

A Small MAP PIECE

A Study Room Guide on Performance Art in China



Compiled & written by Adele Tan
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A SMALL **MAP PIECE** OF PERFORMANCE ART IN CHINA

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June 2008

Let me begin with a fruit. The fruit in this instance is *Grapefruit*, Yoko Ono's visionary 1964 book of art-making instructions for everyone. The Chinese word for fruit is *guo* (果) and like the English word it too means the result or reward of work or activity such as in the word *jie guo* (结果). So how does one begin to look at performance art in China in the selection of material available in the Live Art Development Agency library and make it a productive (fruitful) endeavour without taking the exploratory fun out of it? The history of performance art in China is still in the making and so we might do well not to make it too conclusive.

With this in mind, we could perhaps play a version of Yoko Ono's *Map Piece* from the summer of 1962...

Draw an imaginary map.

- Carla Kirkwood, Chinese Performance Artists - Redrawing the Map of Chinese Culture, 2004, [A0119 / P0519](#)
- Li Wei, Li Wei, 2005, [P0191](#)
- Li Wei, Performance Video Works 2001–2004, [D0113](#)
- Zhu Ming, 1994-2006 Art Works, 2007, [P089](#)
- Zhu Ming, Performance Art Works, 1994-2004, 2004, [D0265](#)
- Zhu Ming, Resume, Articles and Major Works – pictures, [D0103](#)
- Zhu Ming, Unknown Area, July 2003, [D0104](#)

Kirkwood's essay in *TheatreForum* provides an easy entry point into the performance art scene in China since its initial flourish in the late 1980s. She gives a concise history of its development over the past two decades but makes clear to us that from the get-go, performance art is to be taken in China as socio-politically engaged, critically antagonistic and at the forefront of experimental contemporary Chinese art by virtue of a habitual mode of operating in the margins. It has, as Kirkwood puts it, redrawn the imaginary map of Chinese art. The emergence of performance art, which the Chinese call **xingwei yishu** (it translates peculiarly as behaviour art) marks that aesthetic and intellectual turn against the conservative confines of traditional state-run art academies. It is the Chinese body in rebellion and yet ineluctably compelled by the strictures of social relations and rituals.

She also highlights two performance artists, Zhu Ming and Li Wei, both living and working in Beijing, the main hive of Chinese performance activity. Zhu and Li have become influential names in the Chinese performance art movement; Zhu made his name with the East Village group of artists in the mid nineties (former denizens included other internationally well-known performance artists Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan) by performing in his trademark plastic bubble casing. Li, on the other hand, is known for his performance series *Mirror 2000* where he wanders the streets with a large mirrored pane with his head struck through and a later series of performative photographs where he attempts to defy gravity in acts of falling or floating in mid-air. Creating his photographic illusions with the help of props such as wires, scaffolding and acrobatics rather than computer manipulations, Li's performance practice also indicates a new shift in performance methodology; the viewer's encounter with the physical labouring body in the situation of a contrived dangerous reality will be now mediated through the photographic surface.

As such, we should not also disregard the imbricated relationship performance art has with photography in China. The following materials on contemporary Chinese video and photography

allow us an insight into the post-socialist terrain of China, the backdrop in which performance artists operate. Furthermore, it is through the documentary aspects of photography and video that performances by the Chinese artists are able to reach a wider international audience.

- Shu Yang, *China's New Photography*, 2002, [P0456](#)
- Shu Yang, *Public Space and Personal Eyes - A New Vision in China*, 2003, [P0454](#)
- Zhao Bandi, *Uh-Oh Pandaman*, 2003, [P0708](#)
- Li Xu, *Zooming into Focus: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Video from the Haudenschild Collection*, 2004, [P0453](#)
- Wu Hung & Christopher Phillips, *Between Past and Future - New photography and Video from China*, 2004, [P0850](#)

Audiences in the UK must have had a rude shock and a mistaken impression towards contemporary art coming out from China after the television screening of *Beijing Swings* on Channel 4, in particular the hysteria over the *Eating People* act by Zhu Yu. Here, I would urge you to compare the differences between the rambunctiousness of the Channel 4 documentary and the quiet interrogative approach of another Swedish TV documentary on the lives of three performance artists, Zhu Ming, He Chengyao and Zhang Dali. And as I have said before, much of the tone and tactics of Chinese performance practices is determined by the goings-on of the hyper-capitalised and urbanized capital city.

- *Beijing Swings*, various, 2003, [V0673](#)
- Henri Seng, *Beijing Beijing*, 2003, [D0149](#)

Put a goal mark on the map where you want to go.

- Thomas J Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 2006, [P0976](#)
- Daniel Brine and Shu Yang, *China Live*, 2005, [P0683](#)
- *China Live Various* [D0394](#)
- *China Live Film Screening Various*, 2005, [D0314](#)

Eventually you would want to reach Thomas Berghuis's comprehensive book on the history performance art in China that spans the last three decades. It is detailed and meticulously researched and presents the broadest overview thus far of all the significant performance artists in China. Alternatively, you could also reach for *China Live*, the slim but rich volume of essays and documents on live art from China. In particular, Shu Yang's and Colin Chinnery's essays draw attention to the battle for the legitimacy of performance art in China. And as an experienced curator of performance art festivals on the mainland, Shu's personal reflections are not only a snapshot of the difficulties facing live art in China but also track the changing organizational formations of performance events since 2000 from the Open Art festival to Dadao and Transborder Language.

- Nick Kaye, *Cultural Transmissions*, an interview with Xu Bing, 1998, [A0014](#)
- *I Am The Y2K Bug* Cai Guo-Qiang 2000, [P0709](#)
- Julia Colman, *Ma Liuming*, 2003, [P0472](#)
- Yilmaz Dziewior, *Zhang Huan*, 2002, [P0385](#)
- Zhang Huan & Bieito Perez Outeirino, *A Pilgrimage in Santiago de Compostela*, 2001, [P0347](#)
- Cang Xin, *Existence in Translation*, 2002, [P0450](#)

Performance or performatively-inclined work have helped secure the international reputations of a number of Chinese artists such as Xu Bing's *A Case Study for Transference* where he tried to mate two pigs imprinted with nonsense Roman and Chinese characters in front of audiences; Cai Guoqiang with his various spectacular gun powder explosions at different sites; and former East Village artists Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan and Cang Xin who have all been motivated to base their practice on the phenomenal grounds of their own bodies. Ma, Zhang and Cang have been the primary collaborators of the iconic conceptual performance work *To Raise an Anonymous Mountain by One Meter*, where ten artists stacked their naked bodies into a pyramid on a hilltop in accordance to their weight measurements. Individually, Ma troubles the binary logic of sexual and gender fixities with his Fen-Ma Liuming series, Zhang subjects his body to the limits of abjection and masochism and Cang makes his tongue a primary instrument in his sensory investigations of the world by licking a myriad of objects, places and persons. From the mid-nineties, the body (whether human or animal) became the chief interface not only between art and Chinese economic and political realities but also indexes the underlying dimensions of psychosexual desires and conflicts

Go walking on an actual street according to your map.

The historic Long March undertaken by Mao Zedong and his Red Army over 6000 miles to his ideological base at Yan'an in Shaanxi Province in the mid 1930s as been reworked into a extensive spatio-temporal project in 2002 titled "The Long March: A Walking Visual Display". Using the revolutionary ideals discourses left behind by Mao, the Long March Foundation, led by curator Lu Jie, planned a retracing of the route with a series of activities that were "designed to interrogate Chinese visual culture and revolutionary memory". Committed to praxis that stresses dialogue, fluid boundaries and local adaptation, the Long March Foundation has encouraged projects that extend the realms of performativity into that of socio-cultural reclamation.

- Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, November, 2002, [P0463](#)
- The Great Survey of Paper Cutting, Various, 2004, [P0567](#)
- Wang Wei, What Does Not Stand Can Not Fall, [D0329](#)

Performance works have also taken to walking the streets of Chinese cities as a mode of engagement with harsh conditions of daily living of the economically disenfranchised, seen primarily in the figure of the migrant worker amidst the frenzy of urban construction. In Zhu Fadong's *This Person is for Sale*, Zhu dressed himself in an anachronistic blue worker's uniform and walked the streets putting himself up for employment. Han Bing's *Walking the Cabbage* is an absurdist take on the plight of the poor vagabond, as he puts a head of cabbage (a common food of the working people) on a leash and walks it through a series of different public places. In Wang Peng's *Passing Through* in New York City, however, he is himself the migrant artist navigating a new cultural landscape, leaving a trail of white string behind him threaded through his jacket, the artist becoming both an object of disruption and amusement to passersby.

- Zhu Fadong, Inside the Art of Zhu Fadong, 2004, [P0649](#)
- Han Bing, 2001, [D0024](#)
- Wang Peng, Selected Works, [D0277](#)

If there is no street where it should be according to the map, make one by putting the obstacles aside.

Transgressing boundaries and breaking taboos have become distinctive features of performative practices in China. The pushing of the formal, psychic and sensory limits of aesthetics at the turn of the twenty-first century have been inaugurated by the exhibition "Post-sense sensibility" curated by the artist Qiu Zhijie and his erstwhile partner Wu Meichun. Artists closely aligned with Qiu in the exploration of the logic of experimentation as a response to bodily behaviour in an altered biomechanical and technological landscape include Wang Wei, Shi Qing and Zhang Hui.

In quick succession to "Post-sense sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion", more indelible images are collected within the catalogue *FUCK OFF*, also a satellite exhibition curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi as an oppositional gesture towards the official Shanghai Biennale in 2000. The book showcases number of artworks featuring manipulations of dead animals and human bodies and ends with the infamous series of *Eating People* photographs by Zhu Yu, sparking off an enduring epithet of 'cadaver art', which is to become egregiously aligned with performance art. Similarly, Chen Guang has also tested the moral limits with regards to sex and sexuality by experimenting with sex acts with a hundred women and geriatric members of both sexes. But rather than assuming these performance events as facile and arbitrary acts of attention-seeking, the theatre academic Meiling Cheng has provided us with a sustained gloss of these acts, assiduously explaining and interpreting the stakes of such endeavours.

- Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion, 1999, [P0459](#)
- Post-Sense Sensibility: Spree, 2001, [P0460](#)
- Zhang Hui and Shi Qing, Crowning, [D0271](#)
- Wang Wei, Shi Qing and Zhang Hui, Sound, 2000, [D0119](#)
- Shi Qing, Photo documentation, [D0117](#)
- Various, Second Hand Reality, Post – Reality, 2003, [P0659](#)
- Various, Second Hand Reality, Pre – Reality, 2003, [P0658](#)

- Fuck Off, Various, 2000, [P0579](#)
- Zhu Yu, Collected Images, 2002, [D0112](#)
- Zhu Yu, Sacrifice, 2002, [D0111](#)
- Wu Gaozhong, Performance Documentation, 2000, [D0118](#)
- Chen Guang, Documentation part 1, [D0115](#)
- Chen Guang, Documentation part 2, [D0116](#)
- Chen Guang, Island, 2004, [D0280](#)

- Meiling Cheng, Clandestine Interventions, 2004, [A0128](#)
- Meiling Cheng, Violent Capital - Zhu Yu on File, 2005, [A0130/A0111](#)
- Meiling Cheng, Indexing Death in Seven Xingwei and Zhuangzhi Pieces, 2006, [A0137](#)
- Meiling Cheng, Animalworks in China, 2007, [A0147](#)

And of course, women artists have had to set aside the obstacles to take up performance work as a significant part of their practice. In an arena still largely dominated by male artists in China, He Chengyao is a steadfast and singular performance female artist who has foregrounded aspects of sexual and gender difference in her work. Joining He Chengyao is Yingmei Duan, also another former member of the East Village. Yet, unlike He, Duan's performance career took hold in Germany where she now lives, studying initially under Marina Abramovic.

- Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 2003, [P0464](#)
- He Chengyao, Vital 2006 - International Chinese Live Art Festival, 2006, [D0576](#) and [D0674](#)
- He Chengyao, Kiss, 2005, [D0332](#)
- He Chengyao, Performance Act, [V0749](#)
- He Chengyao, Showreel, 2002, [V0659](#)
- Qing Qing, Qing Qing 1996 – 2000, 2001, [P0449](#)
- Yingmei Duan, Vital 2006 - International Chinese Live Art Festival, 2006, [D0581](#)
- Yingmei Duan, Performance Documentation, 2006, [D0670](#)
- Yingmei Duan, Performance Documentation 2000 – 2004, 2004, [D0212](#)
- Yingmei Duan, Performance Painting, 2007, [D0671](#)
- Yingmei Duan, Various 2000 / 2003, [V0611](#)

When you reach the goal, ask the name of the city and give flowers to the first person you meet.

It is undeniable that performance art festivals have flowered exponentially throughout the various cities of China. Besides Beijing, other cities with lively, receptive performance art congregations are Chengdu, Sichuan Province and Xi'an, represented here by the artists Xiang Xishi and Li Mengyuan. The first Open Art festival was a fruitful transfer of the internationalist NIPAF model in Japan to the Chinese context but the first edition was marred by a police intervention, arresting two committee organizers, Zhu Ming and Shu Yang, and two Chinese participants, Liu Jin and his partner. The second edition in 2001 however managed to be an uninterrupted event over three different sites in Sichuan Province. A measure of the current trend to marry the growing influence of China and the success of performance art meetings is also the advent of the VITAL International Chinese Live Art Festival in Manchester in 2006. These festivals are also opportunities for cross cultural exchanges and communication or translational mishaps. This is made none more apparent than in Shu Yang and Clare Charnley's collaboration at the Transborder Language Performance event in Beijing, as Charnley tried to report in Chinese a newspaper incident with the reading of it transmitted to her remotely by Shu Yang.

- Various, Performance Art in Xi'an 2001-2002, 2002, [P0512](#)
- Xiang Xishi, Untitled, 2003, [D0278](#)
- Xiang Xishi, Untitled 2003, [D0279](#)
- Xiang Xishi, Untitled, [D0162](#)
- Li Mengyuan, Quote Out of Context, [D0327](#)
- China Moon - Video Documentation of the 2nd Open Art Festival, China Various Lee Wen 2001, [D0252](#)
- Clare Charnley and Shu Yang, Shuo Hua / Speech 2005, [D0313](#)
- Various, Vital 2007 Press File, 2007, [P0984](#)

The map must be followed exactly, or the event has to be dropped altogether.

The cruel, punitive and traumatic shifts in societal structures in the post-Mao era have also designated a corps of performances that fixate on instances of bodily harm, endurance and survival. Katie Hill's book shows up the coerciveness of political imagery and propaganda in the shaping of collective minds and bodies in the Maoist years. This is then followed by the difficult transition into Deng Xiaoping's free-market socialist capitalist regime in the eighties and nineties, coupled with the political repression which culminated in the tragedy of the Tiananmen Massacre on 4 June 1989.

The various artists here urgently make salient through their bodies an existential nullity and ludicrousness within the Chinese society but to different extents. Where He Yunchang and Yang Zhichao continually stake their bodies in mortally risky circumstances, others like Wang Chuyu, Dai Guangyu, and Sheng Qi place their bodies at socio-political interstices. For Dai, more than the others, his performances which involve the frequent use of ink, refer consistently to the memory of traditional Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy, invoking a plea for the conservation of both ecological and cultural dimensions.

- Katie Hill et al, The Political Body - Posters from the People's Republic of China, 2004, [P0475](#)
- Sheng Qi, Self Exile, May 1998, [V0223](#)
- Sheng Qi, Universal Happy Brand Chicken, 9 May 1997, [V0039](#)
- Sheng Qi, Madness Appropriation, Sheng Qi's Body and Other Things, 2004, [P0652](#)
- Ji Shengli, Art Performance (Buttocks 123), 2005, [D0269](#)
- Various, Internal Injuries I, 2005, [P0679](#)
- Various, Internal Injuries II 2006, [P0815](#)
- Liu Jin, [D0110](#)
- Liu Jin, Grow Up 2003, [D0109](#)
- Wang Chuyu, Collected Works, 2004, [D0105](#)
- Meiling Cheng, Extreme Performance and Installation from China, 2006, [A0134](#)
- He Yunchang, Ar Chang's Persistence, 2004, [P0650](#)
- He Yunchang, Casting He Yunchang's Performance Work, 2004, [P0648](#)
- He Yunchang, Beyond Mountains & the Sky, Passing a Flower with Drum Beats, 2002, [D0264](#)
- He Yunchang, Documentation 1998 – 2004, [D0114](#)
- He Yunchang, Dialogue With Water, 1999, [D0328](#)
- Yang Zhichao, Performance Video, [V0750](#)
- Yang Zhichao, Performance Works, 2005, [D0307](#)
- Yang Zhichao, Performance Works and Concept Photo 2000 – 2003, [D0101](#)
- Yang Zhichao, Performance Works Video 2000 – 2003, [D0102](#)
- Yang Zhichao Works, [D0266](#)
- Dai Guangyu, Vital 2006 - International Chinese Live Art Festival 2006 [D0578 / D0673](#)
- Dai Guangyu, Works and Video Footage, [D0270](#)
- Dai Guangyu, Biography, Images, Videos and Press, 2007 [D0772](#)
- Dai Guangyu, Selected Works, 2007, [D0770](#)
- Dai Guangyu, Works – Images, 2007, [D0771](#)

Ask your friends to write maps.

One may yet ask: when was the earliest instance of performance art in China? This is provisionally answered by Hong Kong artist Kwok Mang Ho's 1979 Plastic Bag Happenings in Beijing. At the same time, Wang Peng's 1984 'performance' with body painting/printing has been named by curator and Chinese art scholar Britta Erikson as probably the first performance work by a mainland artist. The historical documentation process of early performance work in China is still an ongoing task.

- Kwok Mang Ho, Kwok "Frog King": Kwok - Art Life for 30 Years 1967 – 1997, 1999, [P0471](#)
- Wang Peng, Selected Works 1984-2005, 2006, [D0277](#)
- Wang Peng, Various Photos 1984 – 2005, [D0391](#)

Give your friends maps.

The Live Art Development Agency also holds other resources by Chinese artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan and those of the diaspora, all with distinct historical trajectories. Your next assignment would then be to lose yourself in the interweaving networks between the different bodies of constituents.

Or you could redraw my map.

Biography

Adele Tan is a writer and critic. She is completing her PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art on the dimensions of ethics and eros in post-79 performance art from China. She is Assistant Editor at the journal Third Text and programmes curator of the 2008 performance festival, Future of Imagination, in Singapore.