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Contemporary Chinese Performance Art: An Interview with Yingmei Duan

June 4, 2018 | Eleanor Stephenson

Yingmei Duan (b. 1969) left her home country China in 1998, after being a member of the underground Beijing East Village group between 1993-1995 where she took part in the collective performance work *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*. The experience as a member of the avant-garde circle prompted Duan to turn towards the medium of performance, which developed further in Germany where she worked with Marina Abramović and filmmaker Christoph Schlingensiefel. Duan works with her own body as a primary means of expression, in which temporal extension, spontaneity, and the inclusion of the audience play an important role. As a curious observer of life and people's desires and fears, she has concentrated her creativity on performance art and researching the medium for the past twenty years. Based in Germany, Duan travels around the world to present her performance, often collaborating with a wide range of people and probing into themes of cultural shifts and social constraints. - Yoojin Choi, Assistant Curator, East Asia, Victoria and Albert Museum



Yingmei Duan, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995, collaborative performance by the Beijing East-Village artists, 20 mins. Photo credits: Lü Nan, Courtesy of Yingmei Duan and Hanmi Gallery

ELEANOR STEPHENSON: When did you become curious about performance art and how did you make the transition from painting to performance art?

YINGMEI DUAN: I became curious about performance art when I was living in East Village in Beijing in 1995. At the time, I was mainly focused on painting, but when I first saw the village artists Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming perform, I got a very special feeling about it. After many years of painting, I felt I needed to add something new to express myself. Due to my impediment with pronunciation, I always lagged behind other people and lacked the courage to do solo performances. Nevertheless, I joined the Beijing East Village artists in collaborative performances, such as *Anonymous Mountain*. East Village taught me to question: "What is performance art?". As I continued to make work, my mind became very curious. During my studies in Germany in 2000, I got more and more answers on performance art.

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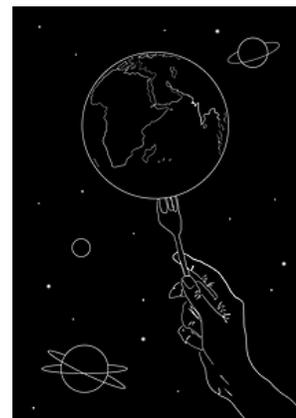
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How do you feel performance art was received by China in the 1990s?

In the 1990s, Chinese artists didn't know much about performance art, so you could imagine the art scene in China at that time. People didn't even know that something called performance art existed. Beijing East Village was like an underground community, it was not publicly accepted. In fact, performance art has been a non-mainstream art form in many countries until recently. Not only ordinary people but also many artists still don't know what performance art is, and that view exists even in some European countries today.

How do you think Marina Abramović has influenced your work?

During my studies at the HBK Braunschweig in 2000, I met Marina and became her student. Meeting her was an important turning point in my life and since then I have been concentrating on performance practice and research. Through performance, I received a deeper understanding and changed the direction of my art to become more open. Marina is a very good teacher; she has been influential to me, as well as other students. She always encouraged us to perform, therefore I always tried to show my performances during her lessons. Besides showing performances in school, she often took us to different art festivals, museums and other places all over the world.



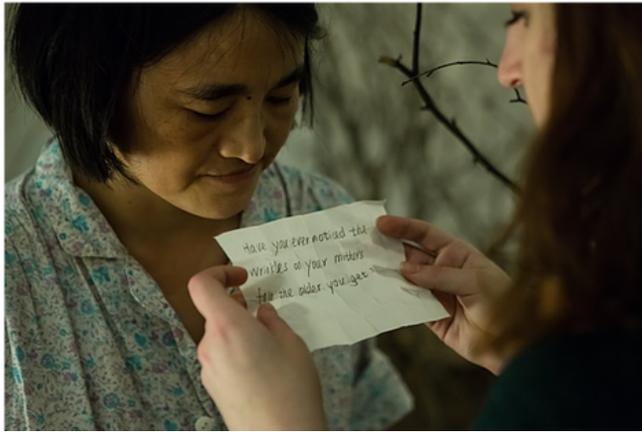
Yingmei Duan, *Little Secret*, 2003, Live Performance 2 hrs.

Photo credits: Viola Yesiltac. Courtesy of Yingmei Duan and Hanmi Gallery

Do you think your inclusion in the Art of Change, the 2012 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, was your most significant exhibition to date?

I think it is one of my most significant exhibitions. In the Hayward Gallery, I showed 'Happy Yingmei', which was a performance that developed in different venues. This work was inspired by Oscar Wilde's fairy tale Happy Prince, which told a story about a prince and a swallow who tried to help people together. It was shown for the first time in Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö. Through a small doorway, visitors had to bend low and enter into a dark small forest. I sat huddled on a tree stump and hummed simple melodies and sounds "...wuwuwu...lalalala...", buzzing as I went slowly towards the audience. Silently making eye contact, sometimes I would take out pieces of paper with handwritten "wishes" from my pocket. Based on my initial quiet interaction with the audience using notes on paper, I gradually added more body language, sound and conversation. I tried to put new elements into this piece of work nearly every day. On the other hand, ways to organise and deal with the audience on-site became more and more important. There was often a large crowd, so I had to cope with all kinds of situations and adapt to new circumstances as quickly as possible.





Yingmei Duan, *Happy Yingmei*, 2012, Live performance sound installation, 7 Sept – 9 Dec 2012.
Photo credits: Alexander Newton. Courtesy of Yingmei Duan and Hanmi Gallery

How has collaboration impacted your practice?

I grew more and more interested in collaborative performance art over the years while I worked on many solo performances. The theme of collaboration became especially important to me since meeting Christoph Schlingensiefel in 2005. He had a talent for working with many people; his work is very intriguing. During this period of working with him, I came up with my own idea of collaboration: “Equal Collaborative Performance”. I decided to collaborate with others on the basis of equality, extend collaborative partners, and let people in different fields become involved. Until now, I have done more than 80 different collaborations and through this, I have got a great deal of experience in all kinds of things.

What is your current project and what is your next project?

Between 1993 - 1998 when living in Beijing, I listened to a lot of American, 1960s Rock & Roll music, and a Chinese musician called Zuoxiao Zuzhou. Since then, it has been my ambition to create a music album. Currently, I am making my own music album, with the Chinese musician and composer Han Xiaohan. I'd like to develop my performance art in connection with music, as all the songs are developed from my performances. Singing and music will become one of the most important parts in my future performances. Through it, I would like to generate a bigger audience, so that I can inform more people about performance art.



Yingmei Duan, *One Upon a Time*, 2011, Live performance with David Hancock, 80 mins.
Photo credits: Richard Bolai. Courtesy of Yingmei Duan and Hanmi Gallery

What would you say to aspiring art students?

Sometimes it is better to not wait for your inspiration, to come and then do your art. I have found that even if you do not have any inspiration you should try to do some practice, and during the working process, you will find a more interesting development and even your inspiration.

