

Losing Himself in his Art

By Jiae Kim

In his quiet approach to performance art, Zhang Huan erases himself from his performance, so the focus is on the art, not the personality of the artist. In a genre that's known for self-aggrandizing, outlandish antics, his performances are often simple and human.

In 12 Square Meters, one of Zhang Huan's first performance pieces to garner international critical acclaim, he sits naked, covered in honey and flies in an outhouse near his then-home in the East Village of Beijing. You can almost smell the shit, bear the buzzing of the flies, and feel the stickiness of the honey. In stark contrast to the squalor of the outhouse and the outrageousness of his act, his face is calm, his demeanor quiet.

Ten years after this breakthrough performance, Zhang Huan now lives in the US and has steadily become an art-star, with commissions to create unique performance for PS 1, The Whitney Museum, The contemporary Art Museum of Cincinnati, and The National Gallery in Australia. We visited Zhang at his home just twenty-five minutes outside of NYC. His home, like the artist, is understated and modest.

Theme: How did you start in performance art?

Zhang Huan: One day, riding my bicycle from the city to my painting studio, I found a leg from a mannequin on the street. Just one leg, a woman's leg. I took it to my studio, and experimented with taping the prosthetic leg to my body. That was the first performance experience for me. It was an important moment; I discovered the body as an important part of my art. The body is the first language for me. The body is immediate. You can feel it. You can't feel by drawing. In the toilet [12 Square Meters] I can feel the flies biting me--I experience new things with my body, that's why I use the body.

Theme: What else is inherent in your performances?

Zhang Huan: When I perform, I'm always very quiet. Very quiet, unlike a lot of American or European performance artists, who use a lot of action and noise in their works. When I have a performance, I always shave my head. I shave it before every performance. I guess it's a ritual. For me, performing is about not performing.

Theme: *You were one of the first performance artists in China, right?*

Zhang Huan: The first to make a lot of work. When I lived in China I think there were perhaps twenty or thirty performance artists in the whole country. Now there are probably 2,000 or more. Every city has performance artists now--even the smaller rural cities. I asked my friends in China about this phenomenon, and they tell me it's because of me. It was because I made it as a performance artist. They see that one could be taken seriously, and that performance art is a possible career path.

Theme: *That's great.*

Zhang Huan: Yes, but on the other hand, maybe not so great. (He laughs.) You know, because 2,000 performance artists means 1,998 more homeless people. The art world is crazy; it chooses one or two to succeed and ignores the rest.

Theme: *You started doing performance art in the early '90s in the East Village in Beijing, which sounds like a pretty incredible place. Tell me about that place.*

Zhang Huan: Beijing is a series of concentric circles. Tiananmen Square is in Central Beijing, that's the first circle, around which you have the peripheral second circle, then the third circle. When I lived in Beijing, there were just three circles, now they've developed up to the sixth circle, outside of the city, and it's getting bigger. Huge, in fact. The East Village was between the third circle and the fourth circle, in the Eastern part of Beijing. It's really not anything like the East Village in New York (laughter), it's really, really different. The people there were farmers, and people from other cities who moved there in search of cheap housing. Everything was cheaper in the East Village. A lot of the people that lived there were builders. Some collected garbage. I think everything has changed. Beijing is growing and I think the East Village is nothing now.

Theme: *Are you doing any new work for 2005? I know you did My Sydney in March, and you did the Dharma Circle this year, are you working on any other performances?*

Zhang Huan: In June, I'm staging a large performance in Stuttgart, Germany, where it's like a temple built specifically for the performance.

Theme: *How would you describe performance art?*

Zhang Huan: Performance is like a branch of a tree, with the main branches being art and its many parts. Or maybe like a stream, a

tributary of a river. People always look to the big river, or to the big tree; their focus is always on the big things. Performance art is the small branch that gets occasional attention.

Theme: Meaning it will always be outside of mainstream art.

Zhang Huan: Yes. It's always there, but not always noticed. It's definitely not a part of popular culture. I never cared for what was popular--I've always just wanted to do something that was close to my heart.