

What's vital about 'Vital'?

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Detractors persist in scathing comments of Chinese Art Centre's partiality: that only representing artists of Chinese ethnicity smacks of 'essentialism', or a self-congratulatory celebration of 'Chinese-ness'. However I find it worthy to participate within the context of Vital International Live Art Festival despite these discrepancies. After all what art event or institutions does not have its own problematic priorities and contradictions? Approaches to minority and marginal representations are complex issues and should not be rejected too hastily. Despite acceptance within the contemporary art world performance art is still very much a marginal form and artists presented via such an event as Vital, rather than merely celebrating, interrogate 'Chinese-ness'. Vital not only gave artists a chance to develop their own work in front of a different audience but also would allow them to meet, interact and discuss with artists and critics from different backgrounds and histories regardless, and without necessary regard, of Chinese ethnicity. We should not confuse Vital's focus as a preservation of ethnic cultural traditions but rather that of negotiating explorations with openness in order for further hybridisation in an ongoing cultural transformation and evolution of our humanity and history.

Performance art usually involves individual artists, sometimes together in a group, partaking or presenting themselves in the creation of the artwork itself. For those who adhere to conservative perspectives or are entrenched in so-called Asian traditions, this is still seen to be alien or overly egoistic. Chinese attitudes, if not also in other cultures of Asia, towards social protocol and decorum are traditionally used to referring to themselves more within a social group rather than as unique or outstanding individuals. To be too outstanding is usually frowned at, as, in the Chinese idioms, one should not be like 'a camel in a sheep's pen' because 'outstanding nails are to be knocked down'. As a result, it is difficult to find similar emphases on self-portraiture in Chinese painting in the period corresponding to the European Renaissance from the fourteenth through to the seventeenth century. Understandably, with dominant Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist philosophical backgrounds, expression of the self is more closely interrelated or tending to be in nature and landscape painting or in groups rather than realistic representation of the unaccompanied physical human self-image.¹

My first foray into performance art was in the late 1980s in Singapore through experimenting with The Artists Village - an informal group initiated by Tang Da Wu. Our challenges and experimentations beyond traditionally accepted media - especially in performance art - often drew mocking criticisms that we were merely aping Western practices; depraving and

depreciative of our own cultural values. These reproaches culminated in 1994 with a ten-year censure on grant sponsorship for performance art from the National Arts Council after a controversial performance by Josef Ng. This *de facto* ban on funding and proscription also affected forum theatre - the political interactive theatrical form invented by Augusto Boal – also seen by the authorities to be subversively threatening to public order. Although the reprimand was lifted in late 2003, artists still face the paranoia of liability to a cumbersome licensing system today.² There has been speculation as to why the ban was lifted at that particular time, such as; pressure from lobbying of local as well as the international arts community; the state's desire to extend its economic success to cultural distinction in parity with global trends; and in corroboration for the Singapore Biennale in 2006.³ Beyond these discussions performance art has crossed over the threshold from derision into acceptance as a valid form of contemporary art practice. However without reading and understanding historical sources and development, relatively conservative assumptions and prejudices will continue to prevail toward performance art and artists.

Singapore's situation of official censure and later acceptance of performance art can be seen in parallel to the situation in China. Artists increasingly found confidence and the relevance of using performance art as a working strategy and practice in the 1980s. However, many performances were first held in 'underground' circumstances and clashed with the authorities.⁴ Some artists like Zhang Huan, Zhu Ming and Ma Liuming were arrested and imprisoned for organising and performing in Beijing East Village during 1994, the same year Singapore imposed its *de facto* ban on funding and proscription of performance art. In 2001 I participated in the 2nd Open Art Festival in China when the venue was switched to three different locations in Sichuan as a strategy to escape the police surveillance in Beijing. Recent festivals are now held more openly in the middle of Beijing (albeit under police surveillance). Today, artists like Zhang Huan, Zhu Ming and Ma Liuming are well respected and successfully represented by galleries in China as well as the international art market. Some critics have even questioned the integrity of recent works by Chinese artists - including the once indicted performance artists - as they employ capitalist production means to meet the frenzied demands of the booming art market.⁵

China's quick pace of economic growth has rippled into a booming art market; however, this does not necessarily help develop performance art practice. China's state support for artists is still caught up in the backwaters of social realism and nationalistic painting, wherein selected state artists are given monthly stipend whether they are productive or not. It would be difficult to imagine national art funding or sponsorship to assist any contemporary art practice - much less performance art - in the near future. Artists themselves, or private sympathisers, fund all

contemporary art practice, exhibitions, events and festivals. In Singapore, performance art continued without funding during the ten years of *de facto* ban. However, with a blacklisted status it became increasingly difficult to have internationally balanced curated program within a social system of escalating living costs. Artists would have found it even more arduous to develop their practice without invitations to international events. China's performance art faces suffocation in contrast to the rising art market as cost of living increase and private art sponsors are lured towards more profitable art enterprises such as sellable paintings and sculptures.⁶

My participation in Vital gave me opportunity to meet many other artists and cultural workers participating in the program as well as in the audience. Of more pragmatic consequence was the chance to continue discussions with another participant, Zhou Bin, regarding our collaboration in organising UP-ON International Live Art Festival. Due to be held in Zhou Bin's home city Cheng Du, Sichuan, China in October 2008; we hope to bring sixteen foreign artists and an equal number of performance artists from China. After the event in Cheng Du artists will also travel and perform in other cities such as Chongqing, Xi-An, Hangzhou and Beijing; to be organised by a key artist-organisers in each city. Interactions in these events will give rise to possibilities for inter-personal cultural exchange and discourse overcoming problematics of market capitalism and society's inanity towards cultural development.

In my presentation during Vital Bodies – the international conference held at John Moores University, Liverpool - I gave a rundown of the pros and cons of performance art festivals; asking whether they remain valid alternatives or are abating into promotional fairs. We need to address questions that had been raised concerning the proliferation not only of performance art but various cultural festivals of the last twenty years. My engagement with this query is a continuation of my involvement in organising international festivals following the lifting of the funding ban in Singapore and one particular forum discussion during one of these festivals.⁷ Among various discrepancies of the festival as platforms for performance art at least two worrying factors stood out.

Traditionally, the festival idea originally derived from that of significant religious occasion manifesting itself by way of a feasting celebration. Through years of development art festivals seem to be losing their sense of value and relevance and are in danger of spiralling down into frivolity and commercialism. One reason for the modern art festival's manifestation is the post-war consciousness in which the preceding cultural *status quo* was called in question and globalisation intensified. It was felt that artists should have more physical meetings and be able to create consciousness of inter-cultural sensitivities, exchange and understanding. Such events

used the model of *symposium* - a drinking party in the Socratic tradition of meetings with philosophical discussions. Performance art emerged from radical anti-art beginnings - with inherent social and ethical dimensions - at times in an underground situation and has been critical of prevalent social and cultural functions, norms and *status quo*. As it is, being accepted into mainstream institutions and state initiated mega exhibitions such as biennales, may be a triumph of uprooting old ideas of art and culture but, it may jeopardise its critical cutting edge and politically charged motivations for social change.

Art productions directed towards festival presentations risk relinquishing a thorough ongoing practice or critical investigative processes. Within the context of festivals, symposiums or conferences artists or speakers must deliver a twenty to thirty minute work or speech. We do not expect that all speakers or writers participating in such conferences build entire careers out of such presentations; neither do we want or need to hear them read their entire books in such situations. However, artists who only perform in festivals concentrate and distillate their work into the production of twenty to thirty minute performance artworks as opposed to longer or more complex processes. But, of course, not all artists are able to work under such conditions; just as not all academics, intellectuals or writers find conferences or symposia conducive to their practice.

One often associates seriality and repetition in art to Minimalism or Pop Art. However, this is also a most valuable, suitable and effective strategy for performance art if the artist is able to flexibly adapt - within the festival framework - to the variable dimensions of site-specificity and momentous timing peculiar to live presentations. Whereas the Minimalist or Pop Artist found serial production as a process in alliance with the anonymity and impersonal sterility in mass mechanical production, for the performance artist, it can equally work with such alignments as well as accentuate unique individuality and narrative subjectivities. One should not mistake repetition in seriality to be production of sameness but rather in the vein of post-structural indeterminacy and difference where nuances of mutable change respond to imperative specificities of location allowing for creative chance and serendipity in experimental discoveries.

Art as performativity - via the presentation of the artist's body and self apparently - may appear to be skill-less: as if 'anyone can do it'. However, it does require the certain ambiguous virtuosity of a trickster artist as much as a discerning critical participatory audience to carry the performance out to its fullest possibilities. Similarly festivals and events such as Vital may come across as yet another formulaic event: evidential of the veering complacency of performance art - a once radical strategy to effect social changes now accepted in the cultural mainstream.⁸ My

opinion tends to differ and I find, in actuality, performance art, especially those works persisting to maintain a serious critical edge, remain a marginal practice; and festivals, such as Vital, provide a rare but valuable opportunity for continued fieldwork research and experimentation in performance art - albeit on a contrived yet ambiguous platform within an established institution.

'Performance' has become a key word to use not only to study art but a wide variety of activities ranging from writing, sports, religious rituals to political rallies and has been described as an anti-disciplinary discipline resisting conclusions.⁹ Vital 07 can be seen as a performance in itself: where the representation in a major European city of Chinese performance artists of different age, gender, cultural backgrounds and conceptual stratagems gives a unique focus enabling appreciable contributions with flexibility yet criticality and the growth of cultural knowledge. This may be the last in the series of international live art festivals to be hosted by Chinese Arts Centre, but hopefully it is not a final conclusion in the ~~organisations~~ engagement with performance art. The concern is what we take from this experience and how to reinforce the accumulation of knowledge gained before it dissipates into the dustbin of obscurity inherent within a ubiquitous global capitalistic system itself fraught with bureaucratic inertia; largely motivated by greed and profit or ideological fallacies in the name of progress but inane to the real needs of our human cultural evolution.

¹ Vinograd, Richard Ellis, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600-1900*, 1992 Cambridge University Press, New York.

WU Hung, Katherine R. TSIANG, editors; *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, 2004 Harvard University Press.

² Langenbach, Ray, "Looking Back at Brother Cane: Performance Art and State Performance", 1995 Space, Spaces and Spacing, The Substation Conference 1995. The Substation Singapore 1996. P.132-147

Langenbach, Ray, "Performing the Singapore State 1988 – 1995", PhD thesis, Center for Cultural Research, University of Sydney. August 2003, Ch.7, p. 207-239

<http://library.uws.edu.au/adt-NUWS/uploads/approved/adt-NUWS20041027.174118/public/08Chapter7.pdf>

³ C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Local Cultures and the "New Asia": The State, Culture, and Capitalism in Southeast Asia.' Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore 2002.

C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Creating High Culture in the Globalized "Cultural Desert" of Singapore', *The Drama Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 84-97.

C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Global Art, Globalised Art and 'Belief': The Singapore Biennale 2006', *CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART+CULTURE Broadsheet* magazine, vol 35 no 4, Adelaide, South Australia.

http://www.cacsa.org.au/archives/index_frames.html

⁴ Berghuis, Thomas J., *Performance Art in China*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2006.

⁵ Zhu Qi, Translated by Modi, 'Experimenting with Art Capitalism in China', *Art Map* 2007.12 issue 7, Beijing, China, p.16-36.

Zhu Qi, 'Art Capitalism in China (Part I & II)'

<http://www.artzinechina.com/display.php?a=602>

http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid603_en.html

⁶ The difficult situation can be seen from the recent dispute between Shu Yang and Wang Chuyu, the main organizers of *DaDao Live Art Festival*, a major performance art event in China. Although it seems a difference in opinion concerning curatorial directions occurred, the fragile economic viability of such an endeavour was impetus for their disagreement.

Liang Yu, translated by Zhang Yan, *'The 5th Annual DaDao Live Art Festival: Why did Shu Yang and Wang Chuyu part company?'* Art Map 2007.12 issue 7, Beijing, China, p.68-65.

⁷ Future of Imagination 3, Forum: "Is Performance Art today in a state of 'menopause'?" 14 April 2006, Singapore Art Museum. Speakers: Sergio Edelsztein (Israel); Nani Kahar (Malaysia); Ko Siu Lan (Hong Kong); Thomas Berghuis (Netherlands/Australia). Moderator: Ray Langenbach (US/ Malaysia)
Full transcript of the forum can be downloaded from <http://www.foi.sg/essays4.htm>

⁸ McEvelley, Thomas, *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism*, McPherson & Co., 2005 p.351-352

⁹ Carlson, Marvin A.: *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge; 1999. P. 188-189