



2000

March 3-9,

Stripped Down: China's Foremost Ordeal Artist Emerges in America

By C.Carr

Zhang Huan has always wanted to do large-scale pieces, but in China he had trouble getting people to take their clothes off. Nudity is essential to his work, he believes.

Now, in a new show at Deitch Projects, Zhang exhibits large photos and a video documenting a performance he did at the Seattle Asian Art Museum last November with 56 other naked people. Of course, he had hoped for a hundred.

One of China's foremost performance artists, Zhang is probably best known in New York for the piece he did in 1998 at "Inside/Out," P.S.1's landmark show on new Chinese art. In that piece, New York Feng Shui, he lay naked and face down on an ice mattress atop a traditional Chinese bed. Only in nakedness, Zhang says, can the body's "relationship with the spirit be identified through its direct contact with the object." In other words, he needed to feel the ice against his skin.

Zhang's work has all the rigor and risk of classic ordeal art, a style no longer fashionable here but right on time in late-'90s Beijing. There, in 12 Square Meters, he sat naked and unmoving in a public toilet for an hour, covered with honey and, inevitably, flies. In 65 Kg, he suspended himself with chains from the ceiling of his studio, naked, a needle inserted in his arm, blood dripping onto a hot plate for an hour. In The Original Sound, he lay naked under a highway overpass, then poured a bottle full of worms into his mouth and let them crawl out onto his body. In 25mm Threading Steel, he went to a construction site and lay naked next to a huge saw as it chopped steel bars, spraying sparks over his body.

The two pieces in which he managed to get collaborators in China were conceptual, involving no physical peril. In To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond, he persuaded village laborers to stand chest-deep in a local pond. And in To Add One Meter to An Anonymous Mountain, he got artist friends to disrobe and pile on top of each other to create the meter.

Now Zhang lives in New York, but speaks little English. With the help of translator Mathieu Borysevicz, the artist explains that in Chinese tradition, nudity is perceived as a perversion. That's just one reason it interests him. More important is the fact that he sees the body as his material, his form, "the only direct way through which I come to know society and society comes to know me."

In the Seattle piece, his work takes a new theatrical direction, and its original title hints at a new set of problems: *Hard to Acclimatize*. When people told him that the title "wasn't explanatory enough," he decided it must be better in Chinese and rechristened the piece *My America*.

Zhang says that until the '90s, no one in China pursued performance art as a form to work in full-time. Vanguard art began to emerge there in the late '80s, with '89 a watershed year. In February, a "China/Avant Garde" show opened at the National Gallery—almost. Two artists fired gunshots into their installations during the opening, and officials immediately closed the exhibition. Then, in June, came the massacre at Tiananmen.

Zhang moved to Beijing from Henan province in 1991, enrolling as a graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He was a painter whose favorite Western artists were Rembrandt and Millet. Then, one day, he went into the library designated for teachers only and happened upon a catalog for the New York artist Tseng Kwong Chi, best known for his ironic self-portraits in which he posed himself in front of tourist attractions all over the world, dressed in a Mao suit and dark glasses. Zhang was baffled and stunned. A door opened in his mind.

In 1992, he abandoned painting and moved with other hardy experimentalists to a suburb east of the city. They dubbed it "the East Village," having heard that there was an artists' neighborhood of that name in New York. Beijing-based art critic Karen Smith describes the ambience: "Many of the village's indigenous population scrape a living by collecting and sorting rubbish. Waste accumulates by the side of small ponds. This pollutes the water, generating noxious fumes in the summer. . . ." Zhang confirms this, saying that basically they were living in a garbage dump. They wanted to set themselves apart from another artists' village east of Beijing, home to a sort of official avant-garde: artists who've become rich selling things that look radical to foreigners, like paintings that critique the Cultural Revolution.

Official spaces in China have never allowed performance or installation work to this day. In 1993, Zhang did his first and only public performance in China at the National Gallery. It was impromptu. Outside the gallery at the opening, he poured a jar full of red liquid and doll parts over his head, assembled one doll from the various pieces, then marched into the gallery

and hung it on the wall. The gallery immediately canceled the entire exhibition, fined him, and ordered him to write a self-criticism.

All his pieces, he says, are about futility. It's like the effort to raise the pond. Human effort can only take you so far.

In '94 or '95, Zhang got access to a book called *Conversations With Experimental Artist* and first heard of Chris Burden and *Shoot*, the 1971 piece in which Burden had himself shot. Soon after, Ai Weiwei, an established artist who encouraged Zhang's performance work, brought him documentation about Tehching Hsieh, an artist well-known here in the early '80s for his arduous year-long performances: one year spent in a cage without communicating, for example. According to Zhang, Hsieh's work in particular gave Chinese artists a new understanding of what performance art could be.

But working in Beijing, says Zhang, he always felt like a criminal. After he did the blood-dripping piece, he left the city for a month, because the police were looking for him. On his return, he was beaten up in a bar by plainclothesmen. He still has the scars.

My America is a sort of compressed ritual for the naked, incorporating tai chi moves, prostrations from Tibetan Buddhist practice, running, crawling, and the lotus position. It ends with Zhang seated on a stool while the 56 naked others stand on three tiers of scaffolding and pelt him with bread. A woman approaches and breaks an egg on his head. He says he was making a basic inquiry: Bread is the staff of life—but is it the reason we're living? A critique of materialism? He says he's just expressing himself as an immigrant.

But sometimes Zhang feels that he has less freedom here, just because now he's part of the art world. He misses the anarchy of his old life. And he finds New York stressful, too often an atmosphere of latent violence. He saw his first gun a couple of days after moving here. So one night recently, he and his wife discussed going back. But, he told her, "I can't go back. Here, no matter how poor I am, I can put my art on my wall, I don't have to hide my videotapes. I still have an identity."