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Earthquake works banned from Beijing art show

Artistic director of Beijing 798 Biennale says deputy wanted publicity from booking 'too sensitive' performance artists

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Tania Branigan in Beijing
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Visitors pose for a snapshot inside an art installation at the Beijing 798 Biennale, which runs until 12 September. Photograph: Elizabeth Dalziel/AP

Works about the Sichuan earthquake and other sensitive issues have been banned from a Beijing art show that was to involve controversial figures, its artistic director said today.

The group exhibition at the 798 space, a former electronics factory in the Dashanzi art district, north-east of central Beijing, covered themes including the death of children in schools that collapsed in the quake. The show, the centrepiece of the Beijing 798 Biennale, reopened today but without some of the contentious works.

Zhu Qi, the artistic director of the Biennale, said he told the exhibition's deputy director not to include performance art involving people likely to stir up controversy. They included "Runner Fan", a teacher who became notorious after posting an article on the web saying he fled his school ahead of his pupils during the earthquake; Liu Xiaoyuan, a prominent blogger and lawyer; and the owners of the Chongqing nailhouse who became famous for refusing to leave their home even when developers demolished all the buildings around it.

"I had not approved it because I thought it was too sensitive. But he wanted the publicity," Zhu said.

Local officials failed to respond when the district's managers notified them of the show's content, leading the managers to ban several works – including a drama performed by migrant workers, a documentary on the earthquake and a memorial to a 12-year-old victim of the disaster. Some artists then decided to withdraw and demolished their own works.

Zhu said he had first raised the possibility of including the contentious figures, but later decided it was better to go ahead without them.

Yuan Tingxuan, speaking for the artists involved, said they had withdrawn from the biennale as a result but managed to hold performances – including those with Fan and

Liu – at other venues in the district. He said either staff from the management office or police officers had come to take photos of the artists, but otherwise they had felt no pressure.

Yuan said the group chose to work with controversial figures who had gained fame online because the internet was now such an important part of life. "We also hope from [our working with] these people, more and more artists would start concerning themselves with society rather than being only engaged in their own small, internal, arty world," he added.

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