**PERFORMANCE ART, CHINA**

Performance art events began in China in the 1980s, following Deng Xioping’s post-Mao economic reforms in 1979 that opened up Chinese socialist society towards foreign investments and influences. In 1985, at a time when China’s mainstream art was mostly defined by official Academic Realism or Socialist Realism, but incipient strands of avant-gardist experimentation were surfacing through informal art groups, Robert Rauschenberg held a solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing. The exhibition displayed innovative readymade assemblages, installations and collaborations, exposing Chinese audiences and artists to major trends in contemporary Western art, including fertile crossings of aesthetic and conceptual boundaries, thereby motivating artists away from old habits of thinking and art-making. Rauschenberg’s exhibition confirmed a rising awareness in China that art could embrace participatory agency, breaking down rules of perception and action, to include expanded possibilities of duration, place and materials. China’s performance art questioned thresholds of visuality and aesthetics and was widely translated into Chinese as “xingwei yishu” (behaviour art), having also been termed “xingdong yishu” (action art), “shenti yishu” (body art), and more recently “xianchang yishu” (live art). The implication of human behaviour and conduct in the translated term reflected performance art’s function in addressing lived experiences under socio-cultural constraints in an authoritarian state, as well as social change and upheaval during China’s transition into a socialist state with capitalist characteristics.

Distinctive features and attributes marked China’s performance art of each decade, from the 1980s to the 2000s. Works in the 1980s are generally characterised by masochistic visual metaphors of wrapping, binding and bandaging bodies, often alluding to the psychic trauma, wounds and political repression exacted upon the Chinese citizenry by the the Communist Revolution era, such as Wei Guangqing‘s *Suicide Project* (1988) and *Concept 21 – The Great Wall* (1987), enacted by the artists, Sheng Qi, Zhao Jianhai, Kang Mu and Zheng Yuke. In order to foreground new avant-gardist philosophies and art methodologies, Chinese artists gave renewed attention towards the artist’s individual body, adopting ritualised bodily performances that challenged art taught by the academies, and often referencing cultural traditions, slogans and monuments, such as the Old Summer Palace and the Great Wall of China. These performances appeared violent in tone and were considered institutionally provocative non-official art. This period of free experimentation, widely known as the New Wave Art Movement, was capped by the 1989 *China Avant-Garde* exhibition at the National Art Museum of China that featured a motley group of installations and impromptu performances from the washing of feet to the selling of prawns. This watershed event was brought to an abrupt halt when the female artist Xiao Lu, encouraged by her artist-partner Tang Song, fired a gunshot into her telephone booth installation entitled *Dialogue*, ominously foreshadowing the tragic events to come some months later on 4 June at Tiananmen Square.

It was in the 1990s that performance art gained more traction in China. Performance artists represented an independent voice from the margins that began to make critical inquiries into contemporary socio-political issues and problems facing China. The creation of special economic zones through the mid-1990s liberalisation hastened economic freedoms but caused rapid changes to social and urban development at considerable environmental and human cost. Artists in this period could be broadly drawn into two types: those who participated in social activism and consciousness-raising activities (such as Zhan Wang’s *Ruin Cleaning Project* (1994), Yin Xiuzhen’s *Washing River* event (1995), Lin Yilin’s *Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road* (1995), and Wang Jin’s *Ice: Central China 96*, which had hundreds of shoppers hacking into the artist’s 30-metre long ice wall in front of a new shopping centre in order to get at the consumer goods embedded in it), and those whose body-centric art reflected the dire conditions of everyday survival, especially for millions of Chinese migrant workers. An artist colony in Beijing, named East Village (or *Dong cun*) after its Manhattan counterpart, hosted the early and by now seminal performances of artists from other provinces such as Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan and Zhu Ming. Their performances often challenged corporeal limits of the artists’ naked bodies, subjecting themselves to the pressures of physical endurance and marginal identities. If masochism was metaphoric or theatricalised in the 1980s, in the following decade, artists confronted daily realities of abjection and violence by actualising and registering the experience via their own bodies.



Lin Yilin, *Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road*, 1995, performance, 90 mins. Copyright obtainable through artist’s website <http://linyilin.com/>

With the prolific rise of performance art practice throughout the 1990s, performative events and installations flourished in many Chinese cities with artists more severely testing the parameters of art and legality by pushing at the limits of ethics, veracity and propriety. Artists during this period worked more radically with the raw flesh, cadavers and live animals, evident in the works shown at the 1999 exhibition *Post-sense Sensibility—Alien Bodies & Delusion* and later at *FUCK-OFF* in 2000, a non-official satellite event at the Third Shanghai Biennale. Performance art gained in notoriety and controversy as many critics queried whether certain performative actions, such as the purported documentation of the eating of a dead foetus by the artist Zhu Yu, the act of copulation with a hundred women by Chen Guang, or Yang Zhichao surgically implanting grass on his back, could be recognised as art, or were mere instances of bestiality and obscene pornography. Criticism of performance art grew in intensity, resulting in the Ministry of Culture issuing a public warning against artists who indulged in extreme taboo acts of gratuitous cruelty and immorality in the name of art. On a more positive front, the 2000s and after marked a period of artistic globalisation whereby international performance art festivals became regular features in several Chinese provinces, such as the Open Art Platform Festival and DaDao Live Art Festival. These curated platforms were important spaces for the maturation of the medium of performance in China, as Chinese artists were able to discuss and exchange ideas with invited artists from abroad (particularly Japan, Europe and America), especially those related to global artistic developments and contemporary concerns of the present-day. The more inclusive remit of such performance art festivals also facilitated the emergence of Chinese female performance artists such as He Chengyao and Duan Yingmei, and encouraged younger art students to experiment with performative practices.

**References and Further Reading**

Berghuis, Thomas. (2006) *Performance Art in China*. Hong Kong: Timezone8.

Cheng, Meiling. (2012) *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* Seagull Books.

Gao Minglu. (2011) *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lu Hong and Sun Zhenhua. (2006) *Yihua de roushen: zhongguo xingwei yishu* [Alienation of the Body: China Performance Art], Shijiazhuang: Hebei meishu chubanshe.

Wu Hung and Wang, Peggy eds., (2010) *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art.