

From:

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The Body at Stake

Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre

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This publication enquires into the role and treatment of the body in the visual culture of contemporary China. What meanings are assigned to the body in artistic practice, what does it represent and what (hi)stories does it refer to? Considerable importance is ascribed to the body as a means of orientation and placement; as an arena and medium of social experience.

19 Chinese artists, theatre practitioners and theorists describe their personal experiences, put their thoughts and views up for discussion and explore how art can shed light on the individual and collective experiences that emerge in the wake of historical change and the anticipation of a newly won freedom.

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Preface

The present publication enquires into the role and treatment of the body in the visual culture of contemporary China (and Taiwan Region). What meanings are assigned to it in artistic practice, what does it represent and what (hi)stories does it refer to? On one hand, great importance is assigned to the body in discourse here in the West with a view to techno-ecologies and biopolitics, making one wonder whether and how these concerns are dealt with in other cultures; on the other, it is astonishing how the body has been brought into play following the cultural evolution, making it a salient factor in art and discourse. A few brief remarks follow.

The art of the Cultural Revolution essentially ignored the body as self-contained material or subject matter. It was always and only a schematic adjunct of religious, cultural and social exigencies. Under Mao, the body was an ideological medium, functionalized and brought into play, if at all, to serve pathetic, formalized purposes: exaggerated or ignored. Some of the contributions in this publication discuss the paradoxes attendant on these paradigmatic revolutionary bodies. Generally speaking, artists had to find themselves in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and redefine their role and function as professional, freelance practitioners within the triangle of art, life and the public arena. This applied across the board, initially overshadowing the question of gender. Determining where one stood as an author was related to self-determination as an individual, as a subject and a self, and, in the final analysis, as a self-contained entity in a society undergoing a process of profound differentiation. It is, of course, imperative to examine the Chinese perception of the terms 'individual', 'subject' and 'self' as these cannot be transferred one-to-one to our cultural context.

Substantial importance is ascribed to the body as a means of orientation and placement, for it is itself an arena and medium of social experience. The challenge lies in exploring how art can represent the individual and collective experiences that emerge in the wake of historical change and the anticipation of a newly won freedom. That also entails finding artistic means to express suffering

and desire, wishes and ideas, anger and criticism. Two contesting aspects form the background to these developments: on one hand, the appreciation of tradition as an ethical and moral fabric combined with the idea of harmony between human and whole, between culture and nature, so that the body is never really a 'problem' and certainly not a locus of independent detachment; on the other hand, the increasingly acute awareness of all the manifold processes of subjectivation, advanced and made possible by 'modernism'. The body becomes the arena in which art pushes these contradictory trends to almost inconceivable extremes, waging a battle on the cusp between discipline versus self-determination; between control versus libidinous manifestation; and between the pathos of valuing life and the physical versus the self-abasement and contempt of creaturely existence to the point of killing oneself (Zhang Shengquan) and ritualizing torture-like practices. One is struck by the often vehement, expressive forms and procedures enlisted in displaying a physical (and mental) aesthetics of transgression – without explicitly involving the body as a self-contained subject matter of art. It is above all a means, a material, and a medium of criticism, polemics and protest. Expression, pure and unadulterated.

It has only been about ten years since the body began to figure as the inspiration and subject matter of specific forms of reflection with the rise of globalization and the onslaught of consumerism: a culture of spectacle that operates affectively, exploiting the body as both agent and target. Is it here that the present selection of essays sets in, following the same principle that guided our previous publication, *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China*. The official art trade is not important to us (except perhaps as a foil). Rather, we are interested in the personal reflections of Chinese protagonists on what is actually physically happening today with regard to their bodies and those of others, in spirit and soul and on a variety of stages. Zhao Chuan and I asked artists, theatre practitioners and theorists about their personal experiences, their thoughts and views, and also their experiments in implementing them in practice. We hope, of course, that these reports, conversations and thoughts will attract an interested public not only in the West but in China as well.

Before continuing with this synopsis of contributions, I would like to thank all of the contributors, translators and image editors for their commitment: Chi-Wei Chang, Paul Gladston, Kate Griffiths, Lorenz Helbling, Kirk Kenny, Eva Lüdi Kong, Catherine Schelbert, Benjamin Marius Schmidt, Gavin Shen, Dora Tan, Helen Wallimann, Wu Meng, Yu Lin Na and Ouyang Yu. My very special gratitude goes to my friend and co-editor Zhao Chuan for a truly inspiring and fruitful collaborative venture.

Zhang Nian approaches the body as one of the greatest challenges in the culture and politics of China. In the Cultural revolution, provocation appeared in paradoxical shape. On one hand, the body (and its sensations) was the enemy of the revolution, the symbol of the counterrevolution and a bourgeois consciousness. It was diametrically opposed to the pure consciousness represented by the revolution and embodied in the ideology of Communist Party. On the other hand, how could/should the proletariat acquire an awareness of the body, for it has no body at its disposal, having surrendered it to the revolution. As the revolutionary movement progressed, the dualism of body and soul established itself as a constant. The notion of the enemy was logically bound up with this dialectic: the enemy was not only on the outside, in other people, but also on the inside, in a false consciousness. And yet the body was the very foundation required to bring about a change of consciousness. As pinpointed by Deng Xiao Ping, the people need bread, not ideology. A materialism emerged in opposition to the 'spiritualisation' of the revolution that corresponded to changing currents in economic developments. The call for a renewed significance of the body thus came from another side as well. Mass culture and consumerism advanced the possibility of bringing it into play again against political ideologies and hence also against the voices that denounced these new possibilities as capitalistic decadence: "The re-emergence of the body's needs brings China's modernity back to its starting point to liberate the 'body' once again." And, as Zhang Nian writes, this can only succeed from the bottom up and not from the top down, that is, from the body itself and not from some ideological imperative.

"The body in socialist revolutionary movements is the physical carrier of class-consciousness and the main site of class struggle." Taking a similar point of departure, **Zhang Hong** eloquently demonstrates how the revolutionary body was officially represented and deployed in Chinese art and culture. He also shows how the body as subject matter was and still is factored into performance art by critical and contrary art practitioners. The question arises whether these are simply different modes of functionalizing and deploying the body for various purposes and goals. Zhang Hong underscores the critical necessity of taking a closer look at the (self)-reflection involved in an artist's practice and at the potential of communicating art through life, in other words, transferring it to the practice of life itself, as eminently illustrated by Ai Weiwei in a diversity of projects.

According to **Gao Shiming**, Xiang Jing's sculptures of human figures, as 'All', 'Any One' and 'Every One', encourage inquiry into the ego, the subject, and into Heidegger's 'one'. Gao Shiming elaborates the way in which the artist's individual, portrait-like figures evolve into monologic bodies. He situates her experimentation with the single 'individual among many' in the larger context

of Western notions and interpretations of the body, from Plato to Foucault and from ancient sculpture to Cindy Sherman. Within this framework, he addresses a poetic soliloquy to *Your Body*, a seated figure that is one of Xiang Jing's key works. It is a large figure, a body with none of the features that define an individual. It is marked by divestment: a physical body, flesh, the figure that has lost its self in consumerism and all the other accoutrements of contemporary life. A body that belongs to no one, unsettling in its anti-monumental monumentality, a striking body – “like a sudden and unexpected prick amidst the even density of reality”. A body that begins talking about herself, an exposition of spirit and soul, beyond the symbols and narratives that are constantly ascribed to it, classifying it. “The body rocks the decadent soul”, as sung by the Chinese pop star Cui Jian.

In a conversation with *Zhao Chuan*, **Xiang Jing** has the opportunity to speak for herself. Among other works, she refers to *Your Body* in elucidating her artistic experimentation with a kind of existential corporeality. The body is a medium through which sensations and feelings are experienced, starting with her own body and moving on to sensitive observation of others. Her work is about the ‘self’, the person, a state of being, a generalized state, which – precisely because it is general – can only enter art through a radical subjectivity, through a first-person narrative style. This notion of a ‘Humanum’ opens a space for a third being beyond the (power) struggles of (gender) contradictions: in other words, the practical experience of life, and not an abstract programme. “Your Body” is therefore our body; the sculpture touches a fundamental chord and it also means “pain, distress, comfort, depression”. “What I’m waiting for is that moment when the piece acquires a soul and comes to life before my eyes.” The figure looks at us: “When that happens, it really feels like I’m standing face to face with a real person.”

With an expert, panoramic eye, **Gu Zheng** describes the historical and cultural transformation of the last 30 years as mirrored in photography. He distinguishes three ‘genres’ and artistic approaches: first, the documentary trend, which observes how the body bears witness to an age or ‘documents’ the ideal images of the imagination; secondly, the body as a medium of expression, of performativity; and thirdly, strategies of staging bodies. At the same time, he discusses fundamental questions such as the role of realism in the medium of photography and artistic practice in various historical and social contexts: the documentary and the metaphorical; agitprop and the political effectiveness of art; the role of the author in the context of various media, etc.

Lu Yinghua directs her attention to the same period, focusing, however, on the development of performance art, specifically work with and on the body of the

artists themselves. Lu Yinghua emphasizes the importance of the raw physical energy and the mental state in body performances. They are about emotions and affections, intuition and instinct, about the unpredictability and uncontrollability of experience. In foregrounding the mediation of everyday life, of one's own existential situation, it is the artistic process rather than the finished 'work' that is crucial. The qualities that mark artistic work with the body over the past three decades run into counter tendencies of art formatted on the basis of the burgeoning art market and the art industry along with the contexts that take their cue from art criticism and a discourse influenced by the West and by specific political ideologies. Art itself plays second fiddle; the personal commitment, the vibrant energy, the significance of aesthetic experience, and the power of resistance, all of which distinguish the body performances, are left waiting in the wings. The bitter conclusion reads: "Nowadays art is more or less manufacturing and artists are one and the same as entrepreneurs. One observation that especially stands out when surveying the new direction of the industry is that we no longer see any emotionally potent, engaging works involving the physical body."

This applies equally to the power and energy of the body on stage: "I certainly would not hesitate to sacrifice a dialogue and storyline to let this group of performers let loose their unbridled energy so visibly and unmistakably in plain, public sight. For our Grass Stage group, the only thing we had was this raw, physical energy: an energy that ignored the rules." Thus does **Zhao Chuan** describe his theatre Grass Stage, a company of lay people. Its aim is to relate to the everyday, to engage in a critical investigation of the socially embedded body and of public space. That means performing in a variety of places and even creating venues. In the cultural history of China, the author writes, the body was not an issue. When it did appear, it was always clothed and represented in keeping with the figure's social status and later with political ideologies: the body of the farmer, the soldier, the revolutionary hero. This concept of the body and its representation also prevailed in the culture and tradition of official theatre. The introduction of capitalism, consumer culture and globalization offered means of escaping these formats but led in turn to other forms and strategies of body branding. By working with lay people, Grass Stage explicitly opposes both ideologies and resists the constraints of commercialization; theatre is used to express distinctly personal, singular experiences and to advance the body as place and agent of individual expression, protest, everyday communication and self-determination.

The way in which this can succeed is described by **Li Yinan** as spectator. She sees the group's "realistic portrayal of the human body" as their "greatest weapon" in resisting ideological rigidity, capitalistic commercialization and the authority of

classic theatre. Of interest here is the debate on how 'realistic' and 'true' are to be understood and how such ideas and objectives can be given shape. This leads to the question of the relationship between theatre and consumerism, with a top-down rhetoric turning into interaction with the public and becoming a "social project as a kind of community workshop" (see Zhang Hong's reference to Ai Weiwei). It is a shift from flaunting the body to working with it and, even here, this shift involves the question of (class) consciousness.

To liberate body expression from the alien (particularly Western) imposition of artistic standards and the art trade is also a core concern for **Li Ning**. His theatre work with lay people foregrounds the body of the individual and personal experience. His physical theatre takes place in everyday surroundings; the actors use their bodies to create a physical presence that interacts with the things around them. "It's the process of using the body to rearrange a real space into a new reality." The context is therefore not simply a stage; it is analysed and expanded in the process of acting. The bodies of the actors are like paintbrushes; practicing and acting is a form of sketching: the aim is not to interpret a given script but to be driven from within to move out of oneself. In this way, the exposition of the self and the surroundings intersect. The eccentric interpretation of the body and physicality that emerges in these experiments is diametrically opposed to any of the conventions and criteria that ordinarily apply to both the production and reception of theatre, dance and performance.

Everyday lived experience is also **Wen Hui's** point of departure. She is active in dance and theatre, so that the body is crucial as a means of expression especially with a view to her own situation and genealogy. The body is the place and medium of memory, through which the individual remembers, experiences and tells his/her story: individual trails as well as social and historical parameters. Significantly, for Wen Hui, wanting to become a dancer had something to do with reclaiming her own body. In her childhood, she remembers being forced into a kind of collective body, in an act of prescribed gestures and dancing in honour of Chairman Mao. The discovery of her own body thus entails exploring memory as a process of subjectivation, and it is no surprise that the artist focuses specifically on working with women and acting out specifically female experiences and narratives.

In 1994, Wen Hui founded the Living Dance Studio in Beijing in cooperation with former filmmaker **Wu Wenguang**. His work has since shifted away from concentrating on the body of the dancer and the performer to more basic aspects of the very nature of the body and corporeality. He shares a commitment to the study of memory with Wen Hui. Speaking about certain modes of rehearsal and the development of performances lasting up to eight hours, Wu Wenguang

impressively explains that the work is not *about* memory; instead memory is actually being processed on stage. ‘Memory’ is a project that went through several versions, often working with young people who in turn began telling their own stories. To illustrate, the author describes how a young woman’s memories of confrontation with her parents and especially her mother led to self-discovery. (Tradition, parents, family, authority, etc. are important and acknowledged arenas of subjectivation.) Dancing is not an expression of psychology or emotion; it is “dancing *motions* of remembering”.

“Current events write our scripts, the people are our actors and society our stage.” This statement by Wang Mo-lin could be a motto of **Amy Cheng’s** contribution. She looks back on three examples/phases of artistic and aesthetic protest in Taiwan, in which the body acquired special significance in the attempt to overcome martial law in the 1980s and 1990s. Wang Mo-lin, an important exponent of theatre (who also works with Zhao Chuan), devised a form of action theatre inspired by the Japanese scene. Opposition to the import of modernism from the West is expressed in experimentation with a radical aesthetics. This work focuses on the social significance of the body as a medium of remembering the period of suffering under martial law. Like Amy Cheng, the artist Chen Chieh-jen is not interested in the body as a vehicle of individual psychologies but rather as a physical element in performances, with which he conjured public space before it even existed. Using a different strategy – mounting pictures of himself in historical photographs – he too drew on memory in an attempt to reinterpret history and reveal the underlying structures of power. In addition, he used the medium of film to re-enact scenes of work and struggle with labourers at the original sites of action. The resulting fusion of fiction and reality yields an aesthetic that permits a critical revision of (his own) history. Cheng also refers to the so-called Noise Movement, which emerged among students in the 1990s and consisted of extremely physical, transgressive actions (vandalism, arson, desecration of graves, theft, the publication of perverse materials, etc.). The issue at stake now is what shape this history of resistance in body art will take in an age of globalized consumerism.

Noise music also forms the background of one of the six Taiwanese, introduced by **Lin Chiwei** in his contribution. Since the 1990s, these artists have been working in a variety of contexts, taking different approaches in exposing the paradoxes that underlie the current situation in Taiwan. Their artistic practices operate apart from the official art system, capitalistic conditions of production and Western processes of modernization. They seek to address existing traditions without shying away from the means and potential of current developments in art and the media. Although aware of the cultural concepts that circulate in the West, these artists aim to take an independent position within the framework of

Taiwan's indigenous culture. This in turn leads to contradictions since cultural operations in Taiwan are an integral part of the globalization inevitably generated by capitalism and Western modernization. It is interesting to note the way in which this art purveys art and the artist, individually assimilating known practices and genres (performance, graffiti, music, architecture, etc.) while at the same time bringing into play a sense of the unfathomable in work that is vague and open-ended, conjuring the spirit of Eastern religions and philosophies. This art defies being captured in words and eludes classification, yet is still informed with a distinctive, idiosyncratic presence that is extraordinarily radical and politically incisive. According to Lin Chiwei, the majority of the art produced in the West can barely compete in this respect, for it is not self-reflective enough to realize that it is caught up in the official fabric of modernization.

The confrontation between personal art practitioners and the official art trade also surfaces in the work of **Chen Lingyang**, who plays two roles: as Chen Lingyang in her own art and as Chen Lingyang 2 who stands on the outside. Duplication, a useful device for dealing with contrast and conflict, enables her to present controversial issues in contemporary China in such works as *Twelve Flower Months*, while at the same time commenting on them with the detached stance of an outsider. (In his conversation with Chen Lingyang, *Zhao Chuan* observes that, had she made the work 10 years ago, she would have landed in jail.) The artist uses her own body as a means of artistic expression, for reasons drawn from her own personal life experience and existence – an approach that can often be observed in Chinese body art. At the same time, her aesthetics relate to the larger context of Chinese tradition and philosophy, binding personal aspects into a more general whole. Correspondingly, the reception of her work oscillates between “poetic, erotic” and “(too) personal, voyeuristic, pornographic”. Opinion is similarly divided as to whether or not her work can be classified as ‘feminist art’.

The contributions repeatedly emphasise that integrating the body into art initiates a shift from the work to the process of its production and its reception, and hence a shift from a product of consumption to an inquiry into specific problems and issues. Processes and stories are the stuff of **Jin Feng**'s art. He works with ‘concrete cases’, usually victims and people on the margins of society or controversial figures, often using them and their bodies in the form of ‘living sculptures’. His subject matter is not the human body but the social body, as *Zhao Chuan* notes in his conversation with the artist. Jin Feng explores the personal memories and processes that society tends to forget and suppress, specifically “cases” that are symptomatic of a society that promotes modernization without being modern itself. Feng's criticism is relentless: consumerism is flourishing; the political system is stagnating. The artist encounters each of his

'cases' at eye level by introducing himself as an ordinary everyday person, as a very small fish in the sea of the system: "I belong to the lowest rung of society in China." However, he does not say that just to be on the safe side. Self-criticism is an important element of his work, not least in order to preclude the risk of provocation becoming an end in itself. Questions of artistic quality are important to him, and that entails thinking about what it means to "use" and "exhibit" other people/their bodies in art. The artist has to be an intellectual; he has to stake out the framework within which he reflects on social life. He has to start with his own experiences and bring himself into play as a real person and not as an artist with a capital 'A'. Only in that way can he justify what is for him the only possible approach in contemporary China, namely an "aesthetics of pain" – and that involves the body.

The admonition of urgency also informs the conversation conducted by **Zheng Bo** and **Yang Guang** about the work of homosexual artists. Curator Yang Guang mounted China's first ever event on the subject in 2009, an exhibition entitled "Gender Diversity". In their conversation, they speak mainly about two very different examples: on one hand, an artist who comes to Beijing as a migrant worker, where he practices the traditional folk art of paper cutting, expressing the struggle between anguish and erotic lust with powerful immediacy; on the other, an artist active in the professional art trade, whose fundamental reflections take shape in a similarly radical personal performance. Such issues as the production of visibility, the social stigmatization of the 'other', the role of the audience in this art context, the conflict between private and public and the distinction between real and fictional body are addressed. The conversation clearly shows how difficult it is for homosexual artists to persist in their work (and lives) in contemporary China. In any case, the theme reads: "The body seeks liberation".

According to artist **Lu Yang**, we can never escape our bodies, and she puts it bluntly when she asks, "If there is a Creator, why create that thing called the body?" Her training in the so-called New Media has allowed her to pursue her interest in the natural sciences, psychology, neurology, biotechnology as well as the current (and future) techno universe. The materials and media of her art are the bodies of animals and people in conjunction with equipment and machines. Lu Yang does not simply make 'bio cybernetic art' for galleries; her artistic commitment is an activity that enables her to orient, position and manifest herself in present day. This necessitates an approach so radical that it takes her to the extremes of ethical and moral tolerability and ultimately to the very justification of society itself. Issues of violence and control, the ethics of life, religion and knowledge, rationalism and affects/emotions underscore this aesthetics of existence. At the core of her agenda is the way in which we perceive, think and

live the body when we turn it into an object and manipulate it, while, at the same time, fully aware that it is not ours to control.

As a teenager, **Cao Fei** embraced pop music, MTV and the consumerism of Western culture. As an artist, she has applied a variety of technical media (audio, Internet, etc.) to experiment with the Internet universe: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs and games, avatars and cyborgs. She advances the body as the arena and medium of games of identity and role playing in spaces where distinctions between physical and spiritual, real and virtual, experience and imagination are often blurred. Her art is characterized by affirmative participation in the open-ended potential of a techno universe. At the same time, a critique of consumerism surfaces in her observations and thoughts on these social contexts, demonstrating that the temptation to join in the game can also end in disempowerment.

Similar 'in between areas' of abstraction, might also be said to surface in the photographs and films produced by **Yang Fudong**. The gestures, poses, movements and gazes of his figures are curiously de-individualized and detached. In a conversation with the artist, he discusses the concept of beauty in the abstract body, a notion of particular interest not least because of his artistic experiments with the norms and paradigms dictated by the world of consumerism and essentially governing our self-images. Yang Fudong has also produced films commissioned by major brands. Some of the remarks he made in the course of the conversation are reprinted here.

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