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## **The Great Body Has No Shape, the Great Art Is Embodied. Conception of Body in Zhang Huan's Performance Art**

### Abstract

Zhang Huan (b. 1965) can be considered a pioneering contemporary performance artist in China. His position on the Chinese art scene is highly regarded not only from a historical perspective. The use of the artist's body as a means of expression can serve multiple purposes, which can touch upon, e.g. social or political issues, and seldom reflects the role of the human body as a vehicle for mediation. Through his artistic activity, the artist tries to discuss this issue based on the Chinese philosophical intuitions of this aspect of human existence. In our paper, we shall try to examine the theoretical foundations of the artist's approaches to performance and illustrate them with selected works.

### Key words

Zhang Huan, contemporary Chinese art, body, Chinese philosophy

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### **Introduction**

Zhang Huan (b. 1965) can be considered a pioneering contemporary performance artist in China. His position on the Chinese art scene is highly regarded not only from a historical perspective. The use of the artist's body as a means of expression can serve multiple purposes, which can touch

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upon e.g. social or political issues, and seldom reflects the role of the human body as a vehicle for mediation. Through his artistic activity, the artist tries to discuss this issue based on the Chinese philosophical intuitions of this aspect of human existence. In our paper, we shall try to examine the theoretical foundations of the artist's approaches to performance and illustrate them with selected works.

## **The Interpretational Context of the Body in Chinese Culture**

What appears to be the crucial guiding factor in interpretation is the conception of the body, which, apart from its essential cultural implications, can be viewed from a philosophical perspective. The issue is relevant in this case for two main reasons. The first is that performance art, which stems from Western culture, is situated in a specific context which involves an ontological conception, among others, of the human body. This can be viewed in terms of the psycho-physical problem, a philosophical issue which has been discussed since the days of ancient Greek philosophy.

Bearing in mind the fact that performance art is understood in a specific ontological context, we need to know the precise difference in the corresponding Chinese conception in order to prevent interpretational inclusivism. Another equally essential reason is that, apart from these differentiating features, we should present the Chinese conception of the body in order to ultimately refer it to the artistic activities of Zhang Huan. Therefore, we shall briefly refer to ontological foundations and their explanatory value, which will enable us to properly place the human body within the correct Chinese context.

It is worth posing the question whether we can perceive the conception of the body in Chinese philosophy in terms of Western duality, i.e. juxtaposed with the mind. Of course, we cannot argue here that the Western conception is monolithic; on the contrary, it is considerably diverse, as exemplified by both the dualist and monist varieties of the psycho-physical problem. It is virtually impossible to reconcile this variety with the use of a common denominator. However, at the same time we have to admit that despite being confronted with this diversity, all theories become entangled in the discussion concerning whether the division of body and mind is ontic or merely apparent. In other words, on the level of ontological discussion there is a variety of solutions; however, to some extent cultural discourse imposes a departure point which makes the dualist perspective more fundamental, if not natural.

Departing from this, we could consider the case that the dualist issue occupies a privileged position as a departure point and therefore is indispensably formative in the discussion. 'Cultural dualism,' so to speak, testifies to some characteristic features of Western thought, namely that at least on the level of appearances we have intuitions of the dualistic character of the psycho-physical problem, which necessitates the making of philosophical declarations in this respect. This intuition is even more prevalent in cultural discourse, and enjoys a safer position there, as it does not have to adhere to philosophical discipline and as it favours most popular intuitions.

However great the prevalence of the above approach can be, it cannot be universalistically extended to the Chinese case. We can roughly state that the Chinese understanding of art should be contextualised in accordance with Daoist and Confucian philosophical intuitions, which do not converge with the Western tradition at least as far as the issue of the body is concerned. This shows that cultural dualism does not necessarily cut across cultures. In order to illustrate the difference, we shall briefly refer to the views on the body in both of the above-mentioned philosophical schools.

For the sake of explanatory clarity, it is convenient to begin with the Daoist general interpretation, presenting those assumptions which can lead us to the ontological interpretation of the body. The opening chapter of the *Daodejing* 道德經 states that *dao* 道, 'which is unnamed, is the beginning of everything' (無名, 天地之始). (Laozi 2006: 5) From this we can learn that the whole universe stems from the same source. This, however, is insufficient evidence to testify to the identity of all things. Another fragment from chapter 34 makes a crucial point for our interpretation by stating that:

大道泛兮, 其可左右 (The great *dao* omnipresent, both on the left and right) (Laozi 2006: 136)

Thus, *dao*, as both the logical and cosmological beginning, is complemented with its being the whole universe. From this we can also infer that the universe is not characterised by ontic stratification in the sense that we have to differentiate between two or more different ontic formations.

What is also important about the world is that on the level of particulars,<sup>1</sup> its constituent parts are interrelated and subjected to an incessant process, which is described in chapter 25 as 'natural':

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'particular' should not be understood in opposition to 'universal.' This usage refers to objects which possess qualities enabling differentiation and reference to them as concrete objects, regardless of their ontic status.

人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然 (Humans act in accordance with the earth, the earth – with heaven, and heaven – with nature/naturally) (Laozi 2006: 103)

The translation of the Chinese '*ziran* 自然' specifically means 'naturally' or 'spontaneously,' which reflects the undistorted functioning of the universe in accordance with its own nature. This bears an important implication for the particulars. We can state that they constitute an organismic whole with the universe, which emphasises their integrity and at the same time slightly limits their individual character.<sup>2</sup>

From the above brief introduction of the Daoist vision of the universe we can conclude that a human being, a special case of a particular, is an integral part of the whole universe, not only in terms of her or his ontic status; however, he or she is also subject to the same natural process of self-identity, which is also identity with the whole universe. Therefore, if we focus on the human body, we can clearly notice here that it is understood entirely differently from the Western tradition. The human body does not provide a borderline between what we define as human and the rest of the world. The impossibility of separation is conditioned by identity on the ontic level as well as being an integral part of the cosmic process. Humans, and, it follows, human bodies, are not atomised individuals, but should rather be perceived as organismic parts. Because of the Daoist 'one-world view,' we are prevented from raising the question of the psycho-psychical problem. Undoubtedly, this question is asked from a comparative perspective, but it would appear as a quite unnatural problem even asked within Daoism alone. As Chinese cultural discourse is consistent with these philosophical intuitions, the body is not perceived as particularly distinct from the rest of the non-human world. Obviously, this does not mean that Chinese tradition fails to distinguish between 'bodily' and 'non-bodily.'<sup>3</sup>

It has to be remarked that the above conception is not exclusively characteristic of the Daoist school. It is understood in a more particular manner in Confucianism, where it is described within a social context. Confucian philosophy shares with Daoism the intuition that human be-

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that nature is deterministic. The Daoist universe leaves a place for will in human action. However, this is not strictly connected with the objective of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Presenting the distinction in the form of bodily and psychological/spiritual would be a false analogy with the notions of Western tradition; thus we use 'non-bodily' as more neutral.

ings are interrelated with the rest of the world. Therefore, actions taken by any single individual cannot be isolated; rather, they alter the network of relations, which is predominantly understood here in social terms. Particularly characteristic of this conception is that Confucianism puts considerable stress upon which actions should be taken in order to attain an ethical target. A typical fragment devoted to this issue is the following:

弟子入則孝，出則弟，謹而信，汎愛眾，而親仁，行有餘力，則以學文

A young man's duty is to behave well to his parents at home and to his elders abroad, to be cautious in giving promises and punctual in keeping them, to have kindly feelings towards everyone, but seek the intimacy of the Good. If, when all that is done, he has energy to spare, then let him study the arts (Confucius 1996: 4–5)

Confucius prescribes here a particular form of conduct, which is tantamount to being moral. There is something specific here to which we should pay attention. We can observe that no stress is put on ethical deliberations; however, the ethical is explained by concrete practice. Thus, human behaviour is given utmost importance in constituting human moral qualities. At the same time, it has to be remarked that moral behaviour does not play an instrumental role in the sense of realising certain absolute, ideal values. Quite the contrary: the very performance of moral actions is equivalent to being moral.

The role of practice in the Confucian ethical scheme gains even more importance when we view it in terms of the self-cultivation, or *xiushen* 修身,<sup>4</sup> of a human being. This means that proper behaviour should optimally contribute to developing dispositions in order to ensure a proper response in concrete situations. Each action gains more importance in itself, as it cannot be reduced to the mere realisation of some mentally arranged set of rules. This makes the performance a vitally constitutive and powerful factor in defining oneself in the world. The identification of oneself as moral is equal to behaving in a moral way. Morality is, as it were, not represented by behaviour but present in the very actions of a human being.

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<sup>4</sup> The second character of the word means, among others, 'body,' which accentuates the importance of self-cultivation through conduct. However, it also includes what we might describe as proper conduct of the mind. In the Great Learning 大學, it is explained that: '所謂修身在正其心者,' (1999: 29) which, for the purpose of our discussion, we could roughly translate as: 'self-cultivation requires proper mind.' Therefore, self-cultivation encapsulates human conduct which should be understood in a comprehensive manner. This could also testify to the fact that human subjectivity is free from psycho-physical disintegration.

In other words, morality does not supervene on a particular performance but is the performance itself.

As we can see, the Chinese context perceives the body more in terms of relationships than in an attempt to grasp its features as a separate identity. This results from the conception that the human body has no clearly defined boundaries as it extends itself and is inseparably entangled in relationships with the whole world. This should not be mistaken for determinism, however. These relations are volitive and consist of particular performances. Bearing in mind that we are beyond the psycho-physical context, volition cannot be perceived as a purely separate mental operation which is properly reflected by an action; quite conversely, it should be viewed organismically as entangled in particular performances.

From a comparative perspective, we can see that the Western problem of discussing dualism is not particularly convergent with the Chinese tradition. Therefore, Chinese culture works in a different interpretational context, at least as far as the perception of body and bodily actions are concerned. The works of Zhang Huan, although inspired to some extent by Western art, do not disagree with the Chinese cultural context.

## **Zhang Huan: Presence through Participation**

The impulse which led the artist to using his own body as an artistic medium was quite spontaneous. Chinese art academies did not offer a programme in performance art at that time, as a result of which Zhang Huan received his education in painting. We can state that his resort to another means of expression was caused by other than academic reasons.

Zhang Huan attributes his interest in the body to his personal experience from everyday life. As he stated:

My inspiration comes from daily life, from the most average things, small things that wouldn't grab anyone's attention. Things like eating, sleeping working and taking a shit everyday. Through these insipid activities that go completely unnoticed by people, we can discover and appreciate intrinsic qualities of human nature. In doing my work I try my best to experience life, the reality of the body and I hate the performative, artificial aspects of work. (Zhang & Geuna)

Daily life in Zhang's work has often placed him in conflicts of a physical nature, (Zhang et al. 1999: 63) by which we can see that the body constitutes an important part of his identity and actions, not only in ordinary experience. It has to be mentioned that Zhang's works are considerably

diverse and spread over time. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, we will narrow the discussion to the most representative ones.

If we approach Zhang's works in chronological order, the two most popularly discussed examples of the explicit deployment of the body in artistic activity are *12 m<sup>2</sup>* and *65 kg* from 1994. It is also worth paying attention to *Original Sound* (1995).

It is customary to discuss an artist's works chronologically in order to trace her/his linear development. However, this strategy would not work optimally in discussing the dimension of the body in Zhang's artistic activity. Thus it is best to begin with three works from the 1990s: *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), *Nine Holes* (1995) and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997). The three works share something very fundamental, to the point that they can be even viewed as realisations of one paradigm.

*To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* is in fact a collective piece of performance art, which apart from Zhang involves, among others, Ma Liuming. Naked performers are piled up to add to a mountain, which is possible by assuming that their bodies are in continuity with the rest of the world. It is worth noticing that the absence of discretion is not only manifested in terms of the quantity of the bodies, which are bereft of their individual aspects and boundaries. What plays a more material role is that no distinction in quality is made either. The bodies are one with the mountain, which reveals the underlying conception of perceiving the body as a non-discrete part of the world.

The same can be said about *Nine Holes*, which is also performed in mountain surroundings. This time we have nine performers who cling to a rugged mountain slope. The random layout of the bodies on the uneven surface suggests the amalgamation of humans and earth. Judging by the title of the performance, it can be argued that the bodies 'make a difference'; however, holes naturally belong to the earth's surface and do not accentuate anything related to humanness.

*To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* differs slightly, perhaps, from the previous two performances. It also departs from the perception of a world beyond distinctions which deprive the human body of idiosyncrasy; but what makes it different is that the aim of exceeding the water level is indiscernible, yet existent. In comparison with *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, there is no precise measure or sensually accessible result. If we view this work in terms of the body, it does not make a difference, similarly to the milieu of processes in the world which take place beyond

our cognition. The body is merged with this underlying holistic structure and, although important within it, does not matter individually.

What is also characteristic of the above performances is that they took place in East Village in Beijing and were done by artists who lived there. The 'natural' setting not only separates it from exhibition space but also disengages it from possible interaction with an audience. The bodies are not being observed; they are more 'felt' by the participating performers by means of the activity in which they are involved. There is nothing beyond the performance, which is a manifestation of the holistic process in which the cultural identity of the body (which could be construed by the audience) is abandoned.

Besides the above group performances of the 'collective body,' it is also worth examining two other works which come from the earlier 1990s, *12 m<sup>2</sup>* (1994) and *65 kg* (1994). These performances are exclusively concentrated on the individual body of Zhang, and they can initially be interpreted as highly personal pieces. However, bearing in mind the previously discussed works, we are aware that within the Chinese context this is not the case.

In *12 m<sup>2</sup>*, Zhang closes himself in a very dirty public toilet on a very hot summer day, his naked body rubbed with honey and the viscera of fish. In *65 kg* he is hung from the ceiling by tight iron chains and 250 millilitres of blood drip from his body slowly onto a radiator, to completely evaporate in the air. Both of the performances last one hour. Both works can be easily interpreted as conveying a strongly individualistic and personal experience of the human body. As many of us know, the East Village artists in the 1990s were vagrant artists who did not want to join the system or who had been abandoned by the system. Some of their works indeed have a strong 'rebellious' and avant-garde spirit. However, it may be an oversimplification, or misleading, to look at these two works in this way. In these works, looked at carefully, the individual sense of expression of self-identity in the body is rather vague. Quite on the contrary, in both cases, the body becomes augmented with the whole. But in comparison with previous group performances, these highly individual pieces only enhance this spirit of being with the whole, since the pieces give prominence to the meditative power with which Zhang plunges himself into his works.

The living conditions depicted in *12 m<sup>2</sup>* are rather severe. Beneath the very straightforward and powerful statements concerning reality (these were the actual conditions of living in the East Village in the 1990s) of Zhang's art is a soaring inner meditative state in relation to living condi-



tions of this kind. Does the very meditative attitude of the artist in these situations shock the audience in order to keep a distance from reality or to achieve an inner transformation to be one with it?

Zhang's *12 m<sup>2</sup>* reminds us of Zhuangzi's famous invented dialogue between Confucius and his favorite student Yan Hui in one of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, 'In the World of Men':

'You must fast!' said Confucius. 'I will tell you what that means. Do you think it is easy to do anything while you have a mind? If you do, Bright Heaven will not sanction you.'

Yan Hui said, 'My family is poor. I haven't drunk wine or eaten any strong food for several months. So can I be considered as having fasted?'

'That is the fasting one does before a sacrifice, not a fasting of the mind.'

'May I ask what the fasting of the mind is?'

Confucius said, 'Make your will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your *qi*. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but *qi* is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.'

Yan Hui said, 'Before I heard this, I was certain that I was Hui. But now that I have heard it, there is no more Hui. Can this be called emptiness?'

'That's all there is to it,' said Confucius. (Zhuangzi 2003: 53–54)

Zhuangzi's strategy of living in a turbulent 'world of men' is applicable to analysis of Zhang's work. Zhang's sixty-minute exposing of the body is a meditative process of forgetting the body and concentrating on the emptiness. But this emptiness is to be filled with all the events of the universe, including the flies and the challenging living conditions. What makes this one hour bearable and extraordinary is the strong individual will not to fight the harsh human conditions, but to empty oneself and to be one with it. Zhang's response to concrete life conditions through his bodily experience is rather constructive and contributive, but not destructive.

There is an awe-inspiring aura about *65 kg*. The performance silenced the entire audience in a room filled with the smell of smoking blood. How are we to understand this work? Can we read it as a demonstration of a heroic individual's extreme power, or does it try to convey a 'collective' feeling of human spirit? In this one-hour performance art work, a 65-kg naked body hangs on tight iron chains and identifies itself with the human spirit itself; the mouth is sealed; and the dripping blood evaporating into the air silently and expressively portrays the history of humanity, its power and its fragility that establishes reality as well as the meaning of human civilisation. The slowly dripping blood gradually diminishes the

strong, intensively tragic feeling of the audience and the artist himself; instead, the meditative attitude towards the unbearable human condition enhances the Chinese cultural sensibility in this work. It represents a deep understanding of human civilisation and a very harmonious spiritual transformation as a consequence of this understanding. It is essential that the transformation is worldly to this degree, and therefore the meditation should not be perceived as a 'mystical journey' but as a plunge into the ultimate reality of the world.

Silence is very expressive in Zhang's performance art, which echoes one of the Chinese aesthetic ideals: 'the greatest sound is ever so faint, the greatest image has no shape' from chapter 41 of the *Daodejing*. (Laozi 2006: 171) Zhang's work *Original Sound* expresses the very greatest 'sound.' As Zhang says about this work on his website:

The performance was created under a flyover in Beijing. There is a railway on the bridge and a road for vehicles and bikes underneath. I invited ten artists to observe and each had their own explanation of the work... For me, it is about the earth. I feel like human beings, like earthworms, have a close relationship with the earth. They come from there and go back to it in the end. (Zhang 2014)

The work clearly demonstrates what we discussed in the preceding section: namely, how Chinese people understand themselves, their bodies/ identities and the universe. This work of Zhang's is his genuine representation of a human being paying homage to the mysterious synthesised force of the universe. The silent, awe and easy atmosphere created in this artwork reflects a human's humble understanding of his own identity, human history and humanity's relationship with the whole environment during a harmonious transformation in the universe.

Zhang's performance art, either in a public lavatory in *12 m<sup>2</sup>* or the extreme situations he created for himself as in *65 kg* or *Original Sound*, challenges living conditions and the artist himself, and eventually succeeds in understanding and appreciating the human spirit itself. In each case, the meditative attitude shown in the artwork expresses human veneration of the subtle relationship between our life experience and the circumstances under which our life is experienced: all the extreme, difficult, challenging but harmonious physical and inner experiences in one's personal life representing one's ongoing interactions with one's surroundings. Expressing such experiences deeply through one's body is precisely a spiritual experience and a contribution to the significance of this life and this world.

## Embodied Art: Conclusion

One of the most natural approaches to the interpretation of body language consists in comparing what is immediately revealed and expressed by it. In this way, Zhang's performance art can be readily seen as consistent with that of many Western artists. This is the case especially regarding *12 m<sup>2</sup>* and *65 kg*, which by virtue of being one-person and apparently provocative actions can be potentially regarded, delusively, as extremely individual statements. We can agree with this, but only to a certain extent. The crucial difference lies in the fact that the vehicle of expression, Zhang's body, is not 'thrown' into the circumstances as an independent object. Despite being individualised, the body is on a more realistic level in continuity with the world, which necessitates a different perception and interpretation of these actions. We can say that instead of being thrown into the situation, the body is a distinct yet integrated element of it. This also undermines the conception of a viewer isolated from the work of art, which can be testified to by the artist's lack of particular interest in the presence of an audience or institutional framework. The audience is naturally in a state of continuity with the performance as with the world.

The key to Zhang's artwork, which doubtlessly belongs to contemporary art, lies in the Chinese tradition, which can be exemplified by, among others, classical texts. This approach not only questions the apparently universal issue of dualism but also brings us closer to this conception of performance art, which is partly Zhang's contribution.

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Zhang Huan's works discussed in the paper:

1. 12 m<sup>2</sup> (1994).
2. 65 kg (1994).
3. *Nine Holes* (1995).
4. *Original Sound* (1995).
5. *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995).
6. *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997).