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Zheqi Shen April 13, 2021

In Light of Chan Buddhism:
Zhang Huan's Solo Endurance Performances in Beijing East Village

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Abstract

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This thesis considers the early performance artworks by Zhang Huan, a Chinese artist now based in New York and Shanghai, who lived in China until 1998. With attention to two solo endurance performances produced in the artistic community Beijing East Village in the 1990s, *12 Square Meters* (1994) and *65 Kilograms* (1994), I highlight a split in their reception. While some scholars have considered these two performance artworks as an outright criticism against the repressive political regime and societal issues in Chinese society, others tend to impose an existential reading centered around the mind and body connection.

By discussing the roles of performance art in the '85 New Wave Art Movement and that of performance art produced in the 1990s, more specifically, in Beijing East Village, I argue that the political interpretations of *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* result from a false comparison between the two roles. Proceeding to reference three core principles of Chan Buddhism, one of the major Buddhist schools in China, I reflect on how each principle is demonstrated in these performances of Zhang Huan, namely a nondualist view of the mind and body relationship, mind-to-mind transmission, and the engagement of the everyday in Chan practices. My thesis therefore argues that Zhang's performances are a form of inward exploration rather than an outward-directed process, making the artist question existing beliefs, seek his own truth, and induce the audience to engage in their own search for "truth."

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Introduction

Just past the Third Ring Road on the eastern margin of Beijing, three miles away from the historical sites and urban constructions in the developed city center, could be found a tumble-down village that rapid modernization hadn't yet reached in the early 1990s. A hand-written sign greeted occasional visitors at the entrance, which led to winding dusty roads with litter piled up along the sides (fig. 1). In the dilapidated farmhouses of *Dashanzhuang* resided migrant workers who wished to make a living in Beijing but could not afford accommodations in the downtown areas. When a group of Chinese avant-garde artists arrived in *Dashanzhuang* in 1993, this "junkyard like" place was infused with vitality and charged with creativity for the first time.[1] In hopes of imitating Manhattan's East Village, they renamed *Dashanzhuang* "Beijing East Village" and used it as the stage for a series of experimental art projects, leaving a mark in the course of Chinese art history despite the fleeting existence of the group. Among these projects are Zhang Huan's notorious *12 Square Meters* (1994) and *65 Kilograms* (1994).

12 Square Meters (fig. 2) involved Zhang Huan purposefully smearing his naked body with fish oil and honey and sitting still in a malodorous public toilet for an hour. As the air reeked of unpleasant smells and swarms of flies tirelessly devoured honey on his skin, he sat with an upright posture, unflinching. The audience felt suffocated by the vision of his body crawling with insects, the buzzing noise, and the unbearable stench emanating from the latrine pits. The performance came to an end when Zhang walked slowly into a nearby pond after spending an hour in the toilet. As a sequel to *12 Square Meters*, *65 Kilograms* (fig. 3) further displayed masochism in Zhang's performances. He suspended himself horizontally from the ceiling of his apartment with ten metal chains, while the blood that two doctors drew

[1] Wu Hong, *Rong Rong's East Village*, trans. Mao Weidong (Shanghai, China: Shanghai People's Press, 2013).

from his body during the performance dripped down onto an electric hot pan.[2] Both performances were carried out in isolated locations in the village rather than conventional performance venues. The cramped non-performance spaces forced the small audiences to share the discomforting experience with the artist, and thus intensified the immersive experience evoking sensations of fear and disturbance.

These two pieces conducted in the summer of 1994 were experimental in relation to the artist's practice and to the contemporary Chinese art scene more broadly. On one hand, they indicated Zhang's transformation from a painter of classical subjects to a performance artist embarking on trials to test his bodily and mental limitations. On the other hand, Zhang Huan and other Beijing East Village artists initiated a new chapter of Chinese experimental art in which artists working in different mediums collaborated in developing performance events. The dynamics of the Beijing East Village artistic community also contributed to a tendency for all group members to experiment with the novel artistic vocabulary of body art. These artists distanced themselves from the city as well as the mainstream Chinese contemporary art, constructing a utopia where they could freely create art with their bodies in radical ways. The involvement of endurance as an integral element was in its purest and most powerful form in Zhang Huan's early performance pieces executed in Beijing East Village, especially *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*, through which he gained prominence and which became the signature works of his career. After moving to New York City in 1998, Zhang Huan continued use of his body as the medium for his performances, but the later pieces were hardly masochist and started to take place in more open and public areas. For instance, Zhang walked in the busy streets of New York City with a suit made of raw meat for *My New York* (2002) and commissioned three calligraphers to write Chinese text on his

[2] Zhang Huan, "A Piece of Nothing," In *Zhang Huan: Altered States* (Milan, Italy: Edizioni Charta, 2007). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1146.

face until it turned dark for *Family Tree* (2000). The former was more analogous to public happenings. The latter, staged for the camera, was concerned with issues about ethnic identity and internal conflict with the foreign culture (fig. 4 & 5).

Though Zhang has produced many performances and traditional studio-based artworks, *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* have received the most critical attention. The commentaries on these works are notably and starkly divergent. Some critics consider them as outright resistance against the oppressive political regime and censorship. For example, New York-based art critic Eleanor Heartney believes that Zhang "used apparently irrational and even potentially self-destructive actions to subtly undermine the mental and physical restrictions placed on individuals by China's authoritarian regime."[3] In portraying Zhang as an artist who "excelled in art with shock value: violent, sexy, dirty and political," *The New York Times* typifies the Western mass media's understanding of Zhang.[4] Contradicting this politically centered interpretation, Zhang Huan denies that he attacks a specific political system, stating that his performances inspired by everyday activities focus on human nature and universal problems such as wars and disasters.[5] More in line with the artist's stated intentions, another camp of critics incline towards more individual and philosophical-religious readings. Chinese curator and critic Xiao Xiaolan writes "He, as an individual artist, also found from himself a puissant artistic language, and let this body language be conditioned thus eventually obtaining the experience and great release of intensified spiritual

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[3] Eleanor Heartney, "Zhang Huan: Becoming the Body," In *Zhang Huan: Altered States*. (Milan, Italy: Edizioni Charta, 2007). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1145.

[4] Alexa Olesen, "Making Art of Masochism and Tests of Endurance," *New York Times* (November 2001). http://www.zhanghuan.com/pl/info_76.aspx?itemid=1160; Richard Vine, "The Labors of Narcissus," *Art in America* (December 2007); Roselee Goldberg, "Zhang Huan At Luhring Augustine," *Artforum* (March 2002). http://www.zhanghuan.com/pl/info_76.aspx?itemid=1158.

[5] Pernilla Holmes, "Beyond Buddha, Zhang Huan in Conversation with Pernilla Holmes," In *Zhang Huan: Buddha* (UK: Haunch of Venison, 2008). http://www.zhanghuan.com/ft/info_30.aspx?itemid=1129.

force."[6] Through an examination of essays by selected Western and Chinese critics, I shall compare the opposed political and existential readings of Zhang Huan's self-torturing Beijing East Village performances.

The major factor contributing to such a stark divergence in reception is the confusion of performance art particular to Zhang Huan in the 1990s Beijing East Village with performance art emerging in the '85 New Wave Movement. The latter is better known to the art world due to its scale and impact. It is necessary to make a distinction between their formats and functions: the former as private events revolving around individual experience, the latter as planned creative activities in public with the explicit aim of catharsis against government repression and attract media attention. This thesis shall clarify the unique role of performance art in both contexts in hopes of situating *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* in the proper cultural and historical frame.

As political dynamics certainly play a role in forming the cultural space, religious factors should also be taken into consideration. Zhang Huan's life-long engagement with Buddhism began from childhood when he participated in folk Buddhist practices. References to Buddhism are consistent and increasingly pronounced throughout his oeuvre, even when the mediums shifted drastically from performance to ash sculptures and paintings following his return to Shanghai in 2006. His later large-scale installations deploy images of Buddha explicitly, as when Zhang placed two four-meter-tall Buddha sculptures made of aluminum and compacted ash facing each other in *Berlin Buddha* (2007, fig. 6). Because the visual manifestation of religious belief in *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* was *implicit*, a grasp of Buddhism and its integration in the Chinese modern society is crucial for analyzing these two pieces. Corporeality is often viewed through the lens of biopolitics and sexuality in

[6] Xiao Xiaolan. "Beijing • New York • Shanghai: Continuation of Zhang Huan," In *Zhang Huan: Dawn of Time* (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2010). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1156.

Western philosophical discussions, while it suggests a relation to asceticism as a form of religious practice within Buddhism. Therefore, introducing and incorporating Buddhist ideas may shed new light on Zhang's performances and bring innovative perspectives to the conversation.

This leads to another factor in contributing to the split in the reception – the difference in critics' level of understanding of Buddhist principles. Chinese art historian Qian Zhijian once remarked "to an audience who is less knowledgeable about Chinese culture than its politics in the last decades, the interpretation could be politically oriented."[7] The same applies to knowledge about Buddhism and its role in the Chinese society. One may be tempted to then make a sweeping assumption that the reception of Zhang's performances is marked by a divide between Eastern and Western criticism. Since Buddhism has larger and more deep-rooted presence in Asia, it might seem obvious that critics with an Asian background are more acquainted with this subject matter. However, with an increasing awareness of the need to place history within its original context to construct an accurate interpretation, some critics have diligently studied the works' Chinese context. Indeed, some of the critics, curators, and scholars in question have received education and lived in both cultures. Thus, the conclusion that only East Asian critics have a propensity to formulate interpretations with a Buddhist theme is not founded, and the question with regard to the degree of insight into Buddhism has become a complex one.

Although Chinese critics are aware of the Buddhist influence on Zhang Huan's early performances, they only speak briefly of it in catalog essays. *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* are usually discussed along with Zhang Huan's other early performance pieces as a whole and are taken to be representative of the period during which he was an active

[7] Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Qian Zhijian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," Art Journal 58, no. 2 (1999): 60–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/777949., p. 78.

member in Beijing East Village. As such, the Buddhist aspects of the early works are frequently acknowledged but undertheorized. With a proper cultural and historical framework, this thesis intends to return to the performances themselves and foreground their Chan Buddhist underpinnings, drawing upon Zhang Huan's religious background. Instead of referring to the vast Buddhist teachings broad in scope and content, I analyze *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* in terms of the Chan school of Buddhism in China, which has been integrated into the Chinese culture most deeply and is more closely associated with Zhang Huan's idea of performance art during the mid 1990s. The subject of my analysis is the original live actions rather than their photographic documentation. The ephemeral nature of Zhang's performances discussed in this thesis, characterized by the co-presence of the artist and the audience in the unique settings that is not reproducible, precludes any authentic documentation attempting to capture the materiality and the temporal presence. However, along with the written and oral accounts of Zhang Huan and the audience present at the actual event, photographic documentation is a key source to consult in order to form a thorough picture of the original live performances. The use of photographic documentation in this thesis is limited to the extraction of information about the content of the performances, without any concern with the photographer's artistic choice and aesthetic elements of the photographs.

Chan Buddhism emphasizes the incorporation of religious practice into daily activities as well as the application of Chan into every possible situation in life, which is in line with Zhang Huan's engagement with the everyday in his performances. Not only does my interpretation draw a correspondence between certain formal elements of the performances and Buddhist concepts, it also discusses the implications of the performances in light of Chan Buddhist ideas, consolidating the readings revolving around existential exploration. Bringing to bear the nondualist outlook of Chan Buddhism—the absence of

dichotomies between the self and others, the mind and body, as well as the subject and the object—my thesis will illuminate that Zhang Huan's performance is a form of inward exploration, making the artist and the audience question what they knew about themselves and everyday surroundings. With the incorporation of certain materials and procedures, the performances were infused with conceptual and speculative qualities that make them art rather than simple day-to-day behaviors.

Literature Review

"Performance art is a process by which a certain spiritual force can penetrate inward, rather than a process by which an artist vents his emotion outward."

– Zhang Huan

Inward and outward: the two orientations mark the critical reception of Zhang Huan's performances in Beijing East Village. Some critics consider *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* as venting criticism of the rapid urbanism in Post-Cultural Revolution China and resentment against an authoritarian regime. They tend to address the environment surrounding the performances, in particular the low living standard of Beijing East Village that strikingly contrasted with the developing city. Curators such as Yu Yeon Kim and Thom Collins interpret Zhang's solo endurance performances as voicing a personal resistance against the political system in China, and writers such as Octavia Zaya and Chan Shing Kwan perceive these pieces as positing a critique against certain pressing societal issues in the Chinese society, generally as outward expressions of intense feelings or attitudes. While these readings map the outwardly directed processes that Zhang outlines in the epigraph, others emphasize the inwardly directed processes. Such is evident in the readings by Xiao Xiaolan, Gao Minglu, and Eleanor Heartney, which highlight the internal changes arising spontaneously within Zhang Huan during the performances. These texts identify the experimental significance and spiritual elements of Zhang's endurance works. They refer generally to the mind-body connection in these works, though some draw connections to Buddhist principles more specifically. All of the scholarship and criticism is marked by two dominant themes: the environment of Beijing East Village as the performance space and Zhang Huan's body as the major art material. The discussion on the former theme is prone to the political reading, while there is a split in the interpretations dealing with the latter theme –

some also illuminate political significance, and others concentrate on the artist's spiritual discovery.

Exterior Environment

The unsanitary condition of the Beijing East Village is the most discussed aspect of the artworks produced there. In the 1990s, the speed of providing housing and infrastructure for the burgeoning urban population failed to keep up with the flow of urban migration to Beijing.[8] Beijing floaters, newcomers to Beijing in search of opportunities for prosperity and success, chose to live in inexpensive ramshackle buildings in the suburban areas to save rent. Many essays quote the artist:

> I created two works in 1994, *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*, to directly reflect our lives in the East Village. Twelve square meters is the area of the public toilets that are used every day in China. One day after lunch, I went to the toilet as usual. The sun had just come out following a rainstorm, but there was no place to stand in the toilet for it was flooded. I had to bike to another public toilet in the village. It was relatively cleaner. When I stepped in, thousands of flies swarmed toward me and I still had to squat down. This was my life, and no one could experience it but me. I was determined to make artworks about my life and suddenly came up with the idea of *12 Square Meters*.[9]

Since his performances are often carried out in ordinary environments, both natural and human-constructed, it is inevitable for art critics to view them in the context of post-Cultural Revolution Beijing as an embodiment of miserable experiences shared by Beijing floaters. For example, Spanish-born art critic and curator Octavia Zaya argues that *12 Square Meters* exaggerates the repulsive feelings that every resident of countryside villages must

[8] Robin Visser, "Beijing Identity in Art, Film, and Fiction," In *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[9] Zhang. "A Piece of Nothing."

encounter on a daily basis in contemporary China, "join[ing] together a personal situation and a local problem to express a collective trauma."[10] Similarly, Chinese-born American art historian Wu Hung states that the performances with Beijing East Village as the backdrop not only problematize Zhang's relationship with the hell-like environment but also link his personal experience with the social phenomenon resulting from the lasting rural-city dichotomy. Hong Kong-based art historian Chan Shing Kwan considers Zhang's performances as a reflection on people's lives in Beijing East Village, "an abject but relatively safe heaven" for its artists-in-residence.[11] Besides the physical space, Zaya indicates that Zhang's masochist performances also mirror the "self-torturing" problem inherent in society. The conscious and unconscious tendency of self-touring was ubiquitous in the context contemporary China, as many peasants compromise themselves and forfeit what they truly want in order to make a living. Sacrifice of time for sleep and family to travel to an unfamiliar city to make an earning brought little benefit, which in Zaya's opinion were futile actions. In an interview with Qian Zhijian, Zhang considers this phenomenon as a self-torturing one, and he endeavored to bring it to an extreme in his earlier performances.[12]

Despite the abundant accounts emphasizing the inhuman condition of Beijing East Village generally, such as raw sewage and rubbish mounds, only limited literature exists that interprets *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* on the basis of the immediate performance spaces. Offering a more theoretical approach beyond the discussion based on a Chinese cultural identity, Chan Shing Kwan characterizes Zhang's endurance performances as "abject art performances" based on psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection and

[10] Octavio Zaya, "Zhang Huan: A Deeper Panic," In *Pilgrimage to Santiago* (Barcelona: Cotthem Gallery, 2001). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1140.
[11] Chan Shing Kwan, "Public Displays of Affliction: On Zhang Huan's 12m2," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2018). http://yishu-online.com/browse-articles/?932, 165.
[12] Zaya, "Zhang Huan: A Deeper Panic."

philosopher Immanuel Kant's investigation on ugliness, disgust, and beauty. Chan argues that the artist underwent immense physical and psychological distress in the immediate performance space of *12 Square Meters*, which epitomizes and is catalyzed by the horrible living conditions of Beijing East Village.[13] Though Chan dedicates a section of his paper to the horrible living condition of the artistic community, he also presents a more nuanced analysis of the concrete elements contributing to the intimate performance space through considerations of both the Western concept of the abject and the context of Post-Cultural Revolution China. The author regards the unsanitary and chaotic setting – the buzzing flies, unpleasant odor, and the sultry weather – as a juxtaposition against Zhang's vulnerable body and austere features. The materiality of sickening elements that Zhang incorporated into performance spaces reinforced the feeling of revulsion presented by the surroundings and also gave rise to a strong sense of anxiety. For example, fish sauce slathered all over Zhang's body in *12 Square Meters* and blood dripping from an incision in *65 Kilograms* suggest death and decay, intensifying the abhorrent embodied experience already inherent in the places where there is a lack of cleanliness and health as well as a disregard of social order.[14] Attracted and nourished by the slick substance of honey and fish sauce, the insect in Zhang's performances functions as a paradigm of the abject and a metaphor for despicable existence of common enemies unwelcomed by the ruling party during the Cultural Revolution in the writings of post-Cultural Revolution China. Some of these writings compared capitalists, the bourgeois class, and scientists who studied abroad to insects. Based on this literary paradigm, Chan further expands his argument to compare flies feasting on the viscous liquid but also trapped by it with Beijing floaters who were stuck between the despair of poverty and the euphoria of the possibilities Beijing offered them.[15] As indicated by Chan, the fly-floater and

[13] Chan, "Public Displays of Affliction: On Zhang Huan's 12m2," 103.
[14] Ibid., 105.
[15] Ibid., 105.

outhouse-Beijing metaphors serve as symbolic critique, which differentiates Zhang's performances from those created merely for the sake of generating shock.

Body as a Medium

In early June of 1994, the Beijing East Village designed a trilogy of body performances as their debut show. It comprised Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (June 3), his *65 Kilograms* (June 11), and Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch* (June 12). In his work, Ma inspected and troubled the gender dichotomy by dressing himself up as an androgynous figure with an effeminate face and masculine naked body. He then put one end of a flexible tube on his genital and the other end in his mouth, while serving a cooked fish to the audience. The main theme of Ma's multiple performances featuring his androgynous alter-ego Fen-Ma Liuming is sexual ambiguity as a transhistorical and universal issue. The idea of cyclicality is evoked by the return of the fishbones to the fish jar and the connection formed by the tube, often interpreted in reference to the Yin-yang concept in Daoist philosophy. Ma and Zhang, along with other Beijing East Village artists, shared the same passion for experimenting with body art and the same courage to face trouble that may arise from the resulting absurdity. Ma remarks that flesh and spirit are themselves outstanding artworks, unparalleled mediums that can communicate with the audience straightforwardly and provoke a kind of revelation.[16]

12 Square Meters and *65 Kilograms* offer evidence of changes in the artist's mind in response to changes emerging in the body. The critical analyses of the bodily presence in Zhang's performance all agree that the enactment of *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* allowed him to test his mental and physical capacity for endurance. Independent curator Yu

[16] Lu Hong, and Sun Zhenhua, *China Performance Art* (Shijiazhuang, China: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House Co.,Ltd., 2006), 87.

Yeon Kim elaborates that *12 Square Meters* entails a return to the primitive sense of living by presenting "the interaction of vulnerable skin against aggressive contaminants" and *65 Kilograms* externalizes Zhang's innermost fear and renders it as a work of art. Such excruciating and even debasing experiences put Zhang Huan's physical and mental limits to test. By means of self-torture, Zhang was able to carry out an "alchemical transformation" of the body's presence in becoming part of the matrix of life.[17] In other words, he was capable of embracing his body and feeling the directness of using his body to create art. Approaching Zhang's work through the theme of corporeality, critics take two different paths to perceive and interpret the performances – oriented to the social and to the spiritual.

Some critics consider the body under stress and pain as a central point where the personal and the social meet and collapse. It is also where the public and private spheres merge. This view is supported by Zhang Huan himself who stated that "this frequent body contact made me realize the very fact that the body is the only direct way through which I come to know society and society comes to know me."[18] He then elaborated that his mind is able to determine the state and meaning of his body that serves as an evidence of identification between himself and the audience.[19] Zhang Huan deliberately put himself under radical conditions posing threat to his body, with an stated intention to understand his mind and body's interrelations through the experimental process of engaging the body.[20]

In his essay "The Naked Body Politic in Postsocialist China and the Chinese Diaspora," Chinese-born American researcher Sheldon Lu presents an overview of nudity in Chinese art that distinguishes it from its Western counterpart: nudity was first met with absolute intolerance, as a result of philosophical grounding since ancient China and of

[17] Kim, "Intensified Corporeality."
[18] Chiu, "Altered Art: Zhang Huan."
[19] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."
[20] Ibid.

political implication, and then with growing acceptance in the post-Mao era. The conclusion that Lu draws is in line with those of art critics focusing on the external environment. He explicitly agrees with Wu Hung and believes that Zhang Huan's naked self-abusive performances such as *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* render pain on both personal and social levels, creating a third-world national allegory and demonstrating his personal existential state.[21] By discussing the role of body and nudity in the historical context of modern Chinese art, Lu sees Zhang Huan's performances as expressions of both personal state and collective trauma.

New York-based art critic Eleanor Heartney chooses a philosophical point of view. Despite a different perspective, her conclusion is similar that of Lu's: Zhang Huan's endurance performances can be read in both existential and political terms. Introducing the notion of "corporeal/body consciousness" to the conversation around body art, Heartney suggests that Zhang Huan's solitary acts extend a corrective to the Western tendencies of separating mind and body into two realms. Flowing from Zhang's mind to his skin, body consciousness serves as the point of contact between the inner and outer worlds whose boundary is disintegrated during the experience of pain.[22] Most importantly, Heartney recognizes that Zhang's artistic, endurance practices stem from Buddhism and Asian spiritual practices, notably "the release of ego and the union of self with the larger forces of nature." To be specific, Zhang Huan often performed without clothes and sometimes asked others to be naked as well so that they were deprived of their temporal possessions. With the manifestation of their natural order without cultural shells, the artist and the audience were able to connect via body consciousness and pursue enlightenment, a state where mind and

[21] Sheldon H. Lu, "The Naked Body Politic in Postsocialist China and the Chinese Diaspora," In *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 71–92 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007) http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/j.ctt6wqqzg.9.
[22] Heartney, "Zhang Huan: Becoming the Body," 1.

spirit are no longer dichotomous but an integral entity.[23] This belief is the core of the Buddhist discourse. Though Heartney acknowledges the religious reference, she also links the element of endurance to the feminist movement's revalorization in the Western world and relates Zhang's self-abusive performances to those by Western artists like Marina Abramović and Chris Burden. In her writing referring to both Buddhism and social movements, Heartney does not pick a side in the political-religious division. She argues that Zhang's self-abusive actions not only dismantle boundaries between the inner spirit and the outside world of an individual but also undermine the mental and physical restrictions placed by the Chinese government.[24]

The Western and Eastern conceptions of mind and body are further examined by art historian Thomas Berghuis in philosophical terms. Western traditions conceive the body as a container of mind, an analogy that reflects a binary conception of the mind and body.[25] Berghuis proposes that the model of the "lived body" first raised by American scholar Drew Leder better corresponds with the Chinese non-binary concept of human body (*shen ti*), similar to the term "body consciousness" put forward by Eleanor Heartney. Sourced from Neo-Confucianism, a combination of Taoist, Chinese Buddhist, and traditional Confucian ideologies, the "lived body" underlies Chinese ritual practices and gives prominence to the entire person, mind and body combined. The concept of "lived body" needs to be understood in relation to the social, cultural, and physical surroundings rather than on its own because the ritual actions are often performed in communities.[26] Following an introduction of the theoretical foundations, Berghuis argues that such interconnection of body, mind, and

[23] Ibid., 3.
[24] Ibid., 1.
[25] Thomas Berghuis, "Close Encounters – Performance Art Practices in China," In *Sharjah International Biennial 6*, Peter Lewis and Hoor Al-Qasimi (United Arab Emirates: Sharjah International Biennial, 2003), 35.
[26] Ibid., 37.

surroundings posed a challenge to Beijing East Village artists, who extracted mind from the body and withdrew body from the construct of self during their performances.[27] According to Berghuis, Zhang separated the body from the mind so that he could posit the body in the public surroundings and as a substance independent of his mind. The body on its own can be seen as a disturbance of the idea of "lived body" and of the order, rule, and law that incorporate this idea, implying the artist's mild resistance against the existing system.[28]

Concerning the spiritual sphere, Xiao Xiaolan's interpretation resonates with that of Berghuis' to some degree, stating that Zhang attempted to detach his mind from the body and to transform his body into "a voided independent entity" during the performance.[29] However, the readings of Berghuis and Xiao suggest that the artist deliberately worked against the mind-body coordination for different purposes. Xiao cites Zhang Huan, who recalled,

> I tried my best to let my thoughts exit my body, and forget the plight of one's body. Once they return back to the body you feel more intensely towards physical existence. You will be more aware of the cruel reality, it's extremely discomforting. This is not purely physical pain, but also mentally discomforting. This lingering back and forth between mental and physical planes is the thing I want to experience.

Without a clear outline for his performances in advance, Zhang abandoned deliberately planned elements and instead valued the uncertainty that might arise during the self-exploratory events. The disquieting endeavor of separating mind from the body and enduring bodily pain inspired some novel experiences within the artist. Holding a different viewpoint from that of Berghuis, Xiao saw these spontaneous "out-of-body" or "out-of-consciousness" trials as a means of seeking spiritual powers and strengthening religious beliefs, which become more perceptible in many of Zhang's subsequent artworks of other mediums. Similarly, Gao Minglu shows appreciation for

[27] Ibid., 36.
[28] Ibid., 36.
[29] Xiao, "Beijing • New York • Shanghai: Continuation of Zhang Huan."

Zhang's tenacity during the solitary quest for the spiritual realm and tests for mortality. In Gao's opinion, Zhang probably reached the state of transcending human flesh through the near-death experiences, and "experienced time slowed to the point of being frozen."[30] Though the author briefly mentions the Buddhist concepts of nirvana and ascension, he does not assert a connection between Zhang's performances and these particular concepts. Instead, he avoids discussing their validity and loosely locates Zhang's metaphysical experience in a world for immortal beings. Though limited in specificity, Xiao's and Gao's general remarks on the release of spiritual force in Zhang's performances suggest a direction for my later analysis of how specific Buddhist principles are manifested *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*.

[30] Gao Minglu, "Private Experience and Public Happenings, - the Performance Art of Zhang Huan." in *Zhanghuan: Dawn of Time* (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2010).

A False Comparison

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which China avoided any contact with the outside world and was forced to renounce its own culture, China re-established its economic and intellectual communication with the rest of the world in the 1980s. Many Western ideas and works of art and literature were then "imported" to China.[31] The '85 New Wave Art Movement, also known as the China avant-garde movement, was a creative response to the clash between two cultures, an emotional explosion after a long period of suppression. It brought about catharsis through the vehicle of art, voicing frustration against the past and the authoritarian regime. As an outcome, most artworks produced in the 1980s were violent, outrageous, and sometimes satirical for the sake of being rebellious. The spirit of rebellion was strikingly conveyed by the Xiamen Dada group, when they burned and destroyed their exhibition in front of the Xiamen People's Art Museum before an audience of about two hundred in 1986 (fig. 7). Rather than a simple act of violence, the destruction of their own paintings was planned as a closing of the exhibition that reconsolidated the group's objective. Putting an end to their own creations ruthlessly was meant to show that the "true meaning" of the artworks was in the artists' hands, and ought not be decided by the artistic authority in China under strict censorship, as explained by the leader of the Xiamen Dada Huang Yongping.[32] Two years later, Huang Yongping devised a hypothetical proposal to tow away the National Art Gallery in Beijing with ropes. These staged or proposed public events

[31] Gao Minglu, "The 1985 New Wave Art Movement," Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993. https://monoskop.org/images/5/5f/Minglu_Gao_1986_1993_The_1985_New_Art_Movement.pdf.

[32] Wu Jianru, and Pan Kwanyi, "From Destruction to Co-Construction: Three Case Studies of Artistic Practice and the Museum," trans. Frank Qian. LEAP 18 (March 2013). http://www.leapleapleap.com/2013/03/from-destruction-to-co-construction-three-case-studies-of-artistic-practice-and-the-museum/.

using distinguished state-run art institutions as the backdrop or subject were often understood as transgressive statements against the official museum system overseen by the government.

Performance art came into prominence in the West as part of postmodernism in the 1960s. Its arrival in China in the 1980s coincided with the beginning of the '85 New Wave Art Movement. Performance art in the 80s had not consolidated its place in the Chinese contemporary art scene and established its distinctive role. It was immediately adopted as a tool to fuel the art movement and as an outlet to release the repressed emotions of a group of avant-garde artists as illustrated above.[33] Without official documentation, Chinese performance art seemed to begin emerging in 1986, the year when Xiamen Dada burned their own artworks to provoke further participation in "the chaos of the national avant-garde." [34] Some other small-scale performance works were produced between 1986 and 1989 but lacked media exposure to make a potent social impact, until the opening day of the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition. During that day, multiple performances took place in the National Art Gallery: Wu Shanzhuan sold shrimps in the gallery; Wang Rende scattered condoms in front of all the displayed artworks; Zhang Nian sat on a straw bed covered with two dozen of eggs to imitate the course of hatching eggs; Li Shan washed his feet in a basin with a printed image of President Ronald Regan. These performances were read as confrontational to the museum and political system, even though their rhetoric and meanings were still underdeveloped and unsophisticated in this initial stage of performance art. [35]

Despite the rising popularity of new mediums such as performance art and installation, painting was still the major mode of expression for the participants of the '85

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[33] Lu and Sun. *China Performance Art*, 2.
[34] Fei Dawei, House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2005), 9
[35] 王端廷. "替罪的肉身—中国行为艺术的意义." In *Complementary Modernisms in China and the United States*, edited by 张謇, 布鲁斯·罗伯逊, Zhang Jian, and Robertson Bruce, 599–609. Art as Life/Art as Idea. Punctum Books, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16zk03m.49.

New Wave Movement, where the aggression directed outward was overt in the artistic language. In Gu Wenda's *Mythos of Lost Dynasties—Modern Meaning of Totem and Taboo* (fig. 8), he painted circles and crosses in violent shades of red over big calligraphic Chinese characters that recall the big-character posters used as political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. These posters with handwritten characters had been powerful weapons to denounce enemies of the revolution and instigate public condemnation of disobedient behaviors. The straightforward political reference combined with the gestural strokes of negation and blocks of intense red color vented the artist's spleen unabashedly. Many artists with passion for experimental art, such as Gu Wenda, were invited to display their radical artworks at the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. Aside from their continuing efforts to create artworks in traditional media, they occasionally planned public happenings as tools to expand the influence of the '85 New Wave Art Movement. These happenings created visual shocks and thus caused a disturbance in society, serving as publicity stunts to increase interest in the paintings, which were the primary works of the exhibition. Thanks to this unprecedented form of art, most notably when the artist Xiao Lu shot her own work at the National Art Gallery in Beijing as part of a performance, the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was investigated and shut down by the government due to its resemblance to dramatic activism and pro-democracy political protest.

Due to their proximity in time and rough resemblance in artistic features, the context and criteria for the '85 New Wave art are often applied to the discussion of performance art created in the last two decades of the 20th century. As the '85 New Wave Movement ended in 1989 and was followed by the Tiananmen Square tragedy, the artists who participated in the movement moved on to develop their work individually rather than to participate in a shared initiative. Despite the seminal importance of the movement and the exhibition as well as their

lasting influence on later generations of artists, we should be skeptical of reducing a dynamic and transformative period to a particular moment.

Explicitly or implicitly, many critics analyze Zhang Huan's early performances within the framework of the '85 New Wave Art Movement. For example, Octavia Zaya discusses Zhang Huan's performances produced in Beijing East Village as instances of the '85 New Wave Art Movement based on the idea that both drew inspiration from novel Western concepts and Chinese traditions, "as much from Dadaist conceptualism as from Chan Buddhism."[36] In another analysis of Zhang Huan's performances, Yu Yeon Kim references the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* Exhibition and Xiao Lu's act of firing two shots at her installation. Kim also provides as context several examples of artist collectives participating in the '85 New Wave Movement such as the 21st Century Group, which performed naked in freezing weather on the Great Wall, and M Art Group whose violent performances involved hanging and beating its members. By associating Beijing East Village with these groups, Kim comes to the conclusion that performance art in China as "an instrument of social and political criticism as well as an expression of the human condition" provides a context for Zhang Huan's performances.[37] However, performances produced in the 1990s, including those by Beijing East Village, entered a more mature phase that involved more contemplative expressions and coherent themes.[38]

The artistic community of Beijing in which Zhang Huan created his works is also discussed in explicitly political terms by art critic Thom Collins. In the catalog for a group exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Collins describes the Beijing East Village group as a group of like-minded artists "chafing at the expressive limitations imposed

[36] Zaya, "Zhang Huan: A Deeper Panic."
[37] Kim Yu Yeon, "Intensified Corporeality," In *Zhang Huan* (Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2003). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1135.
[38] 王端廷, "替罪的肉身—中国行为艺术的意义," p. 601.

upon him by an authoritarian government and rigid society." He also listed the principal topics that Zhang addressed in his performances, including "the power of unified action to challenge oppressive political regimes; the status and plight of the expatriate in the new global culture; the persistence of structures of faith in communities undermined by violent conflict; and the place of censorship in contemporary democracy."[39] More appropriate for the artworks and performances created in the '85 New Wave Art Movement, such political interpretations seem to be premised on the assumption that performance art in the 1990s China was of the same nature.

Though some critics recognize that Zhang Huan is not as politically minded as the '85 New Wave Art Movement artists, only a number of them have drawn a clear distinction between performance art in the 1990s and that in the 1980s, characterizing the latter as public and emotional and the former as individual and tentative. For example, Chinese contemporary art critics Hong Lu and Zhenhua Sun deem it questionable to evaluate performance art in the nineties with the cultural background, political thinking, social function, and artistic vocabulary of the '85 New Wave performance art.[40] Responding to the call for a proper framework, Gao Minglu, the director of the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition, argues that the artists in the nineties shrugged off the influence of the performance art of the eighties. As the leading curator and critic of the '85 New Wave Movement, Gao drew a parallel between performance artists in the eighties and attention seekers who meticulously designed political happenings with a provocative tone to create conflicts on purpose.[41] On the other hand, he labels Zhang's individual performances such as *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* as "private events" exploring and expressing his own psychology,

[39] Thom Collins, "Zhang Huan," In *Witness* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1132.
[40] Ibid., 15.
[41] Gao, "Private Experience and Public Happenings."

physiology, and emotional experience through body language.[42] Without labelling them as necessarily "good" versus "bad", Gao animates the points of contrast – between stirring up external disturbances and presenting internal feelings; between performing in an public and in an isolated space; between premeditated event and the projection of spontaneity in performance; between the artist's role as a preacher and as a member of the general population. Such distinctions are also legible in the essay of Melissa Chiu, the director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, and a curator focusing on Chinese contemporary art in the diaspora. She distinguishes Zhang Huan from the Chinese avant-garde artists in the eighties who reacted against the "state-initiated programs of the Cultural Revolution" and considers his individual expressions as a counterbalance to Political Pop and Cynical Realism, the two most celebrated styles of art emerging from the '85 New Wave Art Movement.[43]

In an artist's statement, Zhang Huan expresses disappointment that "when western media report on contemporary Chinese culture, they always relate it to China's politics and its societal problems, or how the West has influenced China and how China has learned from the West. They do not talk about art as art." He attributed such readings of his works to the status of contemporary Chinese art in the larger world.[44] Many developments of contemporary art in China react to the trends in the West, and critics often neglect the change in values and meanings once concepts are adopted to a new culture. In reality, the international contemporary art world remains demarcated in terms of cultural borders. The artworks by Chinese artists enjoying the most fame and commercial success worldwide often manifest "Chineseness" or are in line with western ideologies. Xiao Xiaolan proposed that

[42] Ibid., 2.
[43] Melissa Chiu, "Altered Art: Zhang Huan," in *Zhang Huan: Altered States* (Milan, Italy:, 2007). http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1143.
[44] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."

critics need to "distance ourselves from the traditional critiquing model and use today's unadulterated art perspective to re-examine [Zhang's] cases of engagement with contemporary art in the 1990s" to avoid marginalizing Chinese contemporary art by its Chineseness,[45] This perspective requires a comprehensive knowledge of the artist's biography, his artistic activities in Beijing East Village, as well as the background of Chinese culture. The time is ripe to delve into the performance pieces themselves to achieve an understanding beyond the general characterization of Chinese performance artworks as resistance against the repressive regime.

[45] Xiao, "Beijing • New York • Shanghai: Continuation of Zhang Huan."

In the light of Chan Buddhism

While the interpretations of Zhang Huan's early performances as political agitation result from a false comparison, those regarding his performances as spiritual exercises draw from the artist's biography. Before discussing the Buddhist references underlying *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*, one should be informed of Zhang Huan's life-long engagement with Buddhism. Raised by his grandparents under impoverished living conditions, he grew up in a rural environment where folk practices derived from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were incorporated in most aspects of daily life.[46] Since his childhood in the countryside of Henan Province, he has participated in activities with his family such as visiting temples, lighting incense, and praying. Zhang pursued a more systematic practice of Chan for eight years during his stay in New York and officially converted to Tibetan Buddhism as a lay devotee (non-monastic follower) when he returned to China in 2006.[47]

The development of Zhang Huan's oeuvre coincides with that of his spiritual values. Before his rediscovery of Buddhist conviction, Zhang often experimented with his body and mind, the concepts and formats of performance art, as well as the relationship between the environment and self. During that period of his artistic career, Buddhist reference exists in a more implicit and subtler form as a result of the Buddhist upbringing that had taken deep root in his life. Following the declaration of faith, Zhang shifted to directly address the image of Buddha with the studio-based mediums of paintings and sculptures as well as readymade materials such as broken Buddha statues collected from Tibet.

Certain instances of performance art share external and formal features with folk and ritualistic practices, and it is common for critics to read such performance artworks in terms

[46] Holmes, "Beyond Buddha, Zhang Huan in Conversation with Pernilla Holmes."
[47] Winston Kyan, "The Buddhist Resistance of Zhang Huan's Pagoda," *Artjournal Open* (October 16, 2018). https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=10012.

of religion. For example, critics often identify the recurring Christian symbols and rituals such as self-flagellation when analyzing Marina Abramovic's performances. In Kemang Wa Lehulere's multi-part installations *I Cut My Skin to Liberate the Splinter* (2017), performers activated the installations by using them as music instruments. The movements and sounds produced during the performance are often seen as associated with African tribal wisdom and religious rites. Similarly, scholars have drawn out Zhang Huan's performances in terms of cultural and religious implications.

12 Square Meters echoes the training of seated meditation in Chan Buddhism. Practitioners of Chan Buddhism usually used this method to clear the mind from distractions from the external world and to enter a state free of anxiety. According to a non-canonical ancient Buddhist text, "The Introduction to the Jataka," the Shakyamuni Buddha underwent six years of asceticism, including very minimal food intake and forceful breath and mind control. Then, he walked into the Lilajan river to take a bath and sat under the Bodhi tree for seven weeks without moving. He eventually achieved enlightenment. The Buddha vows, "Let my skin, and sinews, and bones become dry, and welcome! And let all the flesh and blood in my body dry up! But never from this seat will I stir, until I have attained the supreme and absolute wisdom!"

In *65 Kilograms,* the body hanging in the air, the smell of burnt blood, and white bed sheets provided the artist and the audience with a close encounter with death. The heat of the hot pan rising from below simulates the fire burning in the eight hot hells beneath the earth, where beings who have done many bad deeds during their lifetime will be reborn and receive punishment. Such experimentation with death allowed Zhang to become conscious and appreciative of being alive, which is also a Buddhist practice to get practitioners prepared for the next life in case of the unexpected arrival of death.

These one-to-one correspondences tracing the visual elements to specific Buddhist provenance reflect how Zhang Huan might have drawn from Buddhist practices in creating these two performances. Through formal imitation of the Buddhist practices, with the addition of dramatic effects, he was able to detect new changes surfacing in his mind and body. Zhang's unprecedented thoughts on existence, released only under external pressure, challenged what he previously believed to be true. Delving into the performances' Chan Buddhist underpinnings provides insight into the interaction of the artist with the audience on a mind level, as well as the mind-body connection within the subject. At stake in Zhang's reference to Buddhist practices is his intention to test existing beliefs, seek his own truth, and induce the audience to engage in their own search for "truth."

Means of Communication in Chan Buddhism

Performance art is translated as "behavioral art" in Chinese, and behavior usually connotes the acts that one conducts towards others. The reason for this translation can be traced to Chan Buddhism, which has had a profound impact on Chinese society for centuries. As one of the major schools of Chinese Buddhism, the Chan sect evolved out of multiple strains of lineage and became a coherent system during Tang and Song Dynasty (618-1279 CE). It gradually spread to the rest of East Asia, namely to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. In comparison with the other schools derived from Indian Buddhist texts, Chan or Zen Buddhism was founded on the Indian Buddhist practices while assimilating them to China's native cultural traditions.[48] Its commitment to practices as opposed to textual doctrines and its unique characteristics resulting from assimilating Chinese indigenous cultures make it a

[48] Peter D. Hershock, "The Early History of the Chan Tradition," In *Chan Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005). http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/j.ctvvn5zp.9.

special point of reference that sheds light on the exceptional aspects of Zhang Huan's performances.

Chan Buddhism advocates that truth and wisdom can be only conveyed and understood through mind-to-mind transmission, without the use of spoken and written words. By extension, it stresses spiritual encounters through means of conduct rather than the learning of sutras and commentaries written by scholars. As an unofficial record of the origin of Chan Buddhism, the mythical narrative of "Flower Sermon" from the *Dialogue of the Buddha and Mahapitaka Brahmaraja* demonstrates the ideal form of communication among the collective central to the Chan teachings. The story recounts that Buddha Shakyamuni gave a sermon to the assembly of disciples by holding up a flower. When the crowd was perplexed by the wordless sermon and pondered what the action implied, only Mahākāśyapa, who was one of principal disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni, broke into a smile. The Buddha then stated that he would entrust his true teaching, the Buddha mind or Dharma eye, to Mahākāśyapa.[49] This tenet that later became a pillar of Chan Buddhism admonishes practitioners not to overinterpret the scriptures word by word but to feel it with their hearts. The direct exchange on the level of mind is considered as the gateway to realize the nature of one's mind.

Having been absorbed into China's cultural soil, the Chan school is an exemplar of the "Three Teachings are One" that encompasses Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist principles. The Chinese Confucian principles impart that purely individual behaviors do not exist, and every behavior has a social impact.[50] Conducts vary as the relationship between the actor and the recipient vary, so any behavior should not be seen on its own. There exist five fundamental relationships critical to the Confucian philosophy: those between ruler and

[49] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: a history, India and China* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 9.
[50] Gao, "Private Experience and Public Happenings, - the Performance Art of Zhang Huan."

subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Influenced by Confucian teachings, Chan Buddhism situates enlightenment in relationship because practitioners can only attain Buddhahood by following teachers who have already experienced enlightenment.[51] In other words, enlightenment cannot be reached in purely individual circumstances. It has to be realized and passed down in contact with others.

Chan Buddhism insists on being able to demonstrate the meaning of awakening in even the most mundane circumstances.[52] Mahākāśyapa was praised for his ability to empathize deeply with the pain and joy of laypeople. He was so proficient in the mastery of Chan that he could express buddha-nature in every situation, including worldly ones. Different from traditional Buddhism of its Indian provenance that is more interested in metaphysics, Chinese Chan Buddhism secularizes the abstract concepts and places them in the context of the worldly realm.

The three core qualities of Chan belief – the focus on relationships, the mode of communicating spiritual messages via actions rather than words, and the engagement with the everyday – underlie Zhang Huan's endurance performances produced in Beijing East Village. Although Zhang himself was the sole performer and did not interact with the audience, his solo performances need to be analyzed in relation to others because of the Chan Buddhist connection. In the case of *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*, Zhang invited small groups of artist friends, art critics, journalists, photographers, and, occasionally, passing villagers to witness his performances. His choice of a tight, enclosed performance spaces eliminates the distance between the artist and the audience, inducing the audience to undergo unsettling

[51] Hershock, "The Early History of the Chan Tradition." 71.
[52] Ibid., 77.

emotional states with him (fig. 9). The artist comments on the immediate reactions arising in his body and the audience during the performance:

> "My body was covered with honey and fish juice, and before long, flies were all over my body, even my lips and eyes. It was uncomfortable. Some people walked in accidentally during the course of the performance. When they saw me, they were embarrassed and surprised. They wanted to leave but couldn't, because they had already begun to pee. They probably never would understand what they saw." (*12 Square Meters)*

> "I lay on the door panel and assistants secured the iron chains on the beam. The doctor started to take blood out of me. I felt more and more uncomfortable, as if the chains were sticking into my body. My fingers became numb and I almost passed out. An hour later, the assistants took me down. I wanted to bring the senses of smell and touch to the work. When an audience member entered my studio, he would immediately step into my work, because the floor was covered with a white sheet. I forced the audience to accept this reality--they could choose either to escape it or face it."[53] (*65 Kilograms*)

As remarked by Zhang Huan in the above quote, the audience stepped into his works once they entered the performance space. Instead of sitting in rows of seats designated for spectators, they were experiencing the work simultaneously with the artist. Due to the proximity with the artist, the audience was forced to withstand the flies as well as the odor from human waste and scorched blood (fig. 10). Though they were not the direct bearers of the discomfort, they could see, smell, and hear what the artist was confronting and then generate their own physical and psychological responses. Although these shared sensory experiences do not ensure a mind-to-mind transmission favored by Chan Buddhism between the artist and the audience, they created the conditions for the audience to explore mind and body through their own effort.

Such transmission was only present in Zhang Huan's solo performance artworks in Beijing East Village. The performances of *My America* (1999) and *Pilgrimage: Wind and Water in New York* (1998) that he created after moving to New York City called for the

[53] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."

participation of others by demanding the audience to throw rotten bread at him or follow him in pilgrimage-like movements. These interactions involved verbal instructions and physical contact and did not lay stress on purity of communication pointing from one mind to another.

The content of the transmission in Zhang Huan's performances is certainly not the truth leading to enlightenment because Zhang Huan intended to make art rather than become a sage or monk through these performances. What he attempted to convey was the attempt at self-discovery in the midst of trivial activities and environments, which is in accordance with the Chan thoughts.[54] Zhang Huan did not have a meticulous script for every step that he would take during the performance. Instead, he admitted that he had come across some unanticipated feelings during and after the performances, which should be considered as part of the performances. He not only set out to explore his own state of consciousness but also pushed the audience to gain novel experience on both mind and body levels.

Mind and Body Problem

Zhang acknowledged that "in the course of the hour, I tried to forget myself and separate my mind from my flesh, but I was pulled back to reality again and again. Only after the performance did I understand what I experienced."[55] This quote outlines Zhang Huan's struggle with the mind and body relationship under such extreme self-torturing circumstances. The premise of separating mind from flesh is that the two are originally integral. Chan Buddhism negates the duality between mind and body, and the training of not discriminating between pairs of opposites results in the realization of emptiness and thus awakening.[56] Using the metaphor of lamp and light, the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism

[54] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."
[55] Ibid.
[56] Chün-fang Yü, "The Meditation Tradition:" In *Chinese Buddhi*sm, 172–97. A Thematic History (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020). https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv105b9zz.11. 184.

Huineng defined mind and body as "the two that appear together and are mutually containing," asserting that the difference in their names does not entail a difference in essence. The broader Buddhist belief does not suggest a nondualism but an interrelationship and interdependence. More specifically, if one's mind is disquieted by something, the body will react with physical discomfort that would be more likely to induce difficulties.[57] This view of mind and body diverges from that in the Western sense. Western philosophy has adopted the dualist school of thought, assigning separable and distinct identity to mind and body. There exist many theories and formulations throughout the Western course of history: some scholars identified mind as the substance or property of the body, and others separated mind completely from the body as independent existence. Though frustrating, Zhang's conscious effort to detach mind from flesh reflects his questioning of the long-held belief embedded in Chinese cultural tradition, signifying his wandering spiritual status during that period of his life.

As stated in the *Diamond Sutra*, one of the most prominent sutras within the Chan tradition, suffering only arises when ignorant people try to judge and attach to something obsessively. In order to be relieved from such fixation on a particular thing, one can cultivate a nonjudgmental state of mind and eliminate the appeal of human passions by means of meditation. Far beyond the yoga position of sitting motionless for a long duration and discarding all thoughts, meditation is a gradual process and a lifestyle.[58] As one of the three key points of meditation, no-thought refers to allowing thoughts to flow naturally without dwelling on any particular thoughts.[59] During performances, Zhang felt agony when he intentionally tried to detach mind from his body and to concentrate on his bodily experience, as quoted earlier. The performances become meditative as soon as he "forgot the reality and

[57] Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 66.
[58] Ibid., 184.
[59] Ibid,. 187.

stop[ped] thinking", entering and adhering to the no-thought state.[60] The free-flowing mind naturally moved him to slowly walk into the pond, which caused series of ripples, and disappear into the water (fig. 11). After he saw the photographs of *12 Square Meters* taken by Rong Rong, a photographer who also lived in Beijing East Village and was invited to record performances, Zhang "felt it conveys a spirit of Chan Buddhism that transcends his original plan."[61] Walking into the pond until water flowed over his head and reemerging from the surface signify *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth that the living creatures who haven't reached the highest realization had to experience endlessly.

Zhang Huan's acts of sitting in an outhouse and being suspended on the beam are inspired by daily activities of going to the toilet and sleeping on the bed, respectively.[6263] As claimed by Master Huineng, meditation should not be restricted to the outward form. The correct meditation is simply to have a direct mind in daily activities, and a direct mind is the attitude of nonduality towards people and events.[64] Two aspects of *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* unique to his solo performances produced in Beijing East Village, namely the incorporation of masochist and abject elements, infuse his performances not only with striking visual impacts but also Chan Buddhist concepts related to mind and body, which took precedent over the formal qualities and made the pieces artworks rather than religious practices.

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[60] Holmes, "Beyond Buddha, Zhang Huan in Conversation with Pernilla Holmes."
[61] Wu, *Rong Rong's East Village*, 72.
[62] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."
63 British artist duo Gilbert and George, who held an exhibition in Beijing and visited the Beijing East Village in 1993, envisioned art and life as one and aimed at breaking down the boundary in between them by creating "living sculptures". For the performance Singing Sculptures (1970), they painted themselves bronze and dressed in suits to sing and dance to a recording of "Underneath the Arches," sometimes for 8 hours. Their exhibition in Beijing and visits to the studios of Beijing East Village artists prompted Ma Liuming to conduct an extemporaneous performance and pointed other young artists in a clearer artistic direction surrounding "living sculptures." But Zhang Huan has never specifically indicated that their visits to Dashanzhuang were influential in his works.
[64] Yü, "The Meditation Tradition:", 185.

Not commonly known, some anecdotes about how Chan Buddhist masters taught their disciples and learned from their previous teachers included masochist plots. In one of the stories about Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of Chan Buddhism who brought the Chan lineage to China, Bodhidharma demanded the Second Patriarch Huike to wait in the snow for three days and nights in order to test his sincerity and determination of learning Chan. The Second Patriarch stood outside of Bodhidharma's cave until the snow covered his waist, and eventually he cut off his left arm to demonstrate his resolution.[65] When asked why he was so desperate in learning Chan, Huike begged Bodhidharma to pacify his turbulent mind. He took away many lives during his time as a general and now suffered from guilt. His right arm that used to wield swords and make commands was a symbol of ego of him, and he forwent it in search for an untroubled mind. Although Zhang Huan was not bothered by guilt, his sense of financial precariousness during his time in Beijing produced a troubled mind. He struggled to make a living – he was often kicked out of his apartment since he could not afford the rent and was once scammed of 2000 Yuan by an exhibition director.[66] His mind and body also faced great challenges during the performances. Anxiety comes from the perversion of the social customs. The unhygienic public lavatory, as a place for human excretion, ought to be concealed from the public sight. Similarly, bringing up the topic of death in conversations was a taboo in Chinese societies, and *65 Kilograms* forced the artist and the audience to confront death that they were unfamiliar with.

Inflicting self-harm and enduring harsh environments, represented by Huike's act of severing his own arm and standing in extreme coldness, sometimes induces sudden awareness. After bearing such hardship, Huike eventually had his mind pacified without any spoken or written instructions from Bodhidharma. Many koans, which are dialogues between

[65] Yü, "The Meditation Tradition:", 176.
[66] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."

Chan teachers and students about understanding of Chan, included less violent gestures as part of Chan exercise. Chan masters would respond the students with a slap, a kick, or a blow rather than verbal explanations when being asked about the meaning of Chan. These relatively minor acts of physical aggression are also believed to be conducive in the process of realizing practitioners' true Buddha-nature.

Having a body and human desire is suffering, and only when the distinction between self and other, mind and body, good and bad are dissolved, is one relieved from suffering.[67] In *65 Kilograms*, Zhang Huan submitted himself to the tortures of bleeding and being tethered in a suffocating and ominous atmosphere. For the performance of *12 Square Meters*, he attracted flies to his body, intentionally creating an excruciating environment within the daily setting. Such life-threatening and high-pressure situations were ideal for exploring the mind-body relationship as well as the flow of thoughts in response to the unknown and fear since one's deepest potentials can be stimulated by one's instinct to survive.

Another question may arise: why do performances reflecting Chan Buddhist thoughts incorporate abject materials like blood, human waste, and insects? Traditionally, when discharged from one's body, blood and waste can cause a feeling of revulsion. Zhang Huan has never spoken of the significance of these materials in his performances of *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*, but it is important to note their meanings associated with Chan Buddhism. Blood is believed to have apotropaic quality in many ancient Chinese rituals, so ritual instruments spilled with blood and talismans written with blood are imbued with magic power and sanctified. Blood scriptures are East Asian Buddhist artifacts conveying writers' sincere self-sacrifice and the messages' sanctity, not only because of the content but also the

[67] Yü, "The Meditation Tradition:", 176.

material presence of blood and the mode of production of this type of scriptures. [68] Drawing blood from the writers' body and using it in place of ink to copy Buddhist scriptures are part of Chinese Buddhist ascetic exercise. These scriptures are usually in great length and require a large amount of blood, and thus the writers need to overcome the fear of slicing open their body parts varying from fingertips, underside of the tongue, to chest.[69] The act of writing blood scriptures is more closely aligned with a process rather than simply transcribing the text. It is a series of moves involving extracting blood and writing down the text. (Before Zhang Huan carried out the official performance of *65 Kilograms*, he originally planned to let his blood drip from his wound directly onto the hot pan without any outside assistance.[70]) The act of extracting blood and collecting it in a container can be regarded as having the purifying function of driving away evil spirits and as demonstrating his sincerity, as suggested by the ritual of preparing blood scriptures. Heat was applied both to diffuse the smell of blood for theatrical effect as well as to prevent blood from congealing, which was a problem repeatedly reflected by monks in the past.[71]

Zhang Huan's choice of performing in a public outhouse positioned human waste in the artist and the audience's sights, forcing them to tolerate the matter often repressed and unwelcomed. One essential procedure in the path of becoming Buddha is recognizing and accepting one's own shame, which was the first instruction that disciple Mahakasyapa received from the Buddha as well as the first of the four practices in the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* attributed to Bodhidharma.[72] This practice is called requiting injury. By realizing all wrongdoings and bad karma collected from the past cycles of life,

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[68] Jimmy Yu, "Blood Writing as Extraordinary Artifact and Agent for Socioreligious Change." Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 7, no. 1 (June 17, 2020): 3. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0497-1.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."
[71] Yu, "Blood Writing as Extraordinary Artifact and Agent for Socioreligious Change."
[72] Hershock, "The Early History of the Chan Tradition," 76.

practitioners would cultivate a sense of shame and take it as an opportunity to seek recompense in practicing Chan Buddhism.[73] Human waste is often regarded with shame and embarrassment as a result of an increasingly sharp demarcation between the interior body and exterior world.[74] Since not all life-sustaining substances are absorbed into human body, the superfluous and toxic ones need to be excreted out of the body to regulate one's internal balance. The process of excretion in the literal sense are often applied figuratively in literatures to validate the expulsion of unwanted people and behaviors. For example, in writings of British colonies, authors such as Samuel Purchas analogized criminalized poor, felons, political prisoners, and plague victims to social excrements eligible to be expelled from the national body to the margins.[75] Such a corporeal metaphor can be extended to describe one's ill will, which needs to be removed from body and mind before achieving enlightenment in Chan Buddhism. Shockingly, even in the writings of Chan Buddhism, the Buddha was once compared to the most impure in Master Linji's formal talks. He not only referred to the Buddha as "the True Man of no rank" but also likened the Buddha to a shit stick, which was used as toilet paper in ancient China. Daoist master Zhuangzi also drew a parallel between the ultimate truth with such as ants, grass, and even human excrement.[76] Although these talks might seem profane and disrespectful, their intention was to deliver the message that every living creature alike is endowed with Buddha nature as well as to encourage students to abandon duality and rank. In *12 Square Meters*, being surrounded by human waste that symbolizes vicious matters in body and mind as well as transgresses the boundary between the interior and exterior spheres gave rise to a sense of shame essential to

[73] Yü, "The Meditation Tradition:", 177.
[74] Jan Purnis, "Digestive Tracts: Early Modern Discourses of Digestion." Graduate Department of English, University of Toronto, n.d. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/33822/1/Purnis_Jan_K_201011_PhD_thesis.pdf, 164.
[75] Ibid, 173.
[76] Yü, "The Meditation Tradition:", 189.

the introspective training of Chan Buddhism. Similarly, flies have a metaphorical meaning of annoyance and secular troubles. Towards the end of *12 Square Meters,* Zhang Huan walked into the river, and flies fell from his body and drowned in the water, which signifies a purification from the worldly entanglement and rebirth.

Conclusion

In *12 Square Meters*, a very lean, naked young man sits in a run-down building and stares into the distance. Under the scorching sunlight, his body is covered in a viscous liquid—a mixture of honey, fish oil, and sweat. Swarms of flies land on his skin to feast. The austere expression, the contours of his muscles and bones, the sheen of his skin, as well as the dark and filthy space all add a layer of mysteriousness to the picture. *65 Kilograms* further develops the element of endurance in Zhang Huan's early performance. He was chained to the beam of a room where white hospital sheets spread all over the floor. Small drops of blood fell from his body onto an electric hot pan, and the heat spread its smell into the air. The strong visual and sensory impact pulls the audience and the artist out of their comfort zone and into an unknown realm of private experience. These two performances that Zhang Huan created during his stay in Beijing East Village in the early 1990s have been read in terms of a social critique against rapid urbanization in Post-Cultural Revolution China and a personal resistance against the Chinese authoritarian regime. The unsanitary condition of the outhouse and the village where Zhang Huan's performances were located often quickly became the focal point of these interpretations. On the other hand, other critics argue that Zhang Huan's performances manifest a concept derived from traditional Chinese ritualist practices called "body consciousness," which is an idea indicating the unity of mind and body.

The one group of critics usually mention the '85 New Wave Art Movement as the background for Zhang Huan's performances produced in Beijing East Village in their essays, directly and indirectly. Yet, performance art imported to China in the 1980s already underwent transformation in the environment of Beijing East Village artistic community. It was no longer publicly exhibited with a large audience or employed as an outlet of collective resentment towards the authority and past injustice. The distinction between performance art

in the '85 New Wave Art Movement and performance art particular to Zhang Huan during his stay in Beijing East Village is that the former expresses aggression towards others, whereas the latter demonstrates an endurance of aggression towards himself. The choice of performing at locations in a rural village such as the artist's own apartment and an isolated outhouse where little attention could be drawn, compared to galleries and streets in the city with big crowds, revealed that Zhang Huan prized experimentation with physical and mental elasticity in response to various materials and surroundings rather than use of performance art to win notoriety. According to Zhang Huan, the idea of *65 Kilograms* took shape as he asked himself questions like "Why do I have to sleep on the bed every day? Why can't I sleep on the beam?"[77] This type of inspiration drawn from personal experiences differed from what the leader of the Xiamen Dada Group Huang Yongping stated about '85 New Wave Movement. He compared that artistic movement with a "peasant reform" designed as a revolt of the art circle in the political turmoil, whereas the Beijing East Village community was united by shared life experience and artistic goals.[78]

Originally a Western product, performance art was brought to China in the 1980s. Like a seed transplanted from one place to another, performance art has been endowed with new cultural meanings and implications after its adaptation into China's soil. Since performance art and practical commitment of religion have common grounds, and Chan Buddhism is one of the most prominent school of Chinese Buddhism underlying the thought system of people who grow up in China, Zhang Huan's performance artworks *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* can be examined with regard to Chan Buddhist reference.

[77] Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing."
[78] Huang Yongping, "Dada is Dead, Beware of the Fire! An Interview by Yaling Chen," 2003. https://www.toutfait.com/dada-is-dead-beware-of-the-firean-interview-with-huang-yong-ping/#N_1_top.

Chan Buddhism highlights mastery in improvisation in lieu of strict adherence to rules and doctrines, demanding proper and compassionate responses to different situations and human sufferings. Such assumption of many reactions in response to changing condition corresponds with the impromptu aspect of performance art. Among all the schools of Chinese Buddhism, only Chan Buddhism appeals to a special transmission outside the scriptures since it advocates that the truth and enlightenment do not rely on words and letters. Zhang Huan's quasi-individual performances blocked all communication through words, while elevating the exchange of understanding with the audience to a transcendent state. His attempt to conduct internal observation in an ascetic way and to position the spectators in the same performance space also brought them to enter a no-thought state where the mind flows freely without interruption and to experience the nondualist mind-body relationship under extremely physically challenging circumstances.

Besides suggesting death and decay, the presence of abject materials of blood, human waste, and insects also have religious significance that contributes to the Chan Buddhist reading. The act of collecting blood recalls the practice of writing Chan Buddhist blood scriptures, in which blood is used to sanctify the message conveyed and demonstrate the sincerity of self-sacrifice. As a misplacement of an internal substance in the exterior world, the human waste symbolizes one's past wrongdoings that need to be excreted before being able to achieve the state of Chan and cultivates a sense of shame essential for the practice of Chan. The concluding action of walking into the river with buzzing flies stuck to Zhang's skin not only removes physical contaminants from his body but also eliminates worldly attachment from his mind.

Highlighting the Chan Buddhist underpinnings in these two performance artworks reflects how Zhang Huan managed to recontextualize the spiritual elements in the revolutionary format of performance art. After misunderstandings are resolved and the Chan

Buddhist reference is introduced, Zhang Huan's two performances can be seen to demonstrate his desire to experiment with the nonduality of mind and body, and to induce in the audience similar effects. Do they really understand their body and mind, even in the setting of everyday life? The strong spiritual energy emerging in Zhang Huan is juxtaposed with the earthly elements incorporated in the performances, temporarily bringing him into a state free of memories, worldly sufferings including poverty, lack of opportunities, and death, as well as other distractions. Employing the perspective of Chan Buddhism is only one way of reading Zhang's early performances, but no matter from which perspectives, it is essential to discuss whether his performances were reacting to politics and determined by the cultural characteristics of the country in which they were performed to avoid a too Chinese or too Western interpretation of Zhang's performances. After the introduction of Chan Buddhist reference that brings a new angle to the discourse, it would be important to consider a more nuanced question: is Zhang Huan's experiment with private experience and retreat into the spiritual sphere a mere experimentation of his mental and physical capacity, an implicit form of critique, or an escape from the reality?

Images

Figure 1, Rong Rong, *East Village, Beijing No. 1 东村, 北京 No. 1*, 1994. Black and white photograph. 42 1/10 × 63 2/5 in © Chambers Fine Art, Beijing, New York.

Figure 2, Zhang Huan, *12 Square Meters*, 1994. Performance. © Rong Rong. Photo © The Walther Collection.

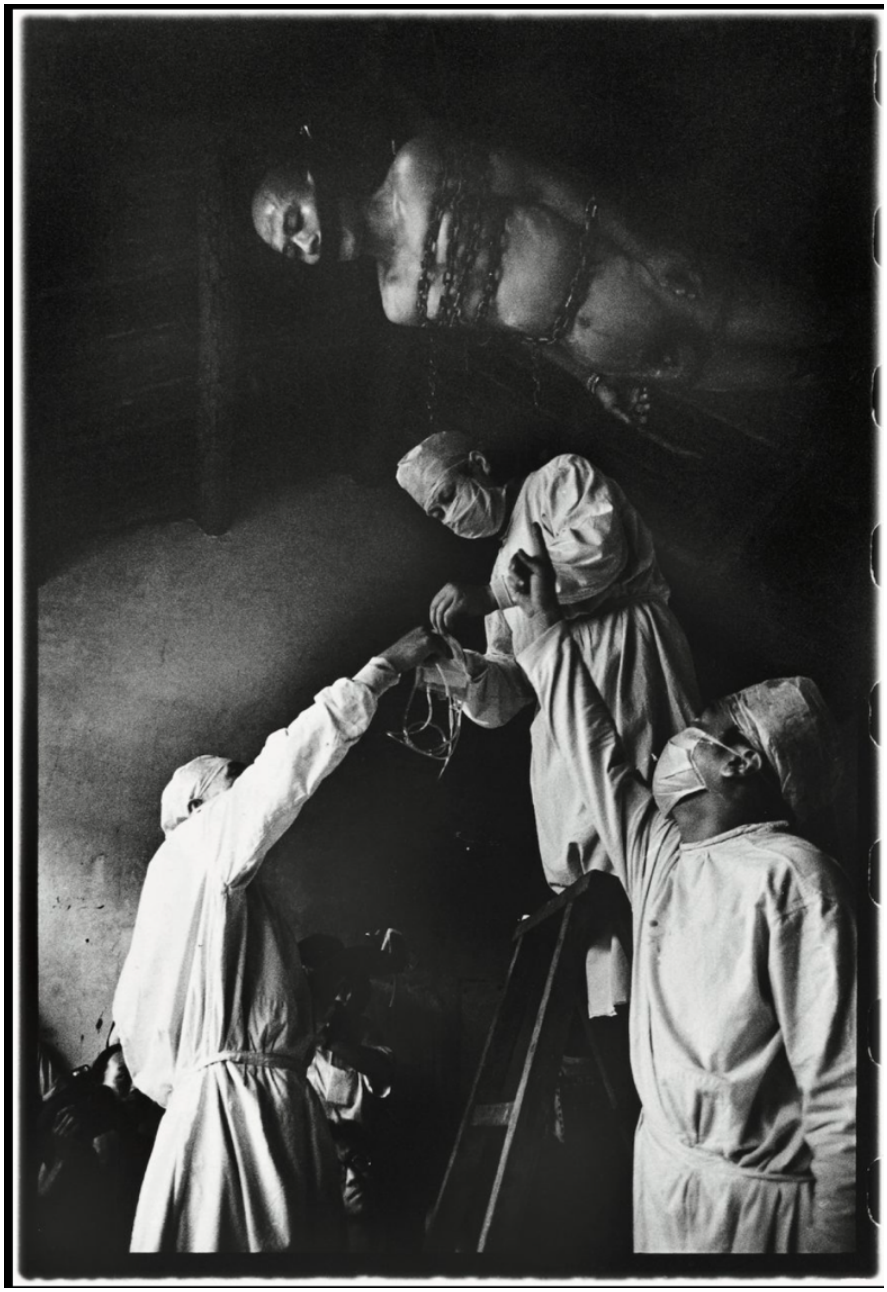

Figure 3, Zhang Huan, *65 Kilograms*, 1994. Performance. © Rong Rong. Video © The Walther Collection Courtesy the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Center, Beijing.

Figure 4, Zhang Huan, *Family Tree*, 2001. Nine chromogenic prints, Image (each): 21 in. × 16 1/2 in. (53.3 × 41.9 cm) © Zhang Huan. Photo: © Yale University Art Gallery.

Figure 5, Zhang Huan, *My New York*, 2002, documentation of a performance.

Figure 6, Zhang Huan, *Berlin Buddha,* 2007. Ash, Iron and Aluminum.

Figure 7, Xiamen Dada, *Dismantling - Destruction – Burning*, 1986.11.20-11.23, in front of the then Xiamen People's Art Museum.

Figure 8, Gu Wenda, *Mythos of Lost Dynasties—Modern Meaning of Totem and Taboo,* splash ink calligraphic painting (triptych), ink on rice paper, silk boarder scrolls, 275cm high x 540cm wide, Gu Wenda Studio, Zhejiang Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, China 1984-1986.

Figure 9, Zhang Huan, *65 Kilograms*, 1994. Performance.

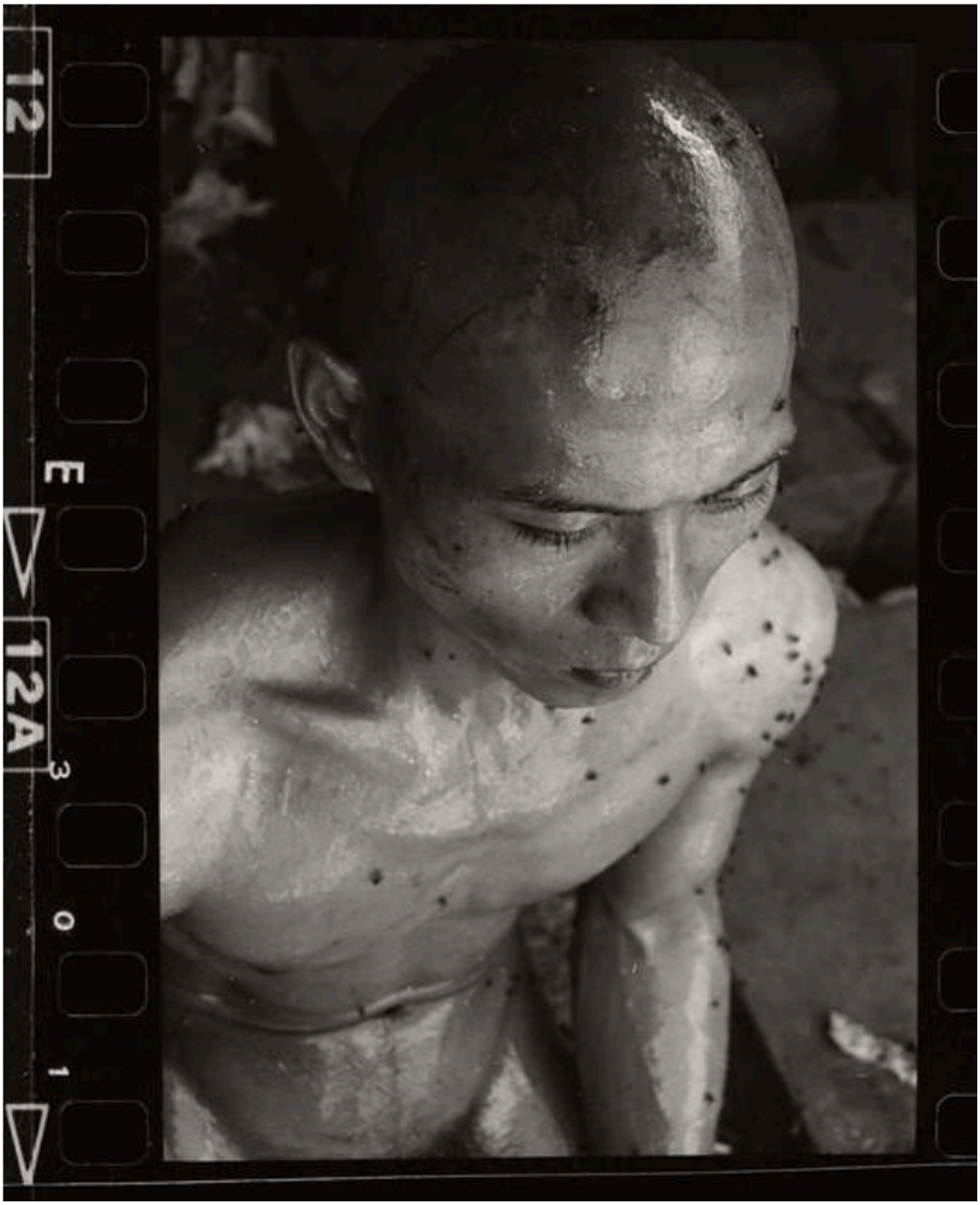

Figure 10, Zhang Huan, 12 Square Meters, 1994. Performance. © Rong Rong. Photo.

Figure 11, Zhang Huan, 12 Square Meters, 1994. Performance. © Rong Rong. Photo.

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