

The Primitive and Unproductive Body: He Yunchang and His Performance Art

Lord Yuan of Song ordered that a scroll be painted. A large crowd of scribes arrived, received the instructions, and immediately started wetting their brushes with saliva and preparing their ink blocks. Half of them were excluded pretty quickly. One scribe arrived late and sauntered up in a very relaxed manner without hurrying at all. He received his instructions and immediately returned to his quarters. The Duke sent people to see what he was up to, and by the time they found him he'd taken off his clothing and was sitting there naked drawing on his tablet. Lord Yuan said: "He'll do. This one is a real painter."¹

In *Zhuangzi*, the second foundational text of Daoist philosophy traditionally attributed to the Daoist master Zhuangzi (369 B.C.–286 B.C.), we find this account of an anonymous painter who flouted social conventions but, rather than being punished, was rewarded with the title "a real painter." This is a well-known story among Chinese artists, which probably should be of no surprise since, as has been pointed out by many art historians, Daoism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and self-cultivation, has been instrumental to the development of Chinese art. This earliest account of a "real painter" sets down the foundation of intellectual understanding and the practice of art in China. First, a real artist has a demeanor that is different from that of regular people. He or she does not follow the common wisdom of respecting authority; he comes late and has a casual manner. Second, true artistic creation is unconventional, and in this case the painter had to be naked in order to make art. It suggests that in the process of art making, conventional social customs and proprieties can be disregarded. The *Zhuangzi* story later spawned an idiom, *jiyipanbo* (literally: unrobed, to sit on the tablet), which would be referred to again and again in literature on art in China. It was traditionally used to praise the highest type of personal devotion, when an artist enters into a pure state of passionate creation.

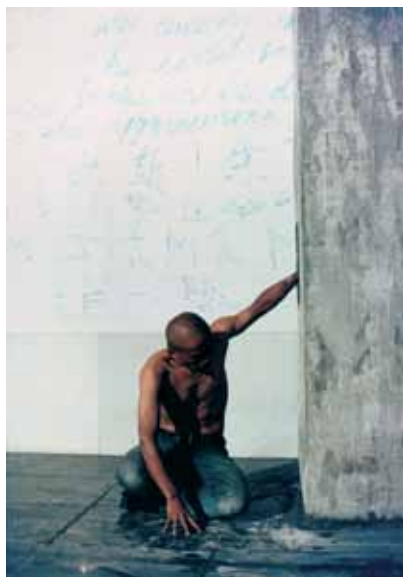
The Individual and Society

He Yunchang, a contemporary Chinese performance artist born in 1967, likely took much inspiration from this anonymous artist described in *Zhuangzi* more than two thousand years ago. He too prefers to be naked

when making art: “Nudity makes the performance more pure, with less distractions.”² Furthermore, since being naked in public is taboo in so-called “civilized” societies, it becomes a symbol of individual freedom:

Insofar as people in society generally wear clothes, nudity is a denial of social conventions. Arising from the fact that children are born naked, one could say that nudity is the state of nature. Fundamentally, for me the body is moving flesh. I take advantage of every opportunity to be naked that is provided to me.³

He Yunchang, *Keeping Promise*, 2003, performance.
Courtesy of the artist.



He Yunchang’s preference of a natural state to a socialized state can be easily connected with the pro-nature thoughts clearly expressed in *Zhuangzi*. He Yunchang relates clothes with social conventions that are enforced upon individuals, and, therefore, taking them off represents a return to the original natural condition, like a newborn baby. He is certainly fond of stories recorded in *Zhuangzi*, and one of his performance works is based on another famous

tale told in this Chinese classic: “Wei Sheng and a girl were to meet under a bridge. The girl did not arrive and a flood came. Wei Sheng clasped the pillar and stayed until he was drowned.”⁴ Starting in the late afternoon on October 24, 2003, a rather cold day, he cast his arm in a newly made cement pillar and kept it there for twenty-four hours—the time every human being possesses for a day. The cement hardened in about fifty minutes and began exerting pressure and inducing pain on his hand, a feeling he described as “being grabbed by a powerful force, like a demon; there was no way I could escape so I had to endure it through.”⁵ Being bare-chested and wearing just a pair of jeans, He Yunchang kept moving himself to keep warm or crouched on the floor to rest until late the next afternoon. The work, titled *Keeping Promise*, turns the ancient love story about loyalty into a demonstration of a contemporary artist’s fortitude and endurance, both physically and mentally.

More importantly, the Daoist philosophical thinking expressed in *Zhuangzi* is detectable in his deep belief in the suppressive power of social norms and common wisdom, and most of his performance artworks are conceived of in order to break away from them. *Zhuangzi* also has been enormously popular among traditional Chinese scholars and was the subject of numerous commentaries throughout the ages since it provided them philosophical support for withdrawal from serving the public

and into a private life of self-cultivation. The philosophy embedded in *Zhuangzi*, and also in *Daodejing*, the other major Daoist text, is generally regarded as the opposite of Confucianism, which emphasized political service and social responsibility. Complementing the main ideas upheld in *Daodejing*, the Daoism of *Zhuangzi* perceives social and political norms as counter-conducive to the natural processes of life and questions the largely Confucian value systems and cultural norms. He Yunchang began exposing himself to these classics while in middle school and continued throughout his student life as an undergraduate at the Art Institute of Yunnan, a period when he indulged himself in the Chinese literary classics and familiarized himself with major philosophical texts and poetry anthologies. In his own words, he was so fond of them that he often stayed up reading out loud at night, unwilling to go to bed.⁶

This long-term exposure to ancient Chinese philosophical thought, especially that of Daoism, likely played a major role in forming He Yunchang's artistic temperament and prepared him to adopt performance art as his chosen form of art making. Or, one may say that his temperament found the best mode of realization in carrying out performance art, an art form that has been regarded as avant-garde in China since its first appearance in the late 1980s and is still an often misunderstood art practice due to the "anti-aesthetic" and "anti-artistic" approaches its practitioners often take.⁷ It is useful here to cite art historian Thomas Berghuis's discussion of Chinese performance art, in which he argues that the value of performance art lies in the challenge it poses to the underlying conservatism of Chinese attitudes to art:

Increasingly, artists treated the body as the primary material with which to construct new visual structures in their performances. Their body under stress was particularly useful to many of these artists who started to use their own body/flesh as the medium of a new art practice that would enable them to visualize and embody their critical stance inside Chinese society and within the Chinese art scene.⁸

He Yunchang's adoption of performance art was propelled by his belief that this art form not only allowed him the maximum freedom to express himself but also provided an occasion to live as a truly free individual who could make his own choices. In an interview with art historian Gao Minglu, He Yunchang states: "What a system controls is the body. But my life is mine, and I can play with it in whatever way I like. I have my choice at least on this point."⁹

On another occasion, He Yunchang provides a quite naturalistic or Daoist explanation: "Fish swim in the water, birds fly in the sky, and plants grow in the wind; they are expressing with their bodies."¹⁰ By setting his body free in the name of art, he allows his body to perform actions that are not prescribed by the system and widely accepted by the majority. It is

this unusual sensitivity toward the existence of a controlling system that underscores his perception of individual life in contemporary China and, accordingly, generates the imperative for personal freedom that features prominently throughout his performance art. However, He Yunchang is by no means a Daoist, for most of his performances are carried out in ways that go against the Daoist doctrine of non-struggle, of taking no action, and of spontaneity. Both his mental state and his physicality are often put through severe, unnecessary, and unnatural trials during his carefully planned performances, resulting in injuries to his physical body; these acts are of a type that is unmistakably rejected in *Zhuangzi's* philosophy. He Yunchang's performance art largely reverses the Daoist maxim of "taking no action while leaving nothing undone." Instead, he takes many actions to get small things done or even without getting anything done.

He Yunchang, *One Rib*,
2008, performance.
Courtesy of the artist.



For example, on August 8, 2008, the forty-one-year-old He Yunchang carried out an astonishing art project. In this performance, simply titled *One Rib*, he had a twenty-five centimetre section of bone excised from the eighth rib of his left side. Originally He Yunchang planned to have a longer rib extracted, but accepted the surgeon's cautioning suggestion in selecting the eighth rib and for a shorter extraction in order to minimize potential harm. Due to this medical necessity, for the first time since he began practicing performance art, He Yunchang had to experience most of his own performance in a state of unconsciousness, as he was anesthetized for a good part of the surgery. But consistent with his usual work ethic when his performance involves the assistance of others, he devised a minutely detailed proposal and made all possible preparations in advance. He Yunchang had lived and worked in Beijing during the previous decade when not making art somewhere else, but the performance-oriented surgery was conducted in the Kunming Adam Hospital in his home province of Yunnan. That private hospital was the only place where he could convince a surgeon, after about three years of explanation and negotiation, to remove his rib for the purpose of art making, a medically unnecessary operation and an unthinkable act under normal circumstances.¹¹

He Yunchang's surgery was performed on the opening day of the much anticipated 2008 Beijing Olympics, an international mega-event that was considered of utmost national significance and triumph by the Chinese authorities. This was pure coincidence, as the schedule for the surgery was determined by the hospital, but it intrinsically revealed a stance He Yunchang had been taking with his performance art: He is an individualist, and he does not celebrate grand and highly politicized social events with everyone else. For him, these events are part of the system that functions to subdue individuality, and they should be protested. He protests society by using his own body, and this performance is obviously cruel and violent. What strikes one the most is the motivation behind his seemingly crazy act. When asked why he has to express himself in such an extreme and brutal way, He Yunchang replied: "Society is brutal and suppressive. I feel the lack of freedom and I am dying for it. As an artist, I feel that challenging my body and mental status is a way of breaking the unbreakable social confinement and achieving a temporary state of freedom."¹²

There are likely several sources that are responsible for He Yunchang's deep conviction against a suppressive society that limits his individual freedom. One can easily connect it to the authoritarian political system in China under which artists work. This reason alone, however, may not be sufficient to understand the complexity of his conviction. The political reality in China, along with the relationship between politics and art or culture in general, has undergone considerable changes as a result of the Chinese state's embrace of capitalism and consumerism. Since the mid 1990s, and in particular since 2000, artists in China were largely left alone with respect to their cultural production and could make any kind of art as long as they did not openly act against the government. Therefore, He Yunchang's critique may seem less a direct reflection of his experience as a cultural professional in China. I argue that the formation of his view of society being suppressing and confining in nature is multifaceted; it is intermingled with political, cultural, and psychological factors. With the importance of this political background understood, this view may relate to his intellectual understanding of being a real artist, of one who stands on one side while society stands on the other. The suppressive nature of society, or of the government or state, as perceived by He Yunchang is partially related to how society or the state was discussed by the Daoist founders Lao Zi and Zhuangzi in their texts and partially related to his direct observations of and psychological response to the sociopolitical environment he inhabits in contemporary China. Moreover, if we adopt Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, then this conviction can also find its source in He Yunchang's profound discontent with the existing state of civilization, a discontent that is shared by many critical-minded modern intellectuals. Discussing the social source of human suffering, Freud writes: "Our so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions."¹³

He Yunchang is certainly not unfamiliar with the writing of Freud or other prominent Western modern philosophers. Starting in 1987, when he became an undergraduate student, He Yunchang began reading translated versions of important Western philosophical and literary texts. His was not a unique case, however. Learning complex philosophical texts from modern thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Freud, and Jean-Paul Sartre and debating the social problems of China were fashionable pursuits for young intellectuals within academic contexts as well as outside of it during the 1980s—a decade theorized by many scholars as an age of utopia or high culture fever in China. It was a decade, unlike the 1990s, when the reform and open-door policy seemed to promise a much more free and open-minded society while a nascent market culture had yet to marginalize the function of intellectuals in Chinese society. The dominance of intellectual spirit during that decade led the literary scholar Wang Jing to describe the 1980s as a period in which “it was undoubtedly the knowing subject that seemed to gain the upper hand over the consuming and producing subject.”¹⁴ The above-mentioned Western cultural figures were immensely popular among Chinese university students, regardless of their majors. Spending his formative years in the 1980s, He Yunchang undoubtedly was influenced by this trend of learning modern Western thought. His negative perception of modern society—its power in the hands of the state—and official ideology might find its partial source in these Western writers who adopted a critical and pessimistic attitude toward human civilization as a whole.

He Yunchang, *Appointment with Tomorrow*, 1999, oil on canvas, 174 x 144cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The Will of the Weak

He Yunchang’s training in art began in a self-taught manner. He recalls that his first experience with art was making drawings, which won a lot of praise from his teachers in kindergarten and elementary school. Art then became his long-term hobby, and he continued to practice drawing along with painting until in 1987 he was admitted into the oil painting program at the Art Institute of Yunnan in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan. The admission was itself testimony to his painting skill; high school students had to go through fierce regional or national competition in order to be admitted into undergraduate art programs in China. While in Kunming, he was close to the circle of his mentor Mao Xuhui, one of the leading avant-garde artists active in southeast of China during the 1980s and thus was exposed to new ideas and trends of art making. He began working with performance art in Kunming in 1993, the same year he quit his job at a local high school to become an independent artist.



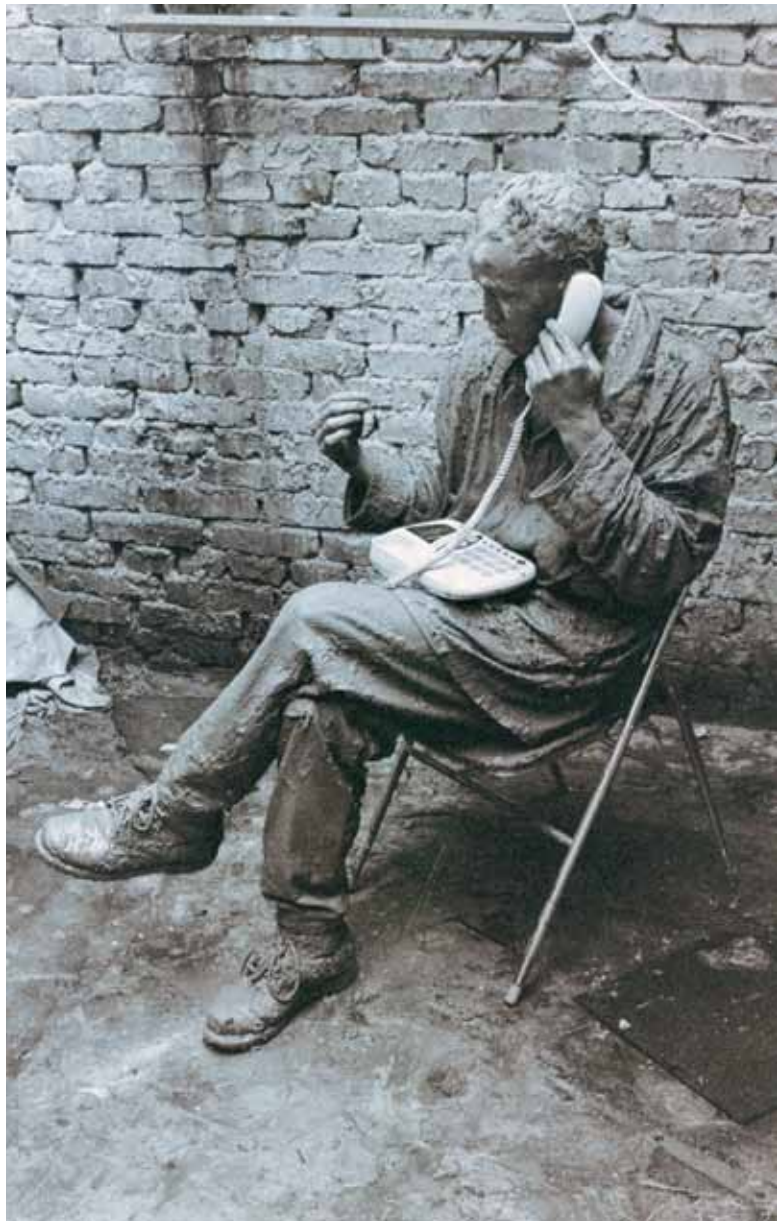
He Yunchang moved to Beijing in 1999, joining many contemporary Chinese artists in their migration to live in an artist village that provided a

better cultural atmosphere and support to realize their artistic ambitions. As the headquarters of contemporary Chinese art, Beijing in the 1990s provided young artists who decided to dissociate themselves from the official art institutions many opportunities that were not available in their hometowns, such as exhibitions, critical reviews, and market support. The avant-garde cultural atmosphere in Beijing gave him much inspiration, allowing him to conceive and realize many important performance art projects. In the early years, He Yunchang supported himself by making stylistically conventional-looking paintings employing the sound realistic training that he received as an art student, a style that was generally accepted by the art establishment. His oil paintings in the 1990s were convincingly solid in their representational technique and narrative content. One of his paintings, *Appointment with Tomorrow* (1999), even won a bronze award at the 1999 National Art Exhibition, a conservative but top national exhibition in China that had been held once every five years since the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949.

Had He Yunchang wished, he could have pursued a career in the official art world. But his interest in art making was not to follow established stylistic precedents or even the institutional norms that governed the Chinese art world. On the contrary, he was interested in breaking free from this world and seeking an individualistic approach. The award-winning painting itself was a pictorial byproduct of a performance also titled *Appointment with Tomorrow* that he carried out the previous year in 1998, a piece regarded as his first mature performance work.¹⁵ In this work, which was performed in his small studio in Kunming, he covered his whole body, from hair to shoes, with mud. Then he sat and kept dialing random telephone numbers on a disconnected telephone for more than an hour while his friends documented the process with a camera. This early performance piece already bore the basic elements of his art that would be strengthened in his later performance work: He conceived and carried out ineffective actions as a way to express his points of view. Dialing on a disconnected telephone is essentially absurd and non-productive, since it will not bring any results. Being a pictorial representation of the performance, the painting omitted the futile effort of actually dialing that was purposely staged by the artist and gave a false impression of a migrant worker calling someone to make a plan for the next day. No matter who it was he might be calling—a friend or his family—the painting conveys a strong sense of hope that is in opposition to the hopelessness in the performance since it suggests that conceivably he is able to reach out to somebody and make an appointment. It is likely this seemingly optimistic theme—the positive portrayal of a migrant worker—combined with the representational mode of realism, that made it a painting welcomed within the mainstream art world.

According to He Yunchang, performing *Appointment with Tomorrow* offered an outlet for him to express a sentiment that had haunted him after hearing a true story in 1996. A young laid-off engineer wanted to buy a very small piece of meat, only the amount that he could afford to satisfy his child's

He Yunchang, *Appointment with Tomorrow*, 1998, performance. Courtesy of the artist.



hunger. The butcher did not want to bother, but later became sympathetic after hearing out the engineer's sorrows and gave him a cut of meat for free. The engineer was utterly depressed with the humiliation that he had suffered with his situation, and after conversing with his wife he prepared a poisoned meal for himself and his family so as to put an end to the misery of their lives. He Yunchang was shocked by this story, which took place not far from where he used to work. For the first time he felt that suicide was very close to him, not like those he read about in the newspaper, and he was forced to face it as reality. Reflecting on his own situation, which at the time was not much better than the engineer's as he had to constantly rely on help from friends, he began contemplating why some people chose to commit suicide and why others, including himself, strived to live despite difficulties. He became sensitive to the endurance exercised by innumerable people who did not give up and commented: "The sharp blade of reality can only pierce their limbs; it cannot wound their wills. The persistence and tenacious spirits of these disadvantaged groups inspire me."¹⁶



He Yunchang,
Dialogue with Water,
1999, performance.
Courtesy of the artist.

He Yunchang's response to this sad story reflects his attitude toward the value of individual struggle and perseverance, a characteristic so present in his subsequent performance art, even though he simultaneously senses the ultimate futility of life for these disadvantaged individuals in a society that has been taken over by the market and capitalism. These reflections were manifest in his early performances: the artist kept dialing a disconnected telephone, knowing for sure that he wouldn't reach anyone, but he was not giving up, as if to affirm his belief that as long as one does not give up, there is hope—not in the result, but in the action itself.¹⁷ It is this belief in a kind of hopeless persistence that has motivated He Yunchang to continue staging such performances, most of which demonstrate the tenacious spirit of the individual, himself, in facing all kinds of adversities. These works express his steadfast rejection of conforming or submitting to conventional rationalities and established patterns of behaviour or ways of making art, all of which can be perceived as the societal power that is imposed upon individuals.¹⁸ Embedded within He Yunchang's artistic practice is a refusal of the normalizing power that comes from widely upheld rationalities and social conventions, much like the Foucauldian critique of the role knowledge has played in facilitating social control by turning people into "normalized" individuals.¹⁹

For example, in 1999 He Yunchang staged *Dialogue with Water*, a thirty-minute performance in which he was suspended upside down and bare-chested over the Lianghe River in his hometown in Lianghe county of Yunnan province during a cold winter day in February. Holding a knife with two hands, he stabbed into the gushing water in an attempt to split the river and induce a wound to it while his own blood from an open cut on each of his arms ran into the river—in a ritually sacrificial way he tried to initiate an exchange with the river. His endeavour to impose his personal will upon the river, however, was designed to be futile, much like his attempt to move the direction of the sunlight in *Golden Sunshine* (1999),

He Yunchang,
Golden Sunshine,
1999, performance.
Courtesy of the artist.



another performance he carried out earlier that year in Kunming. For this performance, he covered his body completely in yellow oil paint—the colour of sunshine—and hung himself from a roof in order to paint the wall the same yellow colour, after which he held a mirror to deflect rays of sunshine onto the corner of the wall that was in shadow. Intending to complete the performance in half an hour, he took two hours due to the difficulty of painting the wall while hanging in the air. A photograph of the performance taken by his friend from below looks rather poetic, but the two-hour performance caused him to faint twice and the cheap industrial paint he applied to his body and face, which were then exposed to the strong sunlight, caused severe skin damage afterward. The symbolic meaning of this work has often been discussed in relation to universal humanistic concerns since the walls he painted and reflected sunshine onto were those of a prison. Even though the location was an accidental choice related to his limited means to find an ideal place, this coincidence, like the timing with the operation of *One Rib*, speaks well to his fundamental concern for the autonomy of the individual.

Relocating to Beijing did not much change He Yunchang's basic theme in his art making or his methodology, both of which have been consistent throughout his performance work since 1998. His methodology can be summed up as simple but difficult. Most of the time, his performances are about his carrying out his intention with a total disregard for the result. The more open cultural atmosphere in Beijing in comparison with Yunnan provided him with better opportunities to carry out his projects and receive better financial support in return. Beginning in 2000, he began to be invited to participate in major exhibitions, and his art gained wider audience and critical attention.

In November 2000, He Yunchang carried out an approximately eight-hour performance titled *River Document in Shanghai* as his contribution



to Fuck Off, a satellite exhibition at the Third Shanghai Biennale in 2000.²⁰ Over the course of about four hours, he fetched close to ten tons of water by bucket from the lower Suzhou River in Shanghai; then the boat that now contained the water traveled up river five kilometres, and he spent another four hours putting the water back into the river. The duration was symbolic, as his total of eight hours of labour was the length of a normal workday for most

He Yunchang, *River Document in Shanghai*, 2000, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

people holding down a day job. Through his seemingly senseless but physically demanding intervention into natural forces, the water was able to flow back again for five kilometers; the artist materialized a challenge to commonplace knowledge that water does not flow backward. In 2001, he staged a performance titled *Wrestling: One and One Hundred*, in which he recruited one hundred volunteers, most of whom were migrant workers, to wrestle with him. The volunteers were told that if they were victorious over the artist that they would receive a small bonus, so most of them were serious in attempting to beat him during the wrestling match, and He Yunchang recalls that the relationship between him and the participants “was definitely tense, antagonistic. People really wanted to hurt me and to win!”²¹ With great psychological and physical persistence, he spent sixty-six minutes wrestling one hundred people in a row. A small and lean person who did little routine physical exercise, he vomited when wrestling with the fifth participant, and after wrestling with a dozen he was out of strength. A feeling of desperateness conquered him the moment he looked up to see the still long line up of waiting volunteers, but he nonetheless endured the increasing injuries each time he wrestled with a new participant and completed the performance as planned.²²

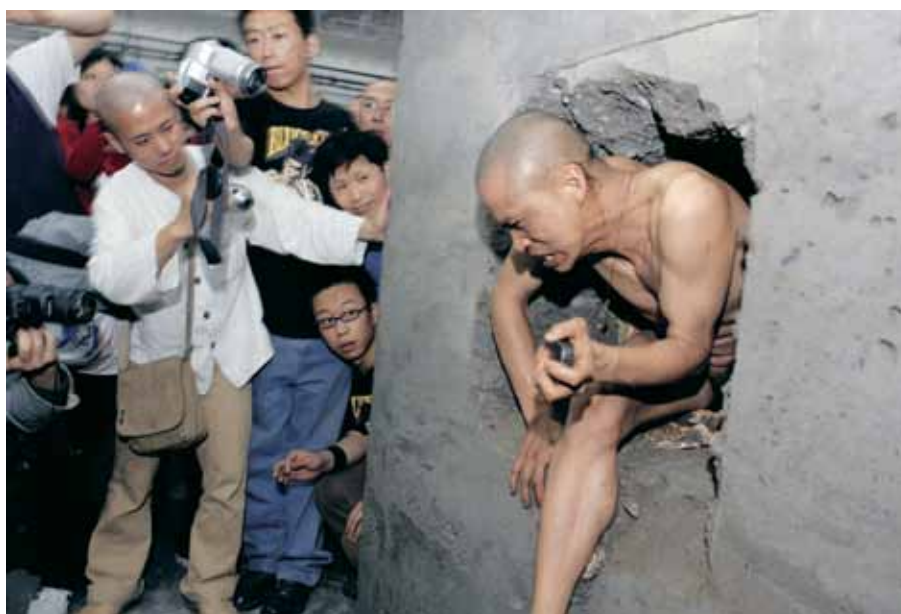


He Yunchang, *Wrestling: One and One Hundred*, 2001, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

At an average rate of two well-conceived performances per year since 2000, He Yunchang has staged various scenarios in which he, a physically fragile man, engages in a series of actions in which he wrestles with natural or manmade forces that are evidently more powerful than he is. Most of the time, the external forces overwhelm him, and it is only his will that

sustains him through all these performances, some of which are ridiculous and others dangerous. Gao Minglu comments on this aspect: “What the contrast of forces reveals is the will of the weak.”²³ The embodiment of the external forces can come from any source—natural, mechanical, or human. He is flexible in working with whatever materials turn out to be available to realize his ideas; most often, he tends to resort to natural elements such as water, sunshine, soil, wood, and rock. In addition, he has also employed ordinary man made-stuff such as wine, purified water, cement, gunpowder, or matches. Of course, the most elementary medium he has continuously used is flesh—his own body. For all his performances he seems to have only one goal, which is to carry the action to its completion. Aspects such as a distinctive personal style or artistic language seem to be of no concern to him. Curator Tang Xin comments:

He Yunchang, *Casting*, 2004, performance. Courtesy of the artist.



He Yunchang does not emphasize the visual quality or performativity; his work bears the quality of simplicity and abstraction. Body, the imperative component of performance art, is not used in his work for the purpose of self-representation; it is otherized as the symbol of life.²⁴

Tang Xin’s understanding of He Yunchang’s art was echoed by Gao Minglu: “He Yunchang’s behaviour is not about his personal bodily endeavours, but rather, he intentionally deflects attention from himself in the process of performance.”²⁵ When writing the above commentaries, both writers had in mind *Casting* (2004), a performance piece in which he sealed himself naked inside a thick cement block for a day and night. Inside the iron and cement reinforced block that had only two tiny openings for air, He Yunchang inhabited a small, dark cell (80 x 120 x 250 centimetres high) that only allowed him to sit, stand, or turn around.²⁶ Enduring loneliness, darkness, and boredom, he stayed inside quietly without communicating with anybody for a symbolic duration of twenty-four hours. The



He Yunchang, *Beyond Sky and Mountains*, 2002, performance. Courtesy of the artist.



He Yunchang, *The General's Command*, 2005, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

performativity was reduced to a minimum, since no one could see what was happening inside. But even if they had been able to see, they would have realized that nothing spectacular was happening; the artist simply existed within the cell.

Gao Minglu comments on this piece: “While spatial isolation itself is fearful, the more horrific situation is to be isolated by inorganic materials.”²⁷

Cement might be the only man made or inorganic material that He Yunchang continued to work with for several projects. It first appeared in his 2002 performance *Beyond Sky and Mountains*, in which he tested his strength against the power of explosives. He had a cement block cast in the desert, set off an explosion on one side of the block, and pushed it from the other side against the force coming from the explosion. He explained that he thought mixing gunpowder, an ancient invention, and steel reinforced cement, a modern material, with a living person would make it an interesting work, so he did it.²⁸ *Keeping Promise* (2003) again dealt with cement in a horrific, intimate way as he had his hand casted in a cement block. Cement appeared once more in *A Sack of Cement* (2004) and *The General's Command* (2005). The latter was staged at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in a cold October evening in which He Yunchang put his flesh in direct confrontation with cement again for about sixty minutes. Sitting naked against the wall of a small Plexiglass cube, he had newly mixed cement poured onto his body up to his chest and waited in coldness under piercing pressure while the cement hardened before it was broken to free him.

He Yunchang's use of cement in these successive performances suggests a possible relationship between his art and the effects of the massive urban construction that has turned Chinese cities into jungles of concrete. Most of the time, however, his art does not reveal a direct relationship with specific social phenomena or their characteristic materials. Living amid massive social transformation under conditions of commercialization and urbanization, He Yunchang surprisingly side-steps references to the specific social issues—such as consumerism, migration, and construction and demolition—that have propelled other avant-garde artists in their art making. There is a transcendence of temporal and spatial-bound specificities in his performance; in this sense, he is like a philosopher who uses abstraction to reduce complex phenomena or specific information into their most simplified forms.

The Primitive and Unproductive Body

He Yunchang's conceptually thought-provoking and operationally thoughtful performances have established him as a leading figure within Chinese performance art. Gao Minglu affirmed in 2005:

He Yunchang is the best performance artist to concentrate on body language since Zhang Huan [a well-known performance artist in China whose most important performances were done in the mid 1990s]. Yet, what makes this different from the self-inflicted injury of Zhang Huan is that He Yunchang is not interested in exploring his own psychology or his willpower to endure pain. Instead, he directs the language of masochism toward symbolization and socialization.²⁹

Maya Kóvskaya points out that there is a “life-embracing ethos” evident in He Yunchang's attempt to realize the impossible.³⁰ This ethos had emerged already in his reflection on the suicide of the laid-off engineer and has been consistent throughout his performance art. Death is not a topic that He Yunchang contemplates in his art, even though he is aware that death might be a consequence of some of his actions, before which he always prepares a written will in advance.³¹ It is this warm spirit and belief in individual perseverance against seemingly desperate situations that distinguishes He Yunchang's performance art from those of other artists, including Zhang Huan as well as Zhu Yu, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu, who provoked widespread controversy with their shocking performances in 2000 involving dead infants. Even though most of He Yunchang's performances involve corporal endurance and mental tenacity, these are not the goals of his art. The most unwavering and most important intention guiding He Yunchang's work, I argue, has been his objection to the logic and rationality that are so widely accepted as natural and normal in our society. As art critic and curator Nataline Colonnello argues, He Yunchang's art reflects “the existential reassertion of the artist's will and his intellectual independence” and is “a

reaction against any form of power, whether commonly accepted moral codes or socio-political impositions.”³²

In general, He Yunchang’s performance art can be characterized as consciously oriented toward a philosophy of primitiveness and unproductivity, an ethos that is opposite to the pragmatic and aggressive modern values upheld in developed countries worldwide and enthusiastically embraced by China since the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, China of the twentieth century can be described as a country driven by the desire and struggle to become a technologically advanced and productive modern nation. In particular, since China launched its market reform in 1978 and, in particular, since the 1990s, the logic of development has dominated every aspect of Chinese society. With a spectacular average annual GDP growth rate of 9.8 percent for a successive three decades, China finally realized its century-old goal by proudly becoming the second largest economy of the world in 2008.³³ Anticipating that China will become the largest world economy and complete its modernization by 2030, policy makers have launched a program of nationwide urbanization to fuel the country’s economic growth, which has also become the primary strategy for Chinese nation building.³⁴ In such a pro-growth and pro-urban social context, the dominant social ethos of China has been progress and efficiency, which, I must emphasize, is equally embraced by political and economic elites from the rest of the world under the conditions of global capitalism.

In light of the national imperatives to modernize and urbanize in contemporary China, one may argue that He Yunchang’s art is conceived of as a refusal to conform to these ideologies. Since he has only his own body upon which he can exert total autonomy, he consciously uses his body to project an image of the counter-productive as a way to challenge these dominant social forces—a contest that he, with his sound mind, knows only too well that he does not have much chance to win. His body is his tool and a medium through which he exerts his unyielding will. The physical challenges and danger he constantly inflicts upon his body may be judged by the general public as senseless and abnormal from a position of common sense. However, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that so-called “common sense knowledge” is but a social construct that has been largely internalized by the majority of people to function as a conforming force.³⁵ According to him, “what appears to be a universal property of human experience, namely, the fact that the familiar world tends to be ‘taken for granted,’ perceived as natural” is essentially a social construct that is meant to enable those who possess power to remain in the dominant position.³⁶ Therefore, He Yunchang’s rejection of common sense knowledge can be seen as conscious defiance of dominant power in order to carve out a space for individual autonomy.

The primitiveness associated with his work comes from his preference to work with his naked body, which he sees as a pure and natural



Top: He Yunchang, *The Rock Tours Around Great Britain*, 2006/2007, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: He Yunchang, *Ten Lives*, 2012, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

condition. It is also evident in the fact that most of his performances rely predominantly on his manual power (except those that demand mechanical power to realize), rather than utilizing technology to accomplish tasks such as cutting the river, moving the sunshine, or holding onto an explosion. This primitiveness and single-mindedness, is in strong contrast to the sophisticated, technology-bound, and multi-tasking nature of contemporary urban life. The two most extraordinary examples are the artist's performances *The Rock Tours Around Great Britain* (2006–07) and *Ten Lives* (2012). In *The Rock Tours Around Great Britain*, He Yunchang picked up a rock in a British town on September 23, 2006, and walked counterclockwise along the perimeter of Great Britain for 112 days, covering approximately 2,100 miles to complete a very simple and, for many,



meaningless task: to return the rock to the very location where he picked it up. With innumerable blisters, he accomplished his goal on January 14, 2007. One of He Yunchang's more recent works, *Ten Lives*, was performed in the yard outside of his studio in Beijing. On March 24, 2012, the artist set up a simple camping bed on the barren ground and lay there until the ground was covered by grass, about one month later.

Accompanying primitiveness is unproductivity—He Yunchang's numerous attempts to realize the impossible—which is equally prominent in his performances. It is evident in the works in which he puts himself in contest with weather, cement, explosions, or one hundred people, which necessarily result in unproductive efforts since they are designed to be ineffective in both their conception and realization. In many performances what has been realized is only his attempt. Unproductivity is also inherent in works in which the artist spend hours, days, or even months carrying out a seemingly meaningless task such as deflecting the sunshine to a shadowed wall, allowing water to flow back for five kilometers, or return a rock to its original place. Our modern society has invented many technologies and devices in order to increase productivity and efficiency. We have evolved into a world in which time is becoming increasingly precious, and we are living a forever-faster pace of life because we have so many desires to fulfill. Art critic and curator Jiang Ming comments: “The value of ineffectiveness expressed in He Yunchang's art is in sharp contrast with our contemporary world in which a market-oriented economic principle that pursues maximum profit as its sole goal dominates.”³⁷ In a contemporary culture that is obsessed with and operates on the basis of high productivity and efficiency, walking for 112 days to return a rock to its original place or waiting on the ground for a month for the grass to grow seems unbearably out of place, if not outrageously romantic.

Overall, then, He Yunchang's work reflects his pessimistic perception of society as an overpowering system that restrains individual will and personal autonomy:

You cannot do what you want, because there are social principles, moral restraints, and laws waiting to catch you. No matter where you are and under whatever circumstances, you simply cannot do as you wish. However, my body is mine, so I can reduce its functionality as the way I like it. Therefore, from another perspective, I can do whatever I like with my own body.³⁸

This sense of “no matter where you are and under whatever circumstances, you simply cannot do as you wish” became especially relevant for He Yunchang after he was detained by the police in Buffalo, New York, in 2005 for a performance that he was carrying out in Niagara Falls. This was the only time that he was forced to stop a performance and was charged on misdemeanor counts and fined.³⁹ Again, in New York City in 2007, he

experienced police intervention while performing his *Mahjong, 2007* for PERFORMA 07, the 2nd Visual Art Performance Biennial. This time he was simply asked to put on his clothes and was allowed to continue the performance.⁴⁰ His preference for nudity, which he believes makes the performance more pure, apparently put the public to test; most of us would be distracted by his nakedness as we are “normalized” social people (which we might not like to admit) whose mindset has long been shaped to expect seeing others wearing clothes in public. It is likely that the police would stop him if he were caught performing naked in public in China; nonetheless, it is ironic that both police interventions (and the only two in his artistic career so far) happened in the United States. Performance art scholar Meiling Cheng comments on He Yunchang’s first encounter with the police:

The irony that he encountered in his first US experience was to discover that his ability to exercise in public his “property” rights to his own body was curtailed in a nation that, unlike his home country, aggressively promotes freedom of expression and human rights.⁴¹



He Yunchang,
One-meter Democracy,
2010, performance.
Courtesy of the artist.

This unexpected experience probably confirms He Yunchang’s long time perception of the restrictive nature of society as a whole, no matter the time or the political system, in relation to individual existence. His *One-meter Democracy* (2010) might partially be inspired by this experience even though it reflects directly the current social environment in China. He invited twenty-five friends to vote whether his body should be cut with a one-metre-long and half-to-one-centimetre-deep opening. The result

was that twelve voted in favour, ten against, and the three abstained.⁴² Afterwards, He Yunchang, fully awake as he insisted not to be anesthetized, and his friends witnessed the one-metre cut being exerted on his body that ran from below his collarbone through his chest and all the way below his knee. This is a performance of a violent nature and intense visual dimension. He asserts: “Personally I don’t like violence. I felt pressured by the macro social environment to carry out this work; it is also normal to do this work in a bloody way since the real society is itself very brutal.”⁴³

The intensity of this performance echoes He Yunchang’s *One Rib*, in which he also connected the brutality of his methodology to the brutality of reality itself. His sharp critique is not out of focus. China, with its remarkable economic success, has firmly established itself as a new power in the global arena. Underneath this magnificent success, however, is a world of widening social gaps, striking disparities, and diminishing moralities. In the field of urbanization, the main engine of Chinese economic development and social transformation since 2001, China has rapidly upgraded many of its cities into splendid world-class metropolises that are populated by spectacular skyscrapers ranking among the tallest in the world. Unfortunately, these have often been achieved at the expense of and through the exploitation of the disenfranchised to the benefit of the few. As pointed out by many urbanist scholars, the collusion of political and economic elites has driven most urban development in Chinese cities, particular in Beijing, where He Yunchang resides, resulting in unequal distribution of social resources and unjust restructuring of urban space in which the poor have become poorer and more marginalized, if not deprived of their rights to the city all together. Once striving to be an egalitarian society, China has rapidly degenerated into becoming one of the world’s most polarized societies. The rising social injustice is accompanied by a striking decrease of social morality in the past decade, leading the Chinese philosopher Wang Defeng to characterize the dominant social value of current China as “ruthless self-interested utilitarianism.”⁴⁴ Such is likely the macro social environment that He Yunchang feels is deeply suffocating and that propels him to adopt a cruel approach in carrying out *One-meter Democracy*. Once again, he turns to his body as the site where he makes a “primitive” and “unproductive” sacrifice to demonstrate “the will of the weak.”

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Notes

- ¹ Zhuang Zhou, *Zhuangzi* (Beijing: Chan'gan Press, 2009), 274.
- ² Rachel Lois Clapham, "Mahjong 2007 at PERFORMA07: Interview with He Yun Chang," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7, no. 3 (2008), 87.
- ³ Heinz-Norbert Jocks, "Travels to the Edges of One's Own Will," in *The Wings of Live Art: He Yunchang* (Beijing-Lucerne: Galerie Urs Meile, 2009), 59.
- ⁴ Zhuang Zhou, *Zhuangzi*, 356.
- ⁵ Jiang Ming, "It Feels like Being Caught by Devils—Interview with He Yunchang," April, 8, 2007, <http://www.artda.cn/view.php?tid=305&cid=14/>.
- ⁶ E-mail communication between the author and He Yunchang, February 4, 2014.
- ⁷ Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Beijing: China Millennium Art Museum, 2005), 2.
- ⁸ Thomas Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2007), 10.
- ⁹ Gao Minglu, *The Wall*, 225.
- ¹⁰ Su Du, "Dialogue with Performance Artist He Yunchang," *International Herald Leader*, June 29, 2005.
- ¹¹ Interview by the author with He Yunchang, Beijing, July 25, 2009.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Aylesbury, UK: Chrysona Associates, 2000), e-book, 13.
- ¹⁴ Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 48.
- ¹⁵ Jiang Ming, "It Feels like Being Caught by Devils."
- ¹⁶ He Yunchang, "A Fairy Tale for Grown Ups," in *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews — Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CAA) 1998–2002*, ed. Ai Weiwei (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2002), 35.
- ¹⁷ Jiang Ming, "It Feels like Being Caught by Devils."
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Graham Burchell, eds. Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104.
- ²⁰ This was the first time that He Yunchang was given a tiny materials fee—here, of 800 RMB (slightly less than 100 USD at the time)—to carry out his project for an exhibition. In the past, all his projects were self-funded.
- ²¹ Clapham, "Mahjong 2007 at PERFORMA07."
- ²² Jiang Ming, "It Feels like Being Caught by Devils."
- ²³ Gao Minglu, *The Wall*, 225.
- ²⁴ Tang Xin, "For Casting—Before He Yunchang's Solo Exhibition," in *Ar Chang's Persistence, An Exhibition of He Yunchang's Works* (Beijing: Tokyo Art Project, 2004), 17.
- ²⁵ Gao Minglu, *The Wall*, 226.
- ²⁶ Tang Xin, "For Casting," 17.
- ²⁷ Gao Minglu, *The Wall*, 227.
- ²⁸ Jiang Ming, "It Feels like Being Caught by Devils."
- ²⁹ Gao Minglu, *The Wall*, 225.
- ³⁰ Maya Kóvskaya, *China under Construction: Contemporary Art from the People's Republic* (Beijing: Futurista Art Beijing, 2007), 9.
- ³¹ Interview by the author with He Yunchang, Beijing, July 25, 2009.
- ³² Nataline Colonnello, "On He Yunchang's project 'One Rib'," in *The Wings of Live Art: He Yunchang* (Beijing-Lucerne: Galerie Urs Meile, 2009), 35.
- ³³ Liang-Xin Li, "Chinese Economy after Global Crisis," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 2, no. 2 (2011): 63–70, 69.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989), 18.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Jiang Ming, "The Ability to Exist," <http://www.artda.cn/view.php?tid=305&cid=14/>.
- ³⁸ Jiang Ming, "It Feels like Being Caught by Devils."
- ³⁹ For details about his detention by the police, see Meiling Cheng, "Extreme Performance and Installation from China," *TheatreForum* no. 29 (2006), 88–96. For He Yunchang's reflections on his encounter with the police, see Jiang Ming, "It Feels Like Being Caught by Devils."
- ⁴⁰ Clapham, "Mahjong 2007 at PERFORMA07," 87.
- ⁴¹ Meiling Cheng, "Extreme Performance and Installation from China," 89.
- ⁴² The voting procedure was a pseudo-democratic one, as He Yunchang was determined to get a "yes" vote by all means. He joked in an e-mail communication with the author (on February 8, 2014) that he intended to re-vote, coerce, or bribe his friends to get a "yes." He argues that is how democracy is often being practiced in reality.
- ⁴³ Li Xuhui, "Interview with He Yunchang," *KuArt*, no. 11–12 (2010), 117.
- ⁴⁴ Wang Defeng and Liu Qing, "Contemporary Chinese Cultural Illness and Value Reconstruction," public lecture series offered by the College of Philosophy at Fudan University (Shanghai), September 22, 2012, available at <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/t-owrmin5Ro/>.