

## The New York Times



CRITICS' CHOICE: NEW CD'S

## Deliberate Echos of Albums Past

## Manu Chao

*"La Radiolina"*  
(Nacional Records)

By BEN RATLIFF

The French-Spanish pop star Manu Chao works hard to keep things as simple as possible. His principal tools are the acoustic guitar, the rock band, the digital

sampler, chatter from the street and the radio and worldwide panic.

"La Radiolina," his first studio album in six years, continues a line of discourse he's been at since 1998, and though the ruckus isn't as interesting as it was on his last record, "Proxima Estación Esperanza," it's pretty similar: One short track flows into another, often echoing something

from a few songs back, and the record coheres through recurring samples of police sirens, harmonica blowing and flickering guitar lines. This is the logic of dub-reggae, in which one's own work is recycled into infinite versions. But since this is Manu Chao, the repetition could also imply that life on the street, its joys and hardships, never stops. If the phrase "infinita tristeza,"

which cycles through the new song "Tristeza Maleza," sounds familiar, that's because it was the key phrase in a song called "Infinita Tristeza" from the last album. And if, along the course of the new record, "El Hoyo" sounds to you like "Mama Cuchara," which sounds like the album's single, "Rainin' in Paradise," you're not wrong. It's the same three-chord, minor-key

progression.

No doubt his basic concept is powerful: a folk-punk-rumba-flamenco pidgin, with shorthand agitprop lyrics made of small, urgent phrases, sung in his thin, nasal, rancor-free voice. He uses a mode of lyric writing that's unelaborate, untheoretical. When there is a siren noise behind thoughts like "infinite sadness," "What do you want from me?"

"panic," "violence" and "blood"—sung in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese—you understand reflexively that he's talking about everyday politics among interconnected cultures. And if you don't, "Tristeza Maleza" calls out George W. Bush by name.

But the disappointment of "La

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Zhang Huan, a radical performance artist turned painter, sculptor and installation artist, in his Shanghai studio factory, which may be China's largest producer of avant-garde art.

## Provocateur's Products Roll Off the Assembly Line

By DAVID BARBOZA

SHANGHAI, Sept. 2 — In a series of factory workshops on the outskirts of this city welders, carpenters and other skilled craftsmen are busy turning wood, metal and other items into fine objects. Their raw material includes Ming dynasty furniture, Tibetan artifacts, mounds of ash and animal skins. A large, stuffed bull dangles from a pole in one warehouse.

This former Japanese textile mill, now with 100 workers in its 75,000 square feet of space, is the studio of Zhang Huan, one of China's most daring artists and the subject of a retrospective opening Thursday at the Asia Society and Mu-

## A Rebel of China's Avant-Garde Reinvents Himself

seum in Manhattan.

He is best known as the radical performance artist who created a sensation in Beijing in the 1990s with his nude, masochistic shows. Now Mr. Zhang, 42, has reinvented himself as a painter, sculptor and installation artist. He is also the foreman of what may be China's largest production line of avant-garde art, overseeing a factory that creates wood carvings, ash paintings and Tibetan-inspired copper sculptures.

A shift to mass production seems natural perhaps for artists in a country dominated by low-cost factories. As prices for Chinese contemporary art skyrocket, dozens of artists are renovating old studios or building much bigger ones. The sculptor Zhan Wang, for example, has a seven-acre plot of land west of Beijing that houses a factory, an exhibition hall and a residence for his 40 employees.

In Tongxian, east of Beijing, the conceptual

artist Ai Weiwei has converted an old tractor factory into a 50,000-square-foot workshop for his colossal installation works. "I started out working in factories when I was younger, so this is natural for me," he said.

Mr. Zhang's studio factory is so large, he has hired a staff just to document the objects as they come off the production lines.

"When I went to his studio and saw the works, that really did it," said Melissa Chiu, curator of "Zhang Huan: Altered States" at the Asia Society. "The scale of it and the subject matter—those Buddhist sculptures, and the ash heads

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# Products of a Chinese Provocateur Are Rolling Off the Assembly Line

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with the long ear lobes — were just fantastic." It is the museum's first retrospective for a living artist.

Mr. Zhang grew up in impoverished Henan province in central China, the son of factory workers. An early interest in art led to a degree in painting from Henan University and then to courses at Beijing's elite Central Academy of Fine Arts.

But in the early 1990s, he said, his penchant for disobedience and mischief inspired him to form a community of experimental artists in what came to be called Beijing's East Village. There he took up with performance art and tested the limits of what was permissible in the years after the Tiananmen Square protests. It was a time when most avant-garde art was banned in China.

Mr. Zhang — who stands just 5 foot 7 but has a muscular frame — used his body as his medium for shocking art. He suspended himself, nude and chained, from a studio ceiling; he locked himself in a metal box; he stuffed earthworms in his mouth — all on camera. In "12 Square Meters," considered a seminal work of the Beijing East Village period, he slathered his body with honey and fish oil and sat nude in a stench-filled public toilet swarming with flies.

Mr. Zhang and his fellow East Village artists like Rong Rong and Ma Liuming formed a singular art collective as experimental art began emerging in China. "He was known for the most violent kind of body art," said Wu Hung, a professor of art history at the University of Chicago and the author of a book that chronicles the East Village artists. "There was blood, and a lot of social commentary on the environment and on the living conditions in China."

The authorities often raided East Village studios and occasionally Mr. Zhang was forced to flee after a performance. "We often had to hide him," recalled Mr. Ai, his frequent collaborator.

But photographs of his performances, like "To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond" and "To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain," brought Mr. Zhang and the East Village crowd international recognition. "Basically I showed people what happens in reality through me," Mr. Zhang said, chain-smoking through an interview in his studio here. "A lot of radical things happened every day. This is how I feel about the changes." Later he fell out with some of his East Village colleagues when those early photographic images, taken by others, began to fetch huge prices in the international market, and Mr. Zhang insisted they were his creations.

In 1998 he was invited to perform in New York; for eight years he made the city his new stage and his base to travel the world. At the Whitney Museum he dressed up in a suit of raw beef and paraded like a bodybuilder, in what appeared to be a commentary on American power. He was photographed with books smashed over his head, and with Chinese calligraphy covering his face and body.

"If you talk to him, you get a sense of how intransigent he is," said Christopher Phillips, a curator at the International Center



Stuffed bull as art object: Zhang Huan, a painter, sculptor and installation artist, in his studio factory in Shanghai, which employs some 100 workers.

of Photography in New York who is a longtime observer of Mr. Zhang's work. "He's a tough artist whose best work often has a brutal edge to it. And he's got a singular focus, which has helped set him apart from others."

He has developed a reputation for aggressively peddling his images to collectors, to the annoyance of some Western galleries working with him. But he has found new ways to preserve his art. For his "Peace" series he created bronze casts of his naked

body, for example, which depict him as a kind of beam, striking a bronze temple bell. One recently sold for more than \$400,000 at a Sotheby's auction.

When he returned to China last year, he said, he decided to abandon performance art and create paintings, sculpture and large installations in the massive studio factory he opened here. "I was tired of performance art," he said. "I ran out of new ideas. I came back to this country and I had new feelings — mixed feel-

## ONLINE: ZHANG HUAN

An audio slide show about this Chinese artist:  
[nytimes.com/arts](http://nytimes.com/arts)

ings, but I got excited again."

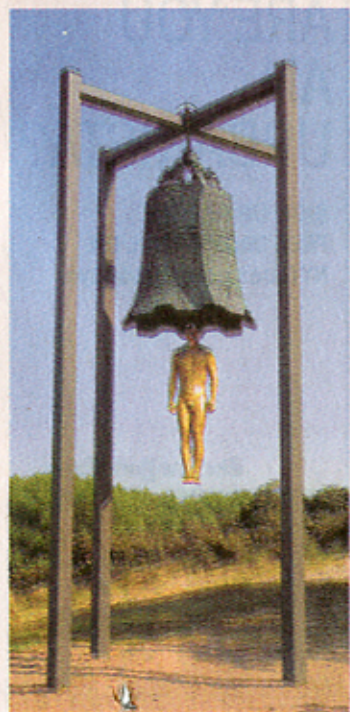
Now he walks the floor examining dozens of projects, all being created by an army of craftsmen and apprentices under what could be called the Zhang Huan brand. Carvers from Dongyang, a

city south of Shanghai known for wood carving, etch images into old doors; in another room a taxidermist works on cattle skins imprinted with Buddha figures. Nearby saws buzz away at a huge copper sculpture of a Buddha-like figure, inspired by Mr. Zhang's interest in Tibetan Buddhism.

In another studio, workers sort ashes collected from a Buddhist temple into piles of different colors. Mr. Zhang considers ash to be a unique art material, because

of its symbolic connections to religion. So outside, three men are slapping wet ash on a huge ash head sculpture while young art school graduates dust canvases with ash, forming a kind of ash painting.

"This is really an enormous transition, and that's why we were interested in doing this show," Ms. Chiu said of his new work. "It's as if he's had all these ideas in his head for all those years, and now he can create some of them."



From left, a large installation of a temple bell featuring a cast-bronze image of Mr. Zhang as clapper; the artist, in white shirt, with assistants in his Shanghai studio; Mr. Zhang in a raw-beef suit for his performance "My New York," at the Whitney in 2002.