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Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre**

Jaguscik, Justyna

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# **ASIATISCHE STUDIEN ÉTUDES ASIATIQUES**

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Huber, Jörg / Zhao Chuan (eds.): *The Body at Stake. Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013, 278 pp., ISBN 978-3-8376-2309-3.

In the manifesto which was included in the opening issue of the short-lived unofficial poetry journal, “The Lower Body”, poet and editor Shen Haobo made the following statement:

[...] *the time of language has come to an end, and the time of the awakened body has begun.*<sup>1</sup>

This declaration, combined with the controversial naming of Shen’s poetic enterprise, offers but two glimpses into a broad variety of literary and artistic phenomena that have emerged on the horizon of Chinese culture in course of the political and economic transition that has taken place since the late 1970s.

The second collection of essays by the editorial duo, Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan<sup>2</sup>, aims at shedding light on the corporeal turn in the artistic production of contemporary China and Taiwan. Nineteen contemporary artists, theatre practitioners and theorists contributed to this volume. They delivered fresh and riveting insights into the vigorous art scene in the so-called region of “Greater China”. The two editors, besides the meticulous translation, the accuracy of which is highly praiseworthy, made an effort to offer a platform for the unmediated voices of protagonists whose artistic personalities were shaped mainly in Chinese educational institutions and by their own regional life experience. This aspect, which has resulted in the introduction of broadly unknown names and discussions to a Western audience, may be regarded as the primary contribution of this publication. Apart from mentioning works by several recognized artists of the older generation, such as Zhang Huan, the Gao Brothers or Yue Minjun, the collection mainly references texts by young artists like Lu Yang, who are currently making themselves known to an international audience. Concomitantly, in a rather exceptional and noteworthy appearance in the Western publishing market, the editors honor the vivid critical exchange of views on contemporary art in China and Taiwan. Their publication thus provides a valuable insight into the emerging discourse on body (and) art in Chinese language, which is normally rarely accessible to non-Chinese speakers.

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<sup>1</sup> Shen Haobo, “Xiabanshen Xiezuo ji Fandui Shangbanshen (For Lower Body Writing and Against the Upper Body)”. *Xiabanshen* 1: 3; translated in: Crevel, Maghiel van: *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008, 317.

<sup>2</sup> See Huber, Jörg / Zhao Chuan (eds.): *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China. Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011.

Jörg Huber's preface, together with the two opening essays by Zhang Nian and Zhang Hong, define the historical departure point for the more specific "case studies" and reflections in the latter part of the publication. All three authors discuss the post-Mao body turn in its emancipatory dimensions, which have engendered an emergence of the concept of a privatized, irrational, desiring and incarnated individual who is no longer bound by previous ideological constraints. Saying farewell to the Maoist revolution with its markedly proletarian aesthetic has led to a growing intellectual interest in the body as a site open to re-signification and as suitable material to be implemented within artistic experiments. After a long period of revolutionary asceticism, characterized by a somatophobic approach, the body has been finally stripped of its revolutionary attire and recognized as a new subject for artistic production. Significantly, not only in visual arts but also in literary texts, the novel post-revolutionary take on changing social reality was often subsumed by this corporeal idiom.

According to the contributors in the introductory part of the volume, following the initial emancipation of the body from ideological constraints, the troublesome and paradoxical nature of the corporeal aesthetic has become increasingly visible. Subsequently, shortly after being freed from revolutionary puritanism, the body fell prey to the machinery of the globalized mass cultural production. The journey of the body in the latter half of the twentieth century may therefore be briefly summarized as a move from Mao to mayhem and money<sup>3</sup>. This uneasiness with the commercialization of body images, and of the art scene, seems to shine through several other contributions to this collection. Consequently, a certain sense of nostalgia for the creative "fever" which struck Mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s is visible, for example, in Lu Yinghua's introduction to the formation of the Chinese contemporary art scene. The current reality of artists trying to walk the narrow path between artistic innovation and commercialization through the global market, together with the ongoing material improvements in their living conditions, undoubtedly requires careful consideration in order to perceive it as an aspect apart from simple, and hastily depreciating financial success.

The texts immediately following the introduction belong to various genres. Perhaps influenced by the intention to reach a broader public than academia, the editors have included not only theoretical articles but also interviews with highly personal views on art and creativity. Instead of granting a panoramic overview of the entire Chinese art scene, these essays may rather be compared to a kaleido-

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3 To paraphrase the title of Maghiel van Crevel's publication.



scope of snapshots, which mirror, even if sometimes fragmentarily, the current state of the arts.

There are numerous instances in this collection in which references in more than one text are made to a single artist or distinct creative undertaking. As a consequence, this strategy of assembling different texts on one topic, allows the reader to approach a single phenomenon from various perspectives.

The first example is delivered by two texts discussing the sculptures of Xiang Jing. In the first, art critic Gao Shiming inquires into her works from a theoretical perspective, while in the latter, the female artist introduces her personal views on art in an interview with the coeditor of the volume, Zhao Chuan. Not surprisingly, as often happens in case of female artists, gender becomes one of the most prominent topics of the interview. On one hand, the artist acknowledges that her work originates from a distinct female body experience; on the other, however, she voices uneasiness with being labeled a “woman” or “feminist” artist. This is yet another common thread that connects Xiang Jing’s opinions to statements by female artists Chen Lingyang and Lu Yang, which are also collected in this volume. They all show a certain anxiety towards being judged based on their gender and as a direct consequence, stereotyped as feminist artists. Their apprehension hints indirectly at the still complicated status of feminist thought in post-Maoist China. The enforcement of gender equality which once was one of the key revolutionary paroles has suffered since the 1990s under the revival of Neo-Confucian values, which seem conveniently to accompany a patriarchal backlash. In juxtaposition to the literary field in which a strong feminine voice has been gradually gaining importance since the late 1980s, and is additionally backed by recognized feminist critics feminism, within the art scene remains an ambivalent association.

The essay by Shanghai-based academic Gu Zheng reflects the role played by the body in contemporary Chinese photography. He shows with convincing analyses how the various images of the body reflect the ongoing social transformation, with its crucial features such as rapid urbanization, growing mobility and globalization. Consequently, the author speaks of the body as a “social landscape”. The close link between photography and performance explored by artists such as Ou Zhihang or Cheng Yao, leads Gu directly to elaborate on the body as medium of expression. He concludes by reassuring his readers that even in a post-revolutionary society, the body remains nothing if not political. There is a deeper purpose than an entry into art merely for scandal value and alleged marketability, as with its highly critical appearance the body still cherishes hope for social change.

The inquiry into body art as a form of critique facilitating a deeper reflection on contemporary social maladies may be seen as another overarching topic that

allows the reader to link the majority of the heterogeneous essays together. It is also of crucial importance for a substantial part of the volume, which is dedicated to theatre. This segment encompasses five contributions, of which the first two grant a glimpse behind the curtains of the theatre group “Grass Stage”, established in 2005 by one of the editors, Zhao Chuan. In his introduction Zhao first summarizes Chinese views on the role of the body as an object and the subject of art. After delivering a comprehensive historical overview, he explains how his own philosophy of the stage has been developed in a constant oscillation between Western and local traditions, to have finally taken form as a theatre group of non-professionals who on stage engage with social reality. Li Yinan observes in his essay that performers affiliated to Grass Stage use their bodies as weapons of social criticism. Both authors thematize the importance of translocal links for the emerging performance theatre art in East Asia. Apart from Grass Stage, there are also other independent theatre groups based in main cities in Mainland China which are often engaged in lively exchange and cooperation not only with partners in Greater China, but also among others in countries such as Japan, Korea, and India.

The latter three contributions in the section of the collection also stem from active artist and founders of performance groups. Li Ning traces his shifting interests in means of expression back to that which made him abandon sculpture for dance and performance. Li distances himself not only from Western discourses of the body, but, at the same time, from the often-quoted statement that China does not have its own sense of physicality. He brings up for discussion examples of traditional Chinese medicine, Qigong, martial arts or calligraphy, together with the Maoist revolutionary consciousness, as distinctly local and basic tools for the development of a postcolonial approach to corporeality. In this uncompromising search for new paths to conceptualizing the body, he is followed by his physical art collective with the telling name of “Physical Rebels”.

The co-founders of the Beijing-based independent performance group Living Dance Studio, Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang, focus in their texts on the body as inscribed by past events. Subsequently, in their performances, the body becomes an important medium of approaching and excavating former happenings by which it has been significantly marked. Not only individual, but also collective remembrance and forgetting are important fields of inquiry in the group’s theatrical works.

The next two essays, by Amy Cheng and Lin Chiwei, introduce the reader to performance art in Taiwan. In a similar tone to the theatre-centered essays, the authors discuss the body as a subversive site and an important medium of expressing social criticism. The first of these two essays opens with a historical overview which shows that it was not only in Mainland China that the body was

freed from political constraints in the 1980s. After the dissolution of Martial Law in Taiwan, social intervention and engagement through art gained in importance too. This concurrently facilitated the emergence of various discourses on body politics. Cheng and Lin, in their essays, search for a new and independent language with which to speak about the artist's role in society. They seek a language that would allow the local artistic productions to approach the problematic post-colonial setting on its own, independent terms.

The "Picture Essay" by Huber and Zhao opens the final part of the collection which includes interviews with artists from Mainland China. In this essay the editors briefly reflect upon the body images that they found particularly striking in the course of their research. Primarily, it makes clear that reproductions of art works do not only play an illustrative function in this publication, but that, on the contrary, they are as essential as texts. Secondly, the fragmentary and brainstorming nature of the exchange between the two editors underscores the fact that this volume does not represent an authoritative or ready-made set of opinions on contemporary art which is to be accepted by the readership. It is much more an opening of a forum for discussion, encompassing a broad range of relevant topics, stretching from individual works of art to the questioning of social responsibility of artists in the globalized, post-Cold War setting. No less significantly, this essay clarifies that the selection of artists and their works as they have been introduced in this collection is highly subjective and personal.

As has already been mentioned, in the final section of this volume the podium is given to younger artists from Mainland China. It includes conversations with Chen Lingyang, Jin Feng, and Cao Fei, together with personal reflections by Lu Yang and Yang Fudong and an interview with Yang Guang, the curator for the China's first ever art exhibition on gender difference. The "Difference – Gender" exhibition from the year 2009 was also the first in Mainland China to deal openly with the topic of homosexuality. In the opening stage of the interview, Yang Guang discusses works by Xi Yadie with Zheng Bo. The artist is a middle-aged man from the countryside who adopts the tradition of Chinese paper-cutting as an artistic medium to deal with his own homosexual life experience. This is one of the very few glimpses within this publication into a rural, non-middle class and a non-intellectual corporeality that leaves the problems of the middle class urban body culture aside. These are otherwise prominent in the works of the featured artists.

In the manifesto quoted in the opening passage of the review, Shen Haobo heralds the end of the era of language and the awakening of that of the body. Texts included in this collection reflect the tension between language and body in various ways. They all search for an appropriate language with which to represent the corporeal experience. Entanglements between these two concepts are playfully engendered by the simple juxtaposition of "body" and "text". Bodies of

texts, textuality of bodies, body language, and corporeal rhetoric reflect the rich theoretical background and the deepness of the conceptual layers, in which this field of enquiry is embedded. This volume focuses primarily on the creative practices and everyday struggle of artists trying to develop their own understanding and philosophy of the body. According to them, the body implies not only mortality or vulnerability, but also agency.

This rich and thought-provoking publication introduces Western audiences to contemporary artworks of promising artists and topical theoretical discussions led by theorists from Mainland China and Taiwan. Its focus is the treatment of the body in the context of visual culture. The intense engagement with the topic of corporeality may be easily appreciated within the theoretical frame of a farewell to the revolutionary aesthetic which is outlined in the first two essays of this volume. As this collection seems to be intended to reach a broader public, the inclusion of more detailed background information (historical dates, a timetable or a glossary) would have been advantageous as orientation points for lay readers. Experts with sinological training may, on the other hand, be disappointed by the lack of Chinese characters and apparent mistakes and inconsistencies in the pinyin transcription. Nonetheless, for patient and careful readers this collection of textual and visual materials will not only provide an inspiring and refreshing insight into contemporary Chinese art but also an invitation to rethink and reposition artistic production in a globalized world.

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