasionally ironically veiled in Gaudy Art or caustically practiced directly in Cynical Realism and Political Pop. The 2000s were far less radical and politicized, although several artists of the movements mentioned were able to capitalize in the West, as Chinese self-criticism confirmed the West in its ostensibly ideological superiority. The question was nevertheless raised as to how everyday life and the recent history of the 2000s could be captured in pictures. What are the main icons of a generation that now has access to the Internet and to information to nearly the same
extent as the West, and can furthermore likewise travel without any major limitations?

Contemporary art is often seen as tending to avoid media-specific challenges in favour of contemporary political or social debates. In these, artists act increasingly as anthropologists or ethnographers. While in the West this perspective is most often applied to the cultural, social, or ethnic “Other”, many Chinese artists direct their gaze toward their own history and their day-to-day reality, which has become impenetrable as a result of the rapid change.

Song Ta, for example, examined the municipal administration of his hometown of Leizhou and interviewed all of the public service employees. In this way, with the aid of 692 drawings he creates a portrait of the anonymous apparatus. By contrast, Ding Xinhua captures his everyday life in snapshots on which he draws little monsters. Crazy City is the fitting title for a city that presents itself to the artist as a mysterious and inscrutable creature. The portraits of magisterial offices by Qu Yan are a documentation of the apparatus of power at the village level. He examines the staging of insignias of power in remote villages in the province of Shanxi. The monumental upheaval in China becomes clearly visible above all on the basis of contemporary architecture: with the aid of a gigantic camera obscura, Shi Guorui took pictures of the Bird’s Nest stadium and Central China Television’s TV tower in Beijing. Shen Xuezhe captured the frontier to North Korea at the Tumen River in dismal images, and Zeng Han documented the
most recent architectural eyesores in the amusement parks and new residential districts in provincial China. Chu Yun collects urban monuments in miniature format, revealing the emptiness of rapid progress, just as Wang Wei addresses the lack of direction of development in general with signs.

In his installation *Fragments*, made of the wood of former temple buildings, Ai Weiwei demonstrates how China’s cultural legacy is dealt with, as does Mao Tongqiang with 1,300 historical rural deeds of ownership. Li Songsong paints the crash site of an airplane in the Mongolian town of Undurkhan, where the politician Lin Biao, a one-time comrade and designated successor to Mao Zedong, lost his life, while Chow Chun Fai captures the unguarded moment in which Hong Kong’s future mayor, Leung Chun-ying, acknowledged the massacre at Tiananmen Square as a “Chinese tragedy”. Jing Kewen imitates propaganda images in the style of Socialist Realism, and Cao Kai compiles historical footage, while artists such as Zhao Bandi, Wang Qingsong, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, Chen Wei, Song Dong, Cao Fei, or Chi Lei create sometimes melancholy, sometimes biting allegories of the world today. In his carefully shot torture scene, Chen Chieh-Jen reconstructs a photograph that inspired the French philosopher Georges Bataille to write a treatise on violence, while He Xiangyu brings home the threatening sides of the Chinese power apparatus with his laconic full-body portrait of Ai Weiwei as well as a tank sewn out of glove leather. Hu Xiangqian satirizes the political system by carrying out a tongue-in-cheek campaign for the office of mayor in Guang-
dong, while Li Songhua has his four-year-old son repeat the promise made by the former Chinese president Hu Jintao at the Fortune Global Forum in Beijing in 2005, and in doing so puts the words into the mouth of the generation most strongly affected by the speech.
Floorplan Kunstmuseum Bern (Groundfloor new building)
2 Liu Ding, ♂, *1976, lives and works in Beijing.
1 Liu Wei, ♂, *1972, lives and works in Beijing.
5 MadeIn Company / Xu Zhen, ♂, *1977, lives and works in Shanghai.
4 Shao Fan, ♂, *1964, lives and works in Beijing.
3 Tian Wei, ♂, *1955, lives and works in Beijing.
7 Adrian Wong, ♂, *1980, lives and works in Hongkong and Los Angeles.
1 Xue Feng, ♂, *1973, lives and works in Hangzhou.
Since the repeatedly proclaimed end of (Western) art history, discussions have been taking place throughout the world on global art. Against the backdrop of various historical events, it is supposed to liberate itself from Western dictates, be open to all international art traditions, and contribute to a history of exchange relationships instead of a history of the Western influence on non-Western positions. Some authors believe that contemporary art is now even really world art for the first time, because it stems from the entire world and seeks to depict it as a differentiated yet coherent whole. In contrast, other authors see the danger of it appearing to be placeless, because it comes from everywhere and therefore from nowhere. This can be countered by the fact that the creation of art always remains a practice that is defined by material and is thus always influenced by a local context.

So while on the one hand the fear of the ‘McDonaldisation’ of culture is growing and on the other, there is a hope that influence can be reciprocal, and need not just emanate one-sidedly from the west, we must wait to see the extent to which the individual cultural spaces can actually emancipate themselves from the West’s former hegemonic claim to the leading position in contemporary art.

Painting lends itself particularly well to an examination of this relationship between the local or the specific and the global, because painting has been practiced for centuries and become differentiated in a wide range of highly diverse local traditions, voices that must now
be regarded as being on equal footing and not as place-bound deviations from the mainstream. Moreover, painting has been absolved worldwide of its traditional representational responsibilities due to new media (photography, video, film), so that the status of the image as such can be put up for discussion with painting and within it. The issue of this status achieves new importance today, because digital images circulate through the world as manipulable distortions of reality, while from the very beginning painting is a construction that neither can nor wants to conceal its fictitious state. On the one hand, what is interesting are the narratives coming from all corners of the earth, and on the other hand the new visual contents that articulate themselves with different traditions of abstraction, ornament, and writing systems.

Xue Feng’s large-format paintings reveal the seemingly real landscape as an abstract variation of the landscape painting genre. Xue draws his inspiration, for example, from the cover illustration of a tourism brochure, but during the painting process he repeats individual components of the painting to create patterns, and by doing so dissolves their representationalism.

Liu Ding, Liu Wei, and Xu Zhen (MadeIn Company) examine the production conditions of painting as an industry or business. Liu Ding and Xu Zhen have others create their paintings, and in this way comment on China’s reputation as a “copier of the West” and address the production process as such, which in exhibitions normally remains
invisible. Liu Wei plays with the influence of digital media on painting: on the one hand by using digital pictorial source material, and on the other by using disturbance functions in television monitors to assemble electronic tableaus.

Tian Wei, Liang Yuanwei, and Adrian Wong pursue various methods of abstraction: Tian Wei deliberately makes reference to American and Chinese traditions (Action Painting and calligraphy), Liang Yuanwei imitates simple decorations on wax tablecloths for the purpose of incorporating female spheres of activity into painting, while Adrian Wong exhibits random gnaw marks made by rats. Ma Ke, Wang Xingwei, and Duan Jianyu work with different forms of narrative painting—be it as encrypted “history painting” or as a personal continuation of folklore traditions; they liberate themselves from the Western cult surrounding style dictates and cultivate different art movements alongside one another. By contrast, Shao Fan seeks a cautious reconciliation of history and the present based on traditional forms of expression in classic Chinese painting.
3 Between Consumer Mania and Spirituality

10 Cao Fei, ♀, *1978, lives and works in Beijing.
11 Chen Ke, ♀, *1978, lives and works in Beijing.
 9 Jiang Zhi, ♂, *1971, lives and works in Shenzhen and Beijing.
14 Jun Yang, ♂, *1975, lives and works in Wien, Taipei and Yokohama.
12 Kan Xuan, ♀, *1972, lives and works in Amsterdam and Beijing.
15 Lu Yang, ♀, *1984, lives and works in Shanghai.
14 Ming Wong, ♂, *1971, lives and works in Berlin and Singapur.
12 Pei Li, ♀, *1985, lives and works in Beijing.
17 Tsang Kin-Wah, ♂, *1976, lives and works in Hongkong.
14 Xie Qi, ♀, *1974, lives and works in Beijing.
12 Yan Lei, ♂, *1965, lives and works in Beijing.
 9 Zhang Xiaodong, ♂, *1968, lives and works in Beijing.
Beginning in 2012, the enormous change that had seized China since 1978 and catapulted a society shaped by communism into a capitalist one was again trumpeted by the People’s Party as the “Chinese Dream” or “China Dream”. The acting Chinese Party Secretary Xi Jinping propagated “national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and military strengthening” as official party objectives and urged young people in particular to “dare to dream, work assiduously to fulfill the dreams, and contribute to the revitalization of the nation”. This was evidently an attempt by Xi Jinping to avert the impending loss of the government’s integrity and people’s trust due to the rampant corruption in China. Because hardly a day goes by without a nationwide news story about corruption, bribery, abuse of authority, or one or the other food scandal.

The social values of modesty, peaceful coexistence, and thought geared toward the common welfare that were informed by Confucianism were abandoned with the introduction of capitalism. What dominates instead is greed for money, expensive watches, and big cars. The consequence is the mental vacuum of many Chinese, although charity still plays an important role, at least in the family and in one’s narrow circle of friends. Yet beyond that, everyone thinks only about his or her own advantage, and the mistrust of constantly being deceived is great. Many Chinese are turning to religion in this climate of a lack of social commitment and eroding reliability. The new prosperity, consumer mania, the mental vacuum, the loneliness of only
children, as well the new mobility and self-determination also leave their traces on art.

Zhuang Hui oriented himself toward the consumer world with his advertisements for potency-enhancing drugs printed on silk, as did Zhang Xiaodong with his childlike cartoons and Jiang Zhi, in whose rainbows radiate the brand names of luxury articles. These artists celebrate the temptation to shop and the heightened indulgence in consumption, while Cao Fei has the zombies in her video *Haze and Fog* make their way through the faceless suburbs of Beijing. Inspired by the American television series *The Walking Dead*, *Haze and Fog* seems like a parable of the symbolic fight for survival against social isolation in the anonymous satellite towns of China. By contrast, the photographs by Xu Di and Yan Lei are devoted to the quest for (female) beauty and contradict the women’s emancipation movement in Chinese society. The bold video by Yang Meiyan, on the other hand, documents a discussion among women about sexuality, while Kan Xuan stages herself as a moody garden statue, and Pei Li has a masked woman symbolically swing back and forth between different emotional states.

In his reference to Andy Warhol’s soup cans, Xin Yunpeng strikes an art historical arc to Pop Art and its adoration of the consumer world in the 1960s. The paintings by Fang Lijun, Li Tianbing, and Chen Ke as well as the photo series by O Zhang address loneliness and isolation in the only-child generation, while the sound-and-video installation
by Cong Lingqi approaches the ultimate solitude of a blind individual. Isolation and feelings of being cut off can be traced back to cultural experiences of shock, as demonstrated by Jun Yang’s video. His Paris Syndrome points out the emotional disorder of the same name that mostly afflicts Japanese tourists when they experience the actual city and discover that it does not match their high expectations. By contrast, Ming Wong shot a remake of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film Ali: Fear Eats the Soul for the purpose of confronting the Chinese public with its racist biases.

The paintings by Xie Qi, which feature distorted faces that dissolve into a colored fog, radiate a general atmosphere of alienation. In his painting, Yan Lei presents a random composition of paint tins in his studio, abstract stripes, and the head of a Buddha and thus leads over to Chinese art’s new religious interest. Based on rage, Lu Yang, for instance, examines the unexpected parallels between depictions of God and neurological findings. By contrast, Zheng Guogu has turned completely toward religion, which expresses itself in the abrupt change of motifs, from brand logos and commercial neon lettering to borrowing from Buddhist thangka paintings and mandalas. Zheng’s aim is to transform the essence of iconography as a spiritual energy into an image that is meant to initiate a personal search for truth. Tsang Kin-Wah’s expansive video-and-sound installation The Second Seal, which deals with the Christian apocalypse according to the prophecy of Saint John of Patmos, concludes this religious quest. With the aid of nothing more than rapidly or slowly moving strings of
words drenched in red and letters that become larger and smaller, the artist generates the impression of a sky that opens up in molten lava and devours the public.
Floorplan Kunstmuseum Bern
(First Floor old building)
4 On dealing with Tradition

21 Feng Mengbo, ♂, *1966, lives and works in Beijing.
20 Li Dafang, ♂, *1971, lives and works in Beijing.
20 Li Shan, ♂, *1942, lives and works in Shanghai.
20 Li Xi, ♀, *1979, lives and works in Beijing.
18/22 Ni Youyu, ♂, *1984, lives and works in Shanghai.
22 Qiu Qijing, ♂, *1979, lives and works in Beijing.
22 Shao Wenhuan, ♂, *1971, lives and works in Hangzhou.
20 Shen Shaomin, ♂, *1956, lives and works in Sydney and Beijing.
18 Shi Jinsong, ♂, *1969, lives and works in Wuhan and Beijing.
20 Charwei Tsai, ♀, *1980, lives and works in Taipeh and Ho-Chi-Minh-Stadt.
The artistic examination of regional or national art traditions has gained new importance against the backdrop of globalization, the conformation of worldwide artistic work to commercial Western standards as well as the sellout of one’s own cultural legacy. While in the Western cultural sphere dealing with tradition frequently assumes the postmodern form of an ironic quote or is reputed to be retrogressive, in Asian contexts the authenticity of national artistic work is given priority as assertiveness toward the West or as an expression of conservative social tendencies. In postcolonial societies in particular, the preservation of artistic traditions is closely linked with notions of cultural identity. On the one hand, one variation of this can indicate that this identity is changing, and on the other that artists can take the liberty of expressing it as well. The more rigorous a tradition is interpreted, the more closed and more rigid this society is. However, playing with traditions can also indicate the commercialization of cultural difference, in the course of a “self-Orientalization” or the sarcastic criticism of it (which can be equally lucrative). Yet it is considered decided that tradition does not simply have to mean the opposite of contemporaneity, as Ai Weiwei also puts it: “Tradition is where the conscious and the unconscious merge.” While the hybrids that develop out of traditional and contemporary art elements attempt to forge a new union out of apparently incompatible individual parts, at the same time they frequently point out the highly charged incompatibility of contemporary and historical fragments and thus the worldview behind it.
In the Chinese context, the examination of tradition above all means dealing with landscape and ink painting. It should not be forgotten that ink painting and calligraphy often belong to basic education, even at the primary school level. However, this tradition is also incredibly dynamic and has time and again transformed itself over the course of its millennia-old existence. Yet it is not only a vitalizing continuation that can be discerned in dealing with tradition, as many Chinese artists do not come back to it until after processing Western and global influences. These artists recognize China’s traditional intellectual heritage and the aesthetics of the East as an approach to bring tradition up to date and use this creatively, which reveals a new element: the search for one’s own cultural roots. According to the Chinese art critic Sun Dongdong, that this especially interests those born in the 1970s and 1980s can be explained by the fact that it was not until the increasing integration of China into a transnational discourse and its new economic self-confidence that the concept of contemporary art in terms of global contemporaneity was introduced in China, and this younger generation therefore felt free to create work unburdened by the expectation that it approaches the various traumas of modern Chinese history.

When Ni Youyu or Li Xi deal with landscape painting or Zhang Jian Jun and Peng Wei address the scholar rock, they uphold existing patterns in today’s world, while Ye Xianyan has dismissed any thought of depiction in painting. Her landscape-related experiences find their way into the picture in the form of diagram-like notations. Jin
Jiangbo sets ink painting—and the viewer—in motion with the aid of an interactive video installation, while in his three-part projection *Not Too Late*, Feng Mengbo translates the movement patterns of a first-person shooter video game into contemporary calligraphy. However, the landscape motif also permits formulating concerns about the handling of nature, as demonstrated by the urban landscapes of Li Dafang and the light boxes with manipulated animals of Li Shan, while Shen Shaomin or Charwei Tsai’s use of the bonsai motif points out the violence behind artistic mutilation.
Chinese Challenges

To complement the exhibition, the three public conversations in the «Chinese Challenges» series will address the challenges China is currently facing. The talks have been co-organised by the Asia Society Switzerland and the Swiss Institute of International Studies (SIAF). For once, the focus is less on art than on China's everyday reality that frequently makes headlines in our part of the world and of which distant echoes manage to enter our consciousness.

The Swiss entrepreneur and former Swiss ambassador to China (1995–1998), Uli Sigg, talks to a number of experts about Chinese society, economy and urban transformation. Facilitator: Martin Meyer (NZZ, SIAF).

The three events will be held at the Auditorium of Zentrum Paul Klee. In English or German, with simultaneous interpretation into German or English.

10.03.2016, 7pm
**Who is dreaming? Society and the Chinese dream** with Professor Andrea Riemenschnitter (Sinologist, University of Zürich) and Urs Schoettli (Asia correspondent for the NZZ during 20 years)

27.04.2016, 7pm
**Building the future: On the role of architecture in China’s Great Transformation** with Ai Weiwei (artist) and Jacques Herzog (architect at Herzog & de Meuron)
24.05.2016, 7pm
Changing Tack: The Chinese economy and its challenges
with Jixin Dai (Founder and Chief Investment Officer, Xin Tian Fund Management Company Limited) and another guest (tba)

Tickets to these events include admission to the exhibition «Chinese Whispers» at Zentrum Paul Klee and Kunstmuseum Bern, until 7pm on the same day, or at a later date.

Adults: CHF 40.00
Concession (AVS / AI / Military): CHF 36.00
Concession (Apprentices, Students): CHF 28.00
Children 6 – 16 years: CHF 23.00
Advanced tickets from: www.kulturticket.ch and at Zentrum Paul Klee

Due to a limited availability of seats at the Auditorium, talks may be streamed live to other spaces at Zentrum Paul Klee. Tickets (and combination tickets for both museums) available at the door.

For any last-minute changes, please refer to our website: www.chinese-whispers.ch
Chinese Whispers
19.02. – 19.06.2016

Catalogue
Chinese Whispers. Recent Art from the Sigg and M+ Sigg Collections

Opening hours
Kunstmuseum Bern
Tue: 10h – 21h
Wen bis Sun: 10h – 17h
Mon: closed

Zentrum Paul Klee
Tue to Su: 10h – 17h
Mon: closed

Holidays
Good Friday & Whit Monday: Zentrum Paul Klee open, Kunstmuseum Bern closed. Open on all other holidays (also Easter Monday)

Prices (combined ticket incl. audio guide)
Adults: CHF 24.00
Concession (AVS / Al / Military): CHF 20.00
Concession (Apprentices, Students): CHF 12.00
Children 6 – 16 years: CHF 7.00
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REPORTAGEN

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RailAway-Kombi
An exhibition of the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Zentrum Paul Klee in dialogue with M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong and Dr. Uli Sigg, in cooperation with the MAK Vienna.