

Body, dress and authenticity -‘looking the part’ in the contemporary Chinese art world-

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In Chinese life, the understanding of the body has undergone profound changes since the beginning of the twentieth century, largely as a consequence of the Chinese path of modernization. Where once the body was hidden and sustained concern for it was medical or religious, in the process of modernization the body has been a site for the exercise of power, a vehicle for fantasy and a prop for the display of identifications. In all of this dress has played a supportive or enabling role. While I cannot begin to explore all of the issues this entails, I hope to suggest how some of these have been expressed in and around so-called recent avant-garde art, principally in the Chinese mainland but with some attention to Taiwan and Hong Kong as well.

My interest is motivated by two observations: On the one hand, the body, both clothed and unclothed, has been the principal subject matter of modern Chinese art, a point more remarkable for the relatively limited place of the body in earlier art. And on the other hand, the nature of the avant-garde Chinese art world, with its lack of formal institutions and public places, has also resulted in nomadic and fluid social circumstances. In these conditions artists and others often have to utilise personal presence and photography to establish their credibility, declare their preoccupations and record their acts.

Let me begin with a few reflections on the use of the body in modern China. I shall then attempt to relate recent art and art world situations to these.

The body possessed. Like other totalitarian states, the Communist regime in China made a profound effort to 'monopolise the emotional economy' and to do so in a way that left little room for the personal. This phenomenon began in the early days of the Communist state and carried on until the late 1970's. The feelings and bodies of individuals were claimed by the State; bodies were disciplined by dress that offered little distinction of age, sex or position; movements were regulated and the presence of individuals was required for actions of mass effort, either demonstrative or practical. Traces of this remain, especially in attitudes to individuals.

The body as icon. While the regime of Mao Zedong made much of his words,

it also made an icon of his body. Strikingly, his body was typically presented in painted or sculpted versions, providing for its idealisation, its presentation as perfected presence. Such a presence is at once full of meaning and beyond reach. It might be reasonable to see this a continuity of much imperial imagery and other uses of costume to distinguish position and to display authority. Now the play of icons has been seized upon by many and is a tool in social competition and communication.

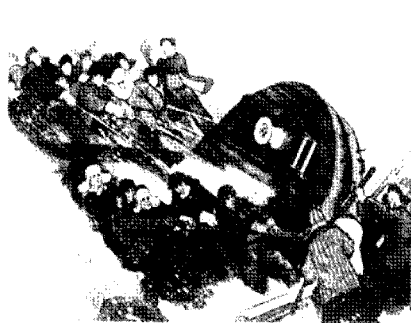
The body as the object of fantasy. I intend to employ the notion of 'fantasy' in a broad way that recalls psychoanalysis, using it to suggest awareness of the availability of another's body to the viewer -- either as a shell to inhabit (identification) or as an object that we take as beckoning for fantastic involvement and interaction. Two newly abundant phenomena make use of this: advertising and pornography.

I shall now take these reflections in turn, suggesting their occurrence in contemporary art and the practices of the art world. With your indulgence, I want to work across a double register, moving in and out of examples and exegesis. I hope this is neither too confused nor too contrived. Along the way I shall refer to various artists, but I am not especially concerned to set this in terms of specific innovators and I will surely neglect cases that some may find more striking; I prefer to see in the works and lives of individual artists examples of phenomena that are widely spread.

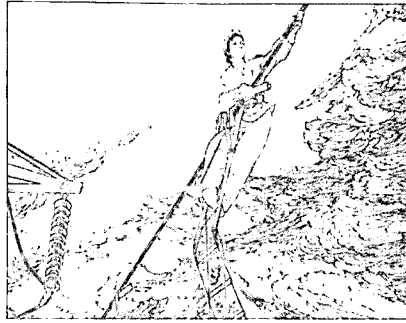
The body possessed

I have suggested that one strong example of possession is the body compelled to participation in mass actions, where the individual is taken as a building block, compelled to take a role of a very general type. The physical presence of an individual body is often neglected, the body reduced to simple gestures and a few bits of symbolic garb. One sees imagery of this kind throughout illustration produced in the service of the Party and State, especially between 1950 and the late 1970s <Fig. 1 and Fig. 2> A similar treatment of the body occurred in theatre of this period, in productions such as 'The Red Brigade of Women', Fig. 3>.

In view of the evolution of contemporary art from its immediate origins in socialist imagery and theory, it is perhaps not surprising to see some form of this continue. I see this in many works where we are confronted with the body unclothed, set in a generalised setting or exposed on a location-less ground. Such works do not necessarily indicate a great deal about the body as a physical entity, indeed, they may only offer the indications of a human that is little more than a diagram. This



<Fig. 1>



<Fig. 2>



<Fig. 3>

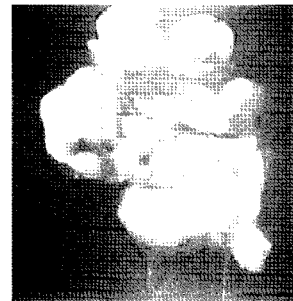
seems to indicate a collapse of both feeling and dialogue and is not uncommonly associated with suggestions of helplessness or despair. It is as though we are finding the body at the end of a time of words, in the face of abstracting movements of power and capital. The body is both the site excluded from these things (that is, it has no part to offer, no place to speak, to be accounted for) and the very site where these matters are played out that bodies are in motion, costed, and driven. One is perhaps looking at the difficult transition from a socialist totality to a capitalist one and finding little difference in the final affects on many individuals.



<Fig. 4>



<Fig. 5>



<Fig. 6>



<Fig. 7>



<Fig. 8>



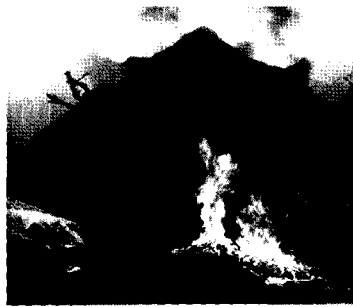
<Fig. 9>

Among the artists whose work might be appreciated in this way are Fang Lijun <Fig. 4>, Zhang Xiaogang <Fig. 5>, Yang Shaobin <Fig. 6>, Zeng Fanzhi <Fig. 7> and Chen Wenbo <Fig. 8>.

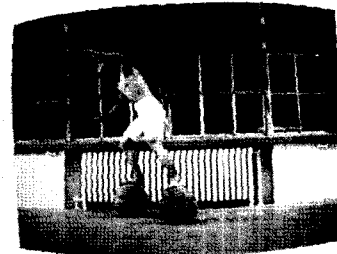
There are also avant-garde works that utilise bodies as little more than props in elaborate stagings of events. I would see the photographs of some performances as being of this sort, such as those Zhang Huan <Fig. 9> and Rong Rong <Fig. 10 and Fig. 11>. In these cases there is little suggestion of individual engagement, but rather attendance at and putting bodies to use in a remarkable event the image of which might be considered in a philosophical way. Similarly, the works of Ho Siu Kee <Fig. 12 and Fig. 13> exist as cool illustrations of a body put through an elaborate action where the performer is an indifferent robot. (Later I will speak of circumstances where the performer's will is also a critical factor and significant to our engagement, but many works do not seem to demand this.)



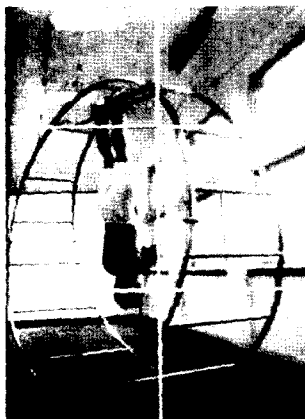
<Fig. 10>



<Fig. 11>



<Fig. 12>



<Fig. 13>



<Fig. 14>



<Fig. 15>

However, a less pessimistic understanding of this mass body is that it is a circumstance that can also render the individual invisible. Here contemporary

mainland avant-gardists can also be found. The typical dress of these artists is the simplest possible, such as a t-shirt and shorts. In a way it echoes urban working class dress, but not absolutely, and this is revealed in details to suggest intellectual preoccupations or access to and knowledge of international fashion markets. A t-shirt may have a sophisticated joke or be the souvenir of an international art event (with text in a foreign language). Choices of patterns and fabrics may reflect subtle sophistication. Typical examples would be artists such as Liu Wei, Fig. 14; Fang Lijun, Fig. 15; and Wang Guangyi, Fig. 16). It is also significant to remark that in dressing as 'ordinary' people, avant-gardists are avoiding dressing to other codes, such as that of business or of the newly wealthy. There is also an avoidance of international branded goods. None of this is surprising in view of the typical unease that such artists feel with both contemporary Chinese society and their own peculiar position as an elite that is recognised (and rewarded) more abroad than in China.



<Fig. 16>

The body as icon

I could virtually speak of this as the body costumed and the body performing a role that is recognised by others. This is a very traditional understanding of the body and dress and one which is normally present in lesser or greater degrees when one talks of semiotics or reading fashion. The appearance of icons in art is obvious enough, so I will speak more of dress in the art world, as an aspect of artists' positioning. Dress, a mannered body and some control of setting are often used to ground a meaning, name a social code or recall an historical precedent.

But allow me to enter into this gently, by way of a personal digression.

As a post-graduate art student at Goldsmiths' in London in the mid-80s, I was quite aware of dress and the ways that it was used by my colleagues and our professional role models to contrive personas or roles. The British performance artists, Gilbert and George had then made a career of it. There were a number of poles and modalities for us to work between, many of which have gradually been brought to a larger public by designers such as Vivienne Westwood. One could and many did -- affect a street-wise style, blending a bit of punk with working class

materials. We thought of this as the 'don't mess with me,' 'straight to the point' style. It went well with pints in rough pubs. That was in South London. But I was also part of a smaller scene in Oxford and there one could profitably turn a different kind of dandyism of tailored garments and eccentric historical materials. My fondest memory of that time was taking the bus up from South London dressed in my German military trenchcoat, well-worn black jeans and Dr. Marten's, clutching a large brown package in which I had the tuxedo, tie and polished black shoes that I would change into in the men's toilet at the Oxford bus terminal for a dinner in the great hall of Christchurch, followed by port in some private room decorated with Renaissance drawings.

So I felt unsurprised by the unfolding of the following situation:

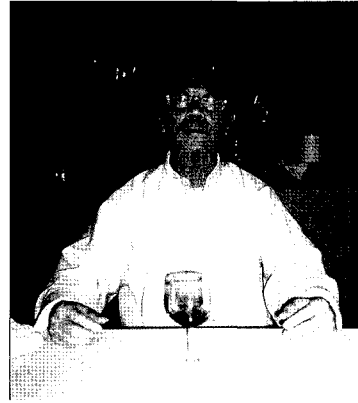
In October of 1996 I accompanied the Hong Kong delegation to the Sao Paolo Bieniel, one of the more important fixtures on the international contemporary art calendar and involving artists from about sixty countries. Hong Kong curator and dealer Johnson Chang (Hanart TZ Gallery) had been appointed by the organisers to select an entry from Hong Kong as well as to propose a contemporary Chinese painter. For the latter, he chose the mainland Chinese painter Qiu Shi Hua and this was accepted by the Bieniel curator in chief. Chang describes Qiu's painting as an especially significant form of 'modern Chinese painting'. In form, these paintings are made in very thin oil on linen; for most viewers they initially look simply like a dirtied surface, only gradually (some might even say 'magically') does the faint image of a landscape appear. In distinguishing them from Minimalist paintings which they might otherwise be thought to be (and were genuinely imagined to be by the Bieniel curator who only approved them based on slides¹), Chang explains Qiu's paintings in terms of a relation to historic forms of ink painting in respect to the quality of the experience of looking at them; that this experience is akin to meditation or Taoist descriptions of experience. (Qiu himself makes much of a connection with traditional practices of meditation; it is difficult to speak with him about the work without being told of this as well).

I spent a great deal of time keeping Qiu company in Brazil, and serving as his translator in English or French over the several pre-opening days when the site was open only to the participating curators and artists. In addition to his striking meditative poses, Qiu who is about sixty but looks older -- also has wispy white hair and beard, and dresses in light grey Republican menswear with black cloth shoes <Fig. 17 and Fig. 18>. His presence

lent considerable authenticity to the claims made for his painting, which is otherwise so 'un-traditional' in form. It is difficult to determine to what extent this



<Fig. 17>



<Fig. 18>

aided in the further exhibition offers he secured during this time, but it appeared to contribute to the respect that he garnered. Qiu's inability in languages other than Chinese also obliged him pose as a silent 'wise old man' -- though if others had had to hear his obsessive worries about details of the exhibition layout, money, food, etc. they might have been disabused of this image.

Let me step back out now to a general argument.

In thinking about dressing the body as an icon, I'm inclined to take two contrasting approaches to interpretation. On the one hand, I find some usefulness in the psychoanalytical notion of transitional or transformative objects. My understanding of this derives principally from the British School of psychoanalysis and the writings of Winnicott, Fairbairn and most recently, Christopher Bollas. They hold that objects and this term is widely employed to designate desired situations as well as physical things meet personal needs for the stabilisation and transformation of self. Invoking a memory of the lost closeness of mother and child, they suggest that the often extreme claims made for objects (such as being vehicles for transcendence) can be explained as manifestations of a desire to recover such a state of union. That objects are often satisfying for but brief periods, is seen to explain the pervasive phenomenon of insatiability in collecting (and in many other experiences related to art.) In regard to both art and dress, these thoughts point to the desire to be transformed by, or 'to be' what such things signal.

I have found it salutary to pair this kind of explanation with one focusing on social knowledge. My principal attention has been to the works of Bourdieu and his circle, with attention to their dynamic accounts of social interaction, couched in terms such as 'field,' 'capital,' and 'habitus.'

Something of how these differing accounts can be brought to bear in a mutually

useful form, can be seen by looking at accounts of authenticity or the validity of individuals' experience. The various manners in which individuals treat objects (such as art) are ultimately 'guaranteed' (and recognised by others) by the understanding that they represent authentic experiences; that specific objects are indeed serving as vehicles of social meaning or transformation for the individuals concerned. The traditional philosophical (or commonplace) notion of 'taste' roughly encapsulates this problem at both a personal and social level (and in its commonplace understanding also hints at the unease felt here). More than exercising it, one 'has taste'. In the words of Voltaire, 'taste anticipates reflection' and thus it stands for naturalization. To be said to have taste is to be acknowledged as sincere, and to have it supposed that one has genuine and penetrating experiences of art. Individuals in Hong Kong and Taiwan explained that for them both painting and looking at art were motivated by a desire to demonstrate a subjective vision and give expression to personal character.

In this context, possession alone (or merely making) are often insufficient for a collector, dealer or artist to be perceived as having attained the taste that is the mark of a real connoisseur.² Taste must be made manifest by a sustained involvement entailing further decisions and continued demonstrations of judgement. Inasmuch as taste refers to a state of self or a degree of belief, its outer signs are elusive (and may be forged).³ Attention to taste involves concern for the totality of actions or signs that an individual undertakes, with attention to both internal consistency and coherent reference to historical or social interpretations. It is often suggested that an individual 'with taste' will reflect this in his environment and that the environment in turn will work to focus and refine an individual's taste.

Returning to the matter of dress, I would note here that the boundaries between everyday life and some separate cultural activity that is the proper arena for taste are decidedly murky and fraught. A criticism of an individual's way of behaving in his private life (e.g. treatment of family or colleagues, or choice of dress or interior decoration) may be related to an overall judgement of his depth of understanding (or connoisseurship) of a cultural tradition along the lines of 'if he really understood such matters, he wouldn't behave like that.'

It is not then surprising that individuals go to some length to elaborate environments and dress. In his study of the psychology and history of decorative form, Gombrich in *The Sense of Order* (1984) notes in particular the part played by *redundancy* in speaking to the meaning of decorative schemes. He demonstrates that symbols or other meaningful features are used 'excessively' in order to leave the viewer in less doubt as to the appropriate interpretation he should make. This is akin to the use of gesture, dress and other devices to ramify a message in social interactions (or perhaps even in the reassurance one offers oneself.) However, such

redundancy not only acts to make clear a situation, but it may also serve to make it more complex (and ambiguous) to the extent that different sets of symbols are not precisely interpretable in parallel. This may be seen in the following example:

The Hong Kong artist and collector Lucia Cheung recalled to me an exhibition she mounted at Hong Kong's City Hall in 1986, for which she brought her own Qing furniture, built folding panels to obscure fire exits, and dressed in *cheung sam*. In doing so she sought to obscure the institutional environment and to create an 'appropriate' atmosphere favouring a historicising or cultural approach to her work. She expressly asked that flowers not be sent as they might be inappropriately arranged; a portion of the paintings shown were in antique frames (where the frames were acquired first, and the paintings shaped to accommodate the constraint). By contrast, her exhibit at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1992 was less fastidious -- she found the space adequate, but difficult to modify (and she hadn't the inclination on this occasion).

In the case of this artist, dress is rarely used to indicate her concerns and this example is somewhat exceptional. However, her concern for setting, either at the micro level of paintings or the macro level of the exhibition space, has been persistent and has been carried forward in her domestic environment. There it works to reinforce her view of herself as well as serving as a signal to visitors. Such a use of the artist's space has been more substantially elaborated by the Taiwanese painter Yu Peng whose domestic arrangements and the subject matter of paintings have progressively overlapped one another.

Yu Peng's home lies in a low-rise section of Taipei, and is a typically ferro-concrete four-storey structure <Fig. 19>. It has a smallish, irregular, vacant space of land attached to it, in part undeveloped as it leads into a water drainage system for the area. He has expended considerable effort to redevelop building and land with a view to creating references to traditional Chinese landscaping of which he takes Suzhou and other cities of the lower



<Fig. 19>

Yangtze as models. In these modifications he has incurred some cost, though generally the work has been undertaken with an economy gained of making minor shifts and symbolic signs of alteration. The building is but camouflaged with wooden and tile facings and large, brushy paintings of people, animals and potted plants. The garden is a series of half-quotations of other gardens and landscapes, and of images of gardens and landscapes from paintings. It is a construction of fragments, strung together in a complexity which belies its tiny dimensions <Fig. 20>. In traversing its winding path the owner remarked that it caused one to forget about

the main avenue just outside the bamboo gate, with its endless stream of traffic, its bus stops and the fluorescent lights of the neighbouring convenience store. Other visitors, while suitably impressed, still remarked on the nearby noises so at odds with the intended references.

Yu Peng's dealer, Johnson Chang again who also maintains a gallery in Taipei -- tells me that the top of the whitewashed wall in the garden is meant to be planted with a grass that will fall down the side -- a gentle, feathery motion that the wind will stir. That this has not yet been accomplished does not distract from the admiration that is



<Fig. 20>

given to it. Through the vase-shaped doorway is a semi-exterior studio with wood and stone and ceramic projects scattered about, presently abandoned. That there are abandoned corners and segments somehow reflects the owner's evolving interests, tolerance for incompleteness. Some plants are left in what the owner acknowledges as inappropriate white plastic containers in which they were bought. (No effort is made to tidy these things or obscure them.) A measure of decay would appear to be positively encouraged, especially in the form of mould and the growth of moss. In terms of the owner's intentions, the lack of maintenance is explained to me as being part of letting the garden realise itself as a remote, detached place (and as a reflection of Yu Peng's persona as 'carefree.')

The artist/ gardener not only dresses in 'traditional' garb, but cut his sons' hair to an antique fashion (until they complained of peer pressure and he relented) <Fig. 21>. He also has a traditional bed (though probably earlier twentieth-century, Taiwanese), and ostensibly favours sword-play movies for television. His habit of drinking to something approaching a stupor he also speaks of with poetic and cultural references (Li Po, drunken Taoists and the like).



<Fig. 21>

The range of these activities may be seen in terms of providing a determination for self-image that is coherent and replete as well as publicly comprehensible (and in this also coincides with his publicity of his artistic intentions and provides a further element in others' appraisal of the paintings themselves (he being best known for landscapes such as the one in Fig. 22.) The house in Taipei and the assertion of control over the form of everyday life is seen in some way to be evidence of authenticity; this impression is further heightened by his obsessional perseverance with the project. While such points may suggest a cynical view of the purposes of

this performance, it is important to note that when he began to re-structure his lifestyle in this manner he was not much recognised as an artist nor financially successful. His strategy for addressing his immediate physical environment would seem instead to have been taken in order to establish a measure of autonomy and identity for himself, especially to the extent that he was unwilling to submit unequivocally to the demand and interdicts of contemporary Taiwanese culture.

While utilizing a particular vocabulary of dress and objects, Yu Peng's practice is echoed by other artists (such as those I was with in London) who use dress and behaviour to present themselves as 'other' to the society in which they operate. This otherness may be both in terms of the choice of unusual clothing and in the presentment of their willingness to be more exacting (and wide-ranging in their choices). It is articulated relative to some of the circumstances in which the artists operate. I am thinking here of the contrast between circumstances with familiar persons and presentations intended for social outsiders as when an artist meets with collectors or the press at a gallery, and may tend to exaggerate his otherness.

A rather more complex picture of resistance and reassurance occurs in the life of the painter, collector and connoisseur CC Wang. Wang, who is now over ninety years old. He lives principally in New York and occasionally stays in Hong Kong for substantial periods. He describes his painting as springing from traditional models and few persons alive could claim to be more expert in Chinese dynastic painting he was preparing important works of connoisseurship in the 1930s. However, his paintings have not been enthusiastically received in the Chinese art world and there is about him a considerable weight of disappointment.

Visiting with him in Hong Kong he told me not to pay much attention to his flat here, it being only for occasional visits and 'not really lived in.' At the same time he was mildly apologetic about his usual residence in New York. While he acknowledges that the city offers nothing like the traditional Chinese lifestyle which he admires, he notes that at least the decoration and furnishing of his apartment can create a proper effect and that in New York he has no problem finding materials for painting and even good mounters for scrolls. He describes, laughingly, his New York residence as being 'the only really Chinese apartment there.' There he has used exclusively Chinese furniture, except for some Japanese lighting ('the best one can do for a substitute'). Permanently displayed are stones, sculptures, books and his own calligraphy ('to cover the walls'). He also has an old painting of his

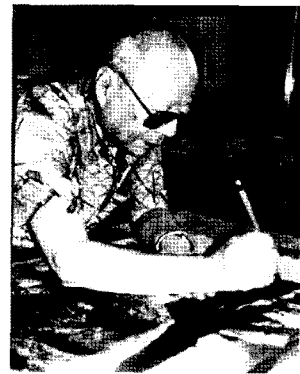


<Fig. 22>

grandfather. Both his own and collected paintings and calligraphy are stored, being only occasionally brought out for study. I ask if the arrangements he describes are only in the 'public' part of the apartment or throughout. He replies that it is more so in the areas where guests are entertained; that other parts of the flat are just 'practical.' In the accompanying catalogue essay by one of his students, the description of his flat includes a number of works which are likely to have been temporary displays (though this aspect is not mentioned; none of the works mentioned are shown in the catalogue photograph, Fig. 23). The aim of the listing appears to be to suggest the range and quality of his interests, from Yuan painting to the contemporary Taiwanese painter Yu Chengyao. Similarly, the photo aims to suggest authenticity (if not a stereotype), presenting the painter-collector in 'Chinese' dress, sipping tea, old book in hand. In my meetings with him in Hong Kong, he dressed in 'Western' clothes. By contrast, a photograph in the press package from his representative in Hong Kong shows the artist 'at work' in a patterned shirt and tinted glasses, elbow sprawled over the painting itself <Fig. 24>. This appears to present him as a 'contemporary' artist, his casualness a consequence of his single-minded concern for the work at hand.



<Fig. 23>



<Fig. 24>

These contrasting dress styles go into the wider picture of his problematic traditional/ contemporary orientation and what is perceived to be the syncretic quality of his work. An essay by one of his students in the catalogues describes his physical bearing and dress thus: 'his medium frame and bespectacled countenance, draped in sober grey and black and balanced with the ubiquitous walking stick, is a portrait of dignity. This dignity borders on harmony with a perfect balance between confidence and humility His sartorial style is neither traditional Chinese nor trendy Western but one of understated refinement'

In regard to society, Wang and others are deploying charged materials that can be widely read to various extents. There is a broad sense in accumulating and ramifying these materials, especially when the ultimate matter at hand, judgement or taste or the authenticity of an artistic practice, is so fundamentally fragile and elusive. To put this in the terms of the social phenomenology Bourdieu has articulated, individuals position and declare themselves as possessors of capital that is knowledge-based and set themselves up as adjudicators of other forms of capital.

In the case of artists this is often a strategy born of the lack of means to otherwise engage in the art world (as a collector might by dint of funds or an academic on the borrowed prestige of an appointment).

The effectiveness of all of this depends on the willingness of an audience to engage with the environmental or sartorial signals offered. How dress may be read depends greatly on the knowledge and *parti pris* of other members of an art world as well as circumstances. To demonstrate this further allow me to launch into another example:

An example of dress providing an indication of authenticity can be seen in the case of the curator and dealer Johnson Chang who presents himself in a silk 'Chinese' suit (historically, late nineteenth century or Republican in its tailoring style, but identified by most persons as 'traditional Chinese' <Fig. 25>). This is taken to indicate an affiliation with traditional interests -- in Hong Kong one finds such dress worn by very few men, save some of the very old and those in conservative trades, such as funeral management. (Recently, however, suits of this sort have been promoted by David Tang, especially through his 'department store', Shanghai Tang <Fig. 26>.) The suit is accompanied by large Havana cigar, a small notebook of telephone numbers, and an affection for food and drink in simple restaurants or tea shops (*chachamteng*), and -- in the last several years -- a portable phone. His dress resolves for some observers a routine phenomenological limitation: that sincerity and insincerity appear the same at the level of the gallery's offering. And as Chang is always dressed in 'traditional' dress -- even at home or on holidays -- this is taken as a further confirmation of his sincerity (and authenticity).

One should also emphasise that while other persons may establish a context for their remarks and judgements through physical spaces (e.g. the executive office) Chang relies almost exclusively on bodily presence, especially so in his frequent travels to Europe, America, mainland China, and Taiwan where he interacts with collectors, other dealers and institutional curators. His dress makes an immediate impression and strongly distinguishes him in a crowd of suits or other apparel. Furthermore, his dress is often discussed in relation to the character and quality of his judgement. To some, it is a veritable guarantee of his 'authenticity', especially to the extent to which some connection might be forged between traditional interests and the self-styled avant-garde artworks which his gallery is



<Fig. 25>



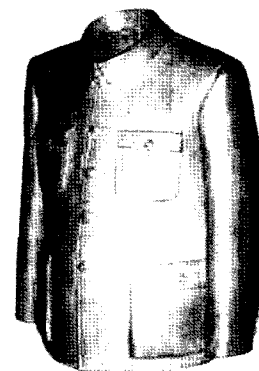
<Fig. 26>

principally reputed for. Here dress act to bridge a historical gap that gives palpable distress to many in the field finding a way to imagine Chineseness as carrying through both the present and the past.

For others, Chang's dress is more simply an eccentricity, and this is in itself a positive demonstration of 'character' and a willingness to ignore convention (suggesting less a sense of being out of touch with reality, as having in some sense discovered opportunities or values ignored by others -- a significant signal in a trade where value is ambiguous and promotional rhetoric is often distrusted.) Undoubtedly, such views of Chang's sartorial choices are only possible to the extent that they are corroborated by the perception that he is intelligent and knowledgeable.

However, his suit is also a negative signal to his critics, especially those who would chide him for deficiencies in his understanding or judgement of traditional Chinese art or taste. These critics tend to note errors in tailoring or fabric choices (that it is not really traditional; that the shoes are not cloth, but leather -- 'like those of a gangster'). In recent years this dress has also been seen as a token of the dealer's link to David Tang, otherwise a friend since childhood, with financial interest in the gallery and an important buyer (especially for his two China Club projects in Hong Kong and Beijing where all of the paintings were purchased from the gallery, and which have served to bring the artists involved to the attention of an important audience in an impressive setting.) Tang is even more often belittled by traditionalists and the dealer suffers by association. Such criticisms are principally heard from their competitors (in judgement) in Taiwan or mainland China.⁴

Finally as I began this reflection with thoughts of Mao's body, is perhaps worth concluding this section in observing its continued presence in both popular art (such as lucky charms for automobiles), and contemporary art. In the later, the meaning of the presence is much less clear, being both an unresolved power that lurks from the past and the shape of a formless nostalgia. As Sui Jianguo a sculptor of massive empty Mao jackets <Fig. 27> and 'academic' sculptures clad in such jackets <Fig. 28> has observed Mao and the high emotions of the Cultural Revolution are the paternity of his generation and in a sense it is a relationship that cannot be discarded even if one doesn't know what it means.



<Fig. 27>



<Fig. 28>

The body as the object of fantasy

The most straightforward utilisation of fantasy occurs in our response to works of the so-called academic school, especially realist painting of beautiful women, clothed and naked. These paintings probably constitute the mainstream of contemporary Chinese art, and certainly the most consistently viable commercial artworks. These are sometimes further elaborated with representations of rich fabrics, elegant clothing, and precious objects all cast in comfortable, soothing lighting. The origins of such work likely begin in commercial illustration of the early twentieth century <Fig. 29 and Fig. 30>



<Fig. 29>

In a certain sense, many of the examples I have discussed as being icons may also work in this way. That is, our appreciation of an individual dressed in a particular manner may also serve as a screen for our projection. Furthermore, our aspiration to support or appreciate a particular cultural circumstance such as traditional literati taste may be served by the attention we give to persons who dress the part. We fantastically engage with and acknowledge the world they have endeavoured to carry on their persons.



<Fig. 30>

However, the call to projection and fantasy is more complicated in a large body of work that presents the body in pain, as a site of endurance. Lacking other means to engage with these works (aside from the unsatisfactory pleasures of formalism) one may find that one associates oneself with the body shown.

Among works of this kind, I see two major groups. One the one hand there are works in paint that render the body as unstable and decaying flesh, such as those of Liu Wei. These are not a detailed account of the body in the unvarnished gaze of modern science, but a baroque exaggeration of the fleshiness and fluids of the body. Many of Liu's works also suggest a pornographic encounter, so that the offer to the viewer is very awkwardly experienced indeed <Fig. 31, Fig. 32 and Fig. 33>.

On the other hand, there are also a very large group of works that exist as photographic or video records of performances. In works such as those of Zhang Huan the typically naked body of the performer is put to uses that may involve pain or inconvenience (as photographed by Rong Rong, Fig. 34 and Fig. 35; and with Ma Liuming, Fig. 36 and Fig. 37). Inasmuch as these are photographs, we are



<Fig. 31>



<Fig. 32>

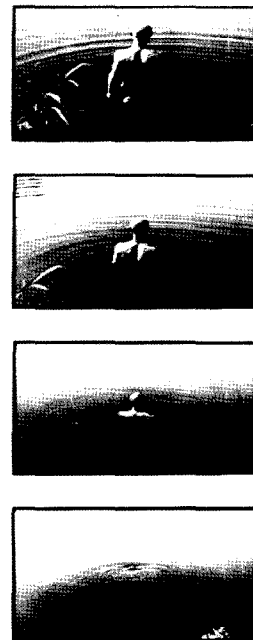


<Fig. 33>

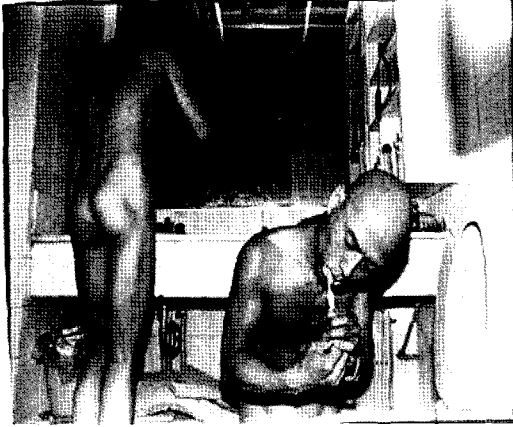
unusually obliged to accept the reality of the events shown, indeed the photograph and our awareness that the artist himself is undertaking these acts leads a great deal of authenticity to the works. I think it is especially interesting to contrast these photographs to those of journalists who might record the sustained suffering of persons while presenting neither the images nor the lives shown as art. In the case of artists, we are typically aware that the act was of relatively short duration, was contrived and entered into voluntarily and is intended for our contemplation.



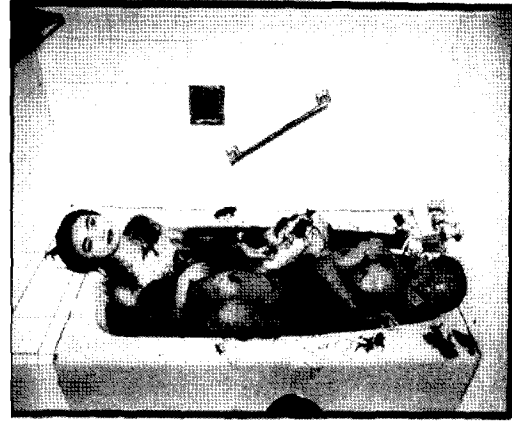
<Fig. 34>



<Fig. 35>



<Fig. 36>



<Fig. 37>

The existential body

I want to go beyond this suggestion of a voyeuristic encounter with images of others' bodies and speak more to what is happening in the performances that have been recorded.

The body of the performer is not merely being presented as an instrument for our projective identification or fantasy. That is the limit of most advertising and pornography. Instead, we are also presented with a record of an act of individual will waged with and perhaps against the body. The body is sacrificed to a desire for knowledge that is both in the manner of a personal awakening and a public experiment. It is tempting to see behind this traditions of Buddhist abnegation and other disciplinary practices that have long circulated in China. In these circumstances, dress is virtually absent and with male artists the head is often shaved. Sharing the scene are props and devices that encounter the body, including elemental materials like honey and ice as well as invasive instruments that cut the body. The settings for these acts are equally stripped of specific history or social context: a mountaintop, a field, a fishpond, a factory building.

The body is considered as an existential platform where the physical is a kind of knowledge to be apprehended. If the body in other situations is dressed and deployed as an icon is order to ground an interpretation, the body of these performers is established in a place outside of specific history or society. And there it seeks a measure of transcendence.

Conclusion

I should like to conclude with a disturbing and ambiguous image evoking many of the issues raised and perhaps others.

In 1993 several avant-garde mainland Chinese artists participated in the Venice Biennale in a special presentation arranged by Johnson Chang. This was seen as something of breakthrough in terms of international publicity and a terrific boost to careers and financial circumstances of the artists in question. Of course, the selection was criticised, largely by those excluded. Others saw in this a recuperation of Chinese art by both the international marketplace and the star system that is one of its features. The artist Yan Lei described his reaction as being of this sort, but the response he made was unique.

To describe it plainly, he approached gangsters and paid for a contract to have himself beaten as punishment for an unspoken crime (gangsters need no explanation). For several days after the payment, he waited in suspense, knowing that the time would be of his attackers' choosing. Eventually he was set upon and brutally beaten. He then had photographs taken of his bruised body to record what he describes as a protest performance. Neither the act nor the photographs were shown to others until many years later. One sees in this elements of theatre, fantasy and the reduction of the individual to a mute body that endures.

References & Notes

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- 1) The curator confided to me that he supposed Qiu to be 'the Chinese Robert Ryman'. This also suggests that recent Euro-American art is presumed to provide the taken-for-granted norms for international encounters and comparisons.
- 2) The dynamics of taste derive in part from materialism itself, in that a materialistic possession of objects involves an existential emphasis on 'having' over 'doing' or 'being' (Fromm 1976; Sartre 1943). However, an important distinction should be made between 'terminal materialism' in which possessions are sought for their accumulation, and 'instrumental material' in which possessions are sought as a part of a strategy for doing something (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). For the most part, connoisseurship as I have experienced it in Hong Kong and Taiwan is concerned with the latter, the chief distinction being between those who are concerned with operations upon the self (where objects are taken for transformative objects) and those who wish to enact social meanings (either through concern for status and authority or in relation to particular conceptual notions.)
Schaper (1983) summarises the classical European discourse on taste and the two major outlooks which see 'aesthetic preference' as either open to education and transformation, or hopelessly subjective (and either beyond investigation or to be understood only as a token of an individual's 'spiritual' quality.) She also observes the persistent association of moral judgements in respect to taste pertaining to the objects of high culture. Clunas (1991) discusses taste as a key device by which Ming connoisseurs articulated the privilege of intellectual training and perception over mere ownership of aesthetically charged goods.
- 3) Schaper (54) refers to the 'opacity of pleasure' and the difficulty of giving precise reasons for preferences or measuring pleasure either quantitatively or qualitatively.
- 4) Chang made one very public exception to dressing in 'Chinese style'. This occurred on the night of 30th June 1997, when he was among the invited guests at Governor Patten's embarkation upon HMY Britannia. He explained that he dressed in a black 'Western suit' in order to dissociate himself with the incoming Communist-anointed administration. A persistent critic of the Chinese Communist Party that he sees as having demolished valuable traditions, he was here concerned to not be associated with its version of nationalism which he otherwise feared his dress might be taken to indicate. (One might recall he the little groundswell of interest in Chinese dress around this time which Shanghai Tang tried to fan into a 'Dress Chinese Day' for the 2nd of July 1997.)