

ZHANG HUAN

# Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

A reflection on the provocative and visceral performances of Zhang Huan and a generation of outsiders that redefined contemporary Chinese art during the 1990s.

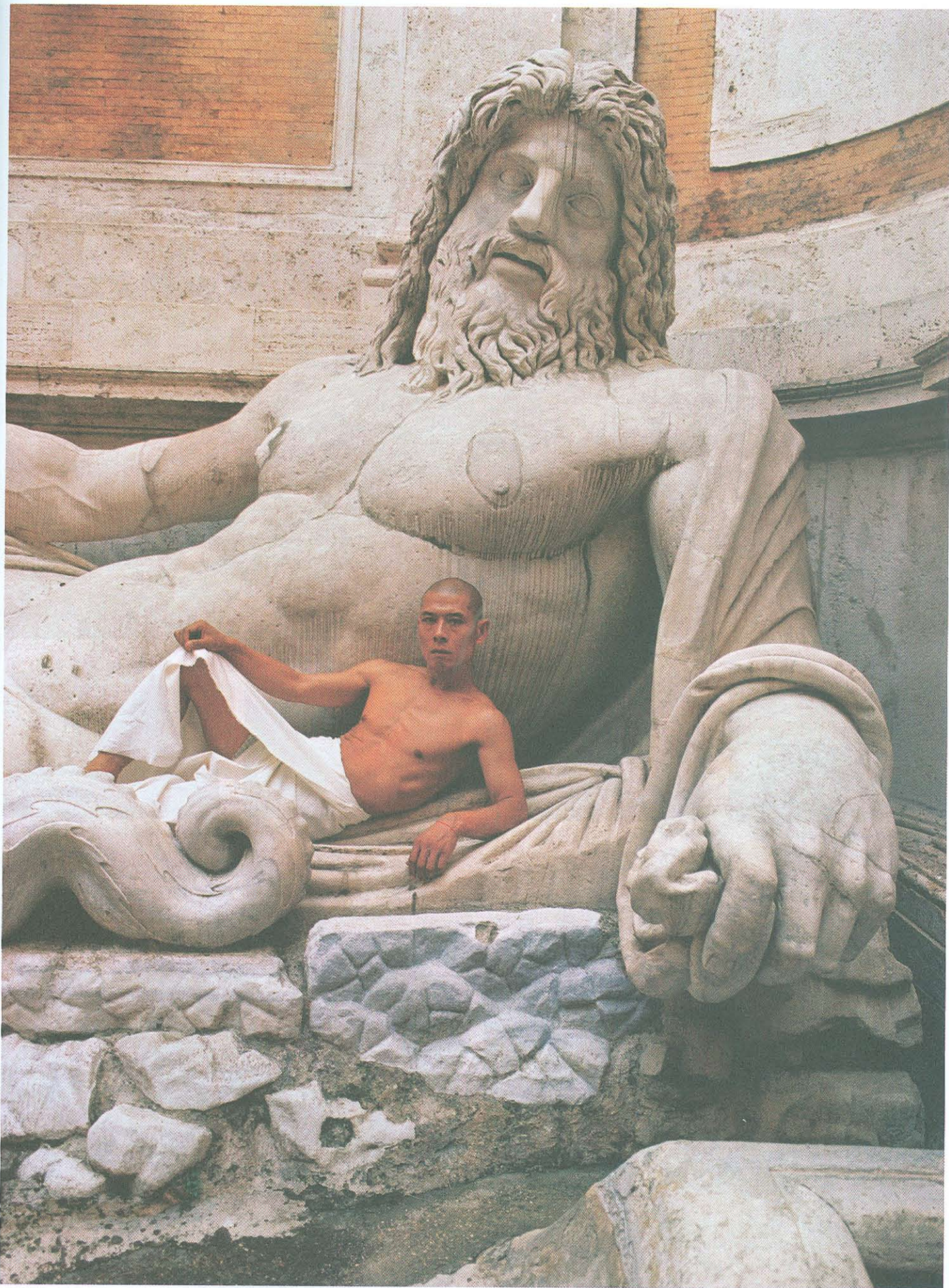
*By Angie Baecker*

**MY ROME**, 2005, performance on the statue of Marforio, Capitoline Museum, Rome, in which the artist reflected on ancient civilizations and Rome's history as an empire.

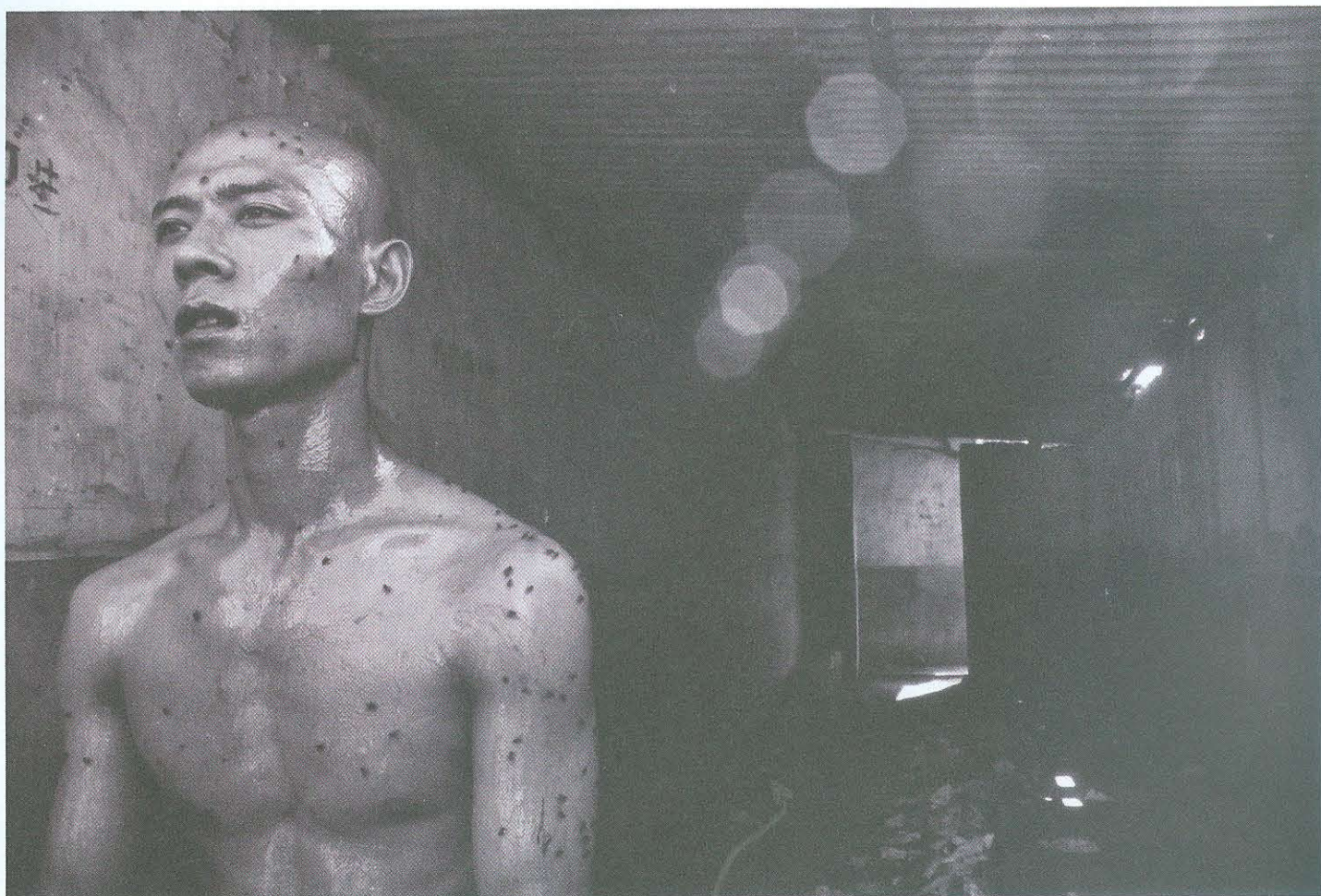
Outside China, few artists are as synonymous with the rise of contemporary Chinese art as Zhang Huan. With his career having taken him from Anyang in his native Henan province to Beijing, New York and Shanghai—transforming him from a pessimistic iconoclast in the early 1990s to a *Newsweek* cover boy in 2004—and his practice ranging from oil painting to performance, photography, sculpture, installation and, most recently, set design, it is difficult to pin down consistent themes in his work. Though his career began with visceral performances staged in self-exile from the predominant trends of China's cultural institutions, his rise to fame coincided with commercial and geopolitical shifts that have softened the intensity of his approach.

Much of the writing about Zhang begins the narrative of his career with his involvement with the Beijing East Village artist community in the early 1990s, where he and a handful of other artists and poets collaborated on a short-lived flurry of challenging performances that have since

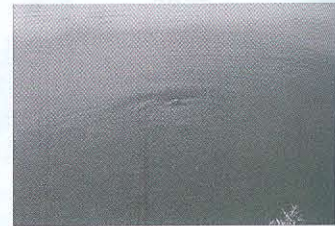








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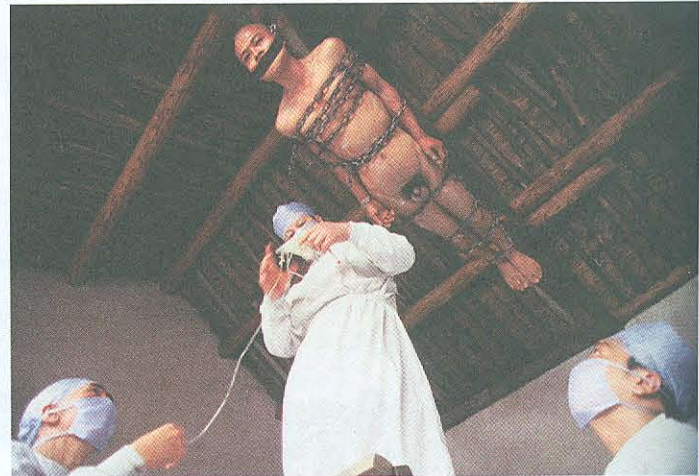
1b.

**1a. 12M<sup>2</sup>, 1994**, documentation of a 40-minute performance. In the height of midsummer heat, the artist covered himself in honey and fish oil and sat unmoving in a public latrine in Beijing's East Village, allowing swarms of flies to crawl all over his body.

**1b. 12M<sup>2</sup>, 1994**, documentation of performance. After exiting the latrine, the artist stepped into a nearby polluted pond, gradually immersing himself until he was out of sight; the flies on his body were caught in the water and drowned.

**2. 65 KG, 1994**, documentation of an hour-long performance, in which the artist was suspended-naked in chains in the East Village. After doctors had inserted a plastic tube into one of his veins, Zhang allowed his blood to drip onto a heated metal plate below.

**3. WEeping ANGELS, 1993**, documentation of performance on the steps of the National Art Gallery in Beijing. After pouring red paint over his body, Zhang reassembled plastic baby doll parts into a complete child, which he then tied to a rope in the exhibition hall.



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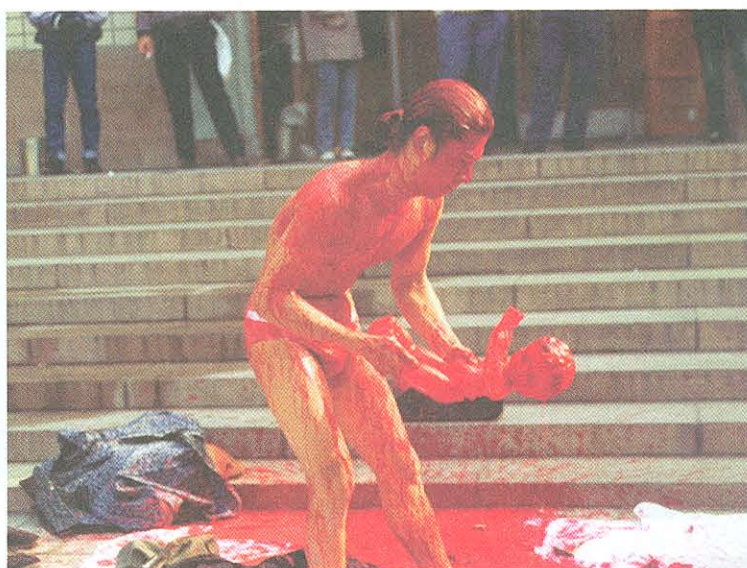
become a storied chapter in China's history of contemporary art. Yet Zhang's beginnings as an artist had taken root before his arrival in the East Village. Born in 1965 into a family of workers, Zhang developed an early interest in the arts. He entered Henan University in 1984, where he was a classical enthusiast who identified with the romanticism of the 19th-century French painter Jean-François Millet, whose work depicts the life of peasant farmers; Zhang's admiration perhaps stemmed from his own rural upbringing. His graduation piece was a painting entitled *Red Cherries* (1988), which portrayed a mother peacefully nursing her baby next to a bowl of cherries. After concluding his studies, he remained at Henan University, teaching for four years in the art department.

Zhang arrived in Beijing in 1991 for a two-year program of advanced training at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), one of the country's most prestigious institutions, whose program he was attracted to for its emphasis on European classical tradition. When he moved into Dashanzhuang—the ramshackle collection of some 65 farmhouses bordering a garbage dump that came to be known as the East Village two years later—there was very little in the fabric of his life that might have predicted the violence and masochism of the performance work that was to establish his career. In interviews, Zhang has described seeing Tseng Kwong-Chi's performance photographs—portraying the artist in famous sites all over the world—in the CAFA library, but that otherwise he had minimal contact with experimental art.

The genesis of Zhang's career as a performance artist can be traced to *Weeping Angels* (1993), his unannounced contribution to a showcase of advanced works by the 13 students in his CAFA class at the National Art Museum of China, all of whom had contributed to the exhibition hall's rental fee by pooling their meager finances. Five minutes before the exhibition's opening, Zhang stood on a white sheet laid at the venue's entrance, dressed only in his underwear, and poured a jar of red paint over his body. He then knelt to pick up an assortment of plastic baby doll parts, which he reassembled into a complete child before heading into the exhibition hall where he tied the doll to a rope. Critics have interpreted the performance as a protest against various forms of state-inflicted violence, from forced abortions to the traumas of modern Chinese history. Zhang's intervention caused the museum staff to shut down the exhibition (although it should be noted that submissions from two fellow artists, Ma Baozhong and Wang Shihua, had been rejected before the opening), and earned him the indignation of his peers, most of whom had little interest in experimental art.

Just a few days later, Zhang met and posed for Rong Rong, the Fujianese photographer whose documentation of and eventual collaboration with Zhang during his early performances have played an essential and often uncredited role in cementing Zhang's reputation. Like Zhang, Rong Rong had moved to Beijing from the provinces to pursue his craft, and in Dashanzhuang the burgeoning clique came to share a camaraderie born of the common squalor of their living conditions and a sense of exile, rejecting not only the mainstream but also Beijing's Yuanmingyuan artist colony, where other artists had taken up residence.

The East Village cast of characters quickly came to include Ai Weiwei, who had just returned to Beijing in 1993 after living in the United States for just over a decade. At the time, Ai's own practice was still emerging, yet to Zhang and the East Villagers, his interest in their work was immensely validating. Ai was admired for many reasons: for being the son of Ai Qing (1910–1996), the poet whose fame made him a household name in China; for his involvement with the Stars, widely considered the first avant-garde art collective in China; for his time in New York, where he hobnobbed with Chinese and American intelligentsia alike; and for his sage and



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## Zhang poured red paint over his body and reassembled plastic baby doll parts into a complete child.

contemplative poise. On June 2, 1994, Zhang performed *12m²*, which remains perhaps the most iconic performance of his career. He would later describe it to Rong Rong as a tribute to Ai, who was made to clean filthy public toilets as a child during his father's exile in the western Xinjiang autonomous region.

Zhang's execution of *12m²* sparked off the string of performances for which the East Village is best known. The images that survive today are largely Rong Rong's documentation of the event, a performance for only a handful of people that has since become legendary: naked and slathered in honey and fish oil, Zhang sat stationary in a festering public latrine during the height of the Beijing summer, unflinching as flies flocked to his body. "The worst was watching flies trying to get into his ears," wrote Rong Rong, describing the stench and silence of the intervention. "All I could remember was the noise of the flies and the sound of the shutter lens . . . I felt that I couldn't breathe, it felt like the end of life."

Zhang's own statement of the event was later published in Ai Weiwei's agenda-setting avant-garde journal of contemporary art in China, *Black Cover Book* (1994). Edited with artist Xu Bing and curator Feng Boyi, the book featured Zhang's performance among a selection of others. "The creative inspiration for my work comes from the most ordinary, easily overlooked aspects of life," wrote Zhang. "For example, we eat, work, rest and shit everyday—the banal aspects of quotidian existence that allow us to observe the most essential aspects of humanity, and the conflicting relationships within our environment."

Most art-historical accounts of the performance include Zhang's emergence from the toilet, from where he walked into a nearby pond until fully submerged, the flies on his skin drowning in the water's surface—a powerful and cathartic gesture of closure. Yet





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## Zhang and more than 40 men entered a fish pond in the attempt to displace the water by one meter.

Zhang's original statement detailing the specifics of the event does not include walking into the pond, and the water coda exists today only because Rong Rong's gaze followed.

Although separated from *12m<sup>2</sup>* by only a few days, Zhang's next performance, *65 KG* (1994), articulated a shift from corporeal concerns to a more metaphysical confrontation with death. Naming the work after his own body weight, Zhang suspended himself with chains—naked and facing the floor—from the ceiling of an East Village home, where he had three doctors from a nearby hospital insert a plastic tube into one of his veins, allowing his blood to splatter and burn on a hot-plate on the ground below. In addition to the East Village artist community, a wider group of art critics and photojournalists had been invited. The visceral effect of the hour-long performance was overwhelming, the smell of burnt blood mingling with Zhang's dripping sweat caused several audience members to pass out.

Zhang performed *65 KG* the same weekend as part two of Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch*. Ma began by cooking fish in front of an audience, but instead of eating it, he attached a long plastic hose to his penis, then sucked and blew through the other end. Both of these nude performances shocked what was otherwise a small community of migrant workers. The fallout from the weekend was severe, and the police arrested Ma and forced others, including Rong Rong and Zhang, to abandon their modest homes and go into hiding. A brutal anonymous attack the day before the 45th anniversary of the state on October 1 put Zhang in hospital with head injuries, and when the shaken East Village community re-emerged months later, its members settled in various locations across the city. But although this marked the end of the two-year existence of the East Village in its Dashanzhuang incarnation, the community grew as word of its experimental practices reached similarly invested ears elsewhere in Beijing.

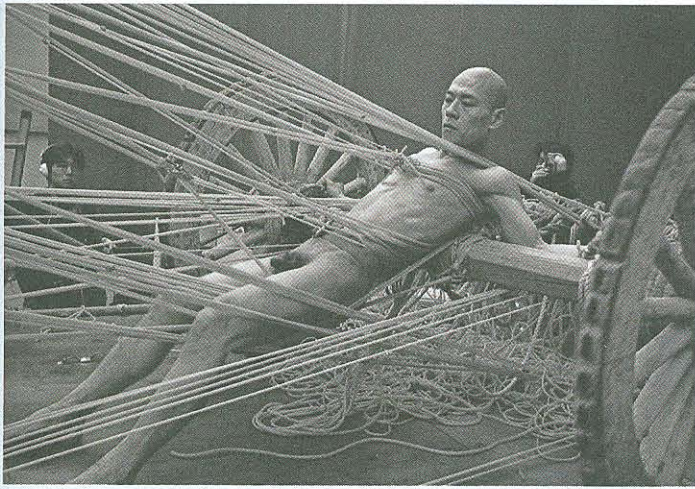
Despite the setback, Zhang continued his confrontation of death in his contribution to the group performance *Original Sound* (1995), a collaboration between 12 artists—including Ma Liuming, Rong Rong, Cang Xin, Wang Shihua, Curse, Song Dong and Zhu Fadong—in which each contributed an individual performance in an attempt to embody primordial sounds. Zhang emerged naked on the side of a slow highway in the middle of the night, laughing hysterically. Standing up and falling down until he reached the edge of the road, he jumped down into a corner beneath the highway, where he stuffed handfuls of earthworms into his mouth, and then lay motionless on the ground, allowing them to crawl out before he finally turned over on his side and sobbed.

If *65 KG* was an escalation of the confrontation with mortality that Zhang had begun in *12m<sup>2</sup>*, his performance in *Original Sound* embodied a sense of hysteria provoked by the prospect of death and articulated the physical decay that ensues. He was only shaken from this line of morbid inquiry when complications surrounding his preparations for a performance entitled *Cage* (1996) resulted in a terrifying experience that served to confirm his lust for life: while practicing for the performance, in which Zhang was to ride around Beijing's subway system in a human-sized metal box with only a small window on its side, Zhang accidentally locked himself inside the container. In a statement in *Rong Rong's East Village 1993–1998* (2003), a photo documentation of the community, Zhang describes his elation after being released from the container: "After I finally walked out of the box . . . I felt that I had experienced a state between life and death . . . Nothing is more precious than being alive. This scary metal box—I will never go near it."

As the output of the East Village artists grew, the authorial voices of individual artists became stronger and more identifiable, contributing to performances in greater and more independent capacities. Zhang continued to make collaborative works, such as *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), in which he and nine other East Village artists gathered on Miaofeng Mountain on the outskirts of Beijing and stacked their naked bodies on top of each other with the aim of adding a meter to the mountain's height. Later that day they staged *Nine Holes* (1995), with the men lying prostrate with their penises inserted into holes that they dug in the ground while the women aligned their vaginas with earthy protrusions. But Zhang's appetite for pursuing projects as an independent authorial voice was growing. In 1997, he realized his first commission abroad, at the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, where he staged *3,006 Cubic Meters/65 KG*, an attempt to pull down the museum using a system of plastic tubes running from his body to the building's exterior. Where the authorship of *To Add One Meter* has subsequently been disputed by its participant artists, the equally iconic performance *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond* (1997), in which Zhang and more than 40 men entered a pond in an attempt to displace the water by one meter, stands largely as an epilog to this brief period of collaborative works. By this time, it seems Zhang had learned how to protect the sovereignty of his work—he hired migrant workers to enter the pond instead of collaborating with his peers.

Perhaps because tales of New York loomed large in the consciousness of an artist community named after one of its neighborhoods, or perhaps because it offered greater financial opportunities than China's still-nascent gallery scene, Zhang moved to the United States in 1998, catching the tail end of a precedent set not only by Ai Weiwei, who moved to the US in 1981, but also Gu Wenda (1987), Xu Bing (1990) and Cai Guo-Qiang (1995). In New York, Zhang quickly fell into a schedule of performances and commissions from top cultural institutions, due partly to the

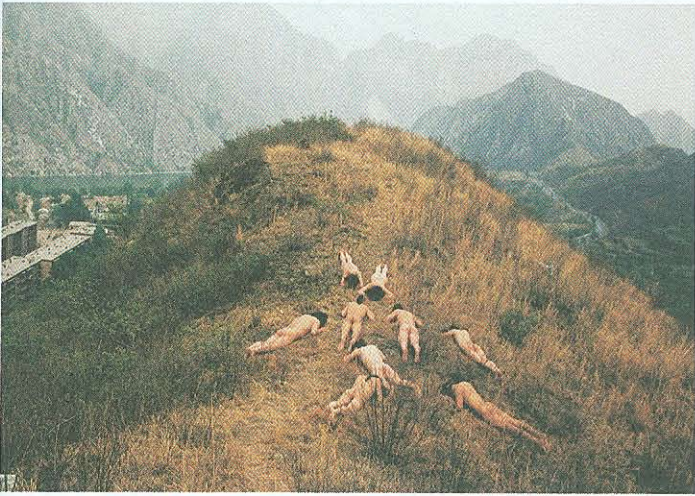




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**4. TO RAISE THE WATER LEVEL IN A FISH POND, 1997,** documentation of performance, in which the artist and 40 participants stood in a pond to raise the water level by a meter.

**7. NINE HOLES, 1995,** documentation of a collaborative performance at Miaofeng Mountain, near Beijing, in which the participants aligned their genitals with holes in the ground.

**5. 3,006 CUBIC METERS/65 KG, 1997,** black-and-white fiber based print, documentation of performance at the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

**8. TO ADD ONE METER TO AN ANONYMOUS MOUNTAIN, 1995,** documentation of a performance in which Zhang and others lay in a pile on Miaofeng Mountain, near Beijing.

**6. CAGE, 1996,** documentation of preparation for a performance in which the artist locked himself inside a metal box that only had one narrow slit through which to breathe.

**9. PILGRIMAGE - WIND AND WATER IN NEW YORK, 1998,** documentation of performance for Asia Society's exhibition "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" at PS 1, New York.



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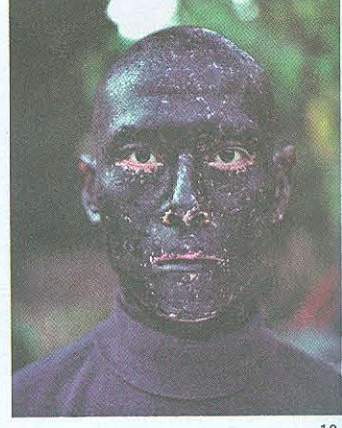
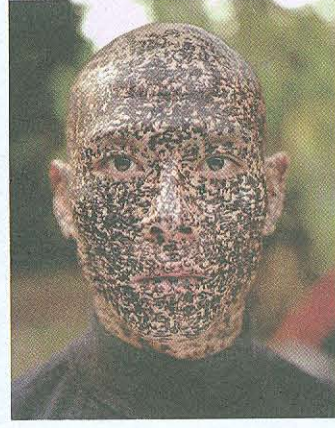
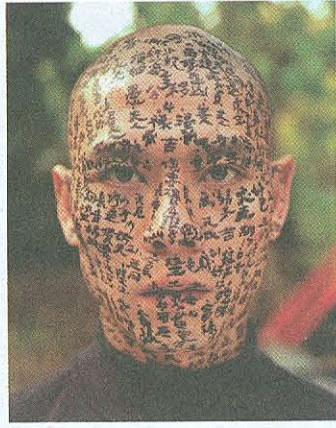
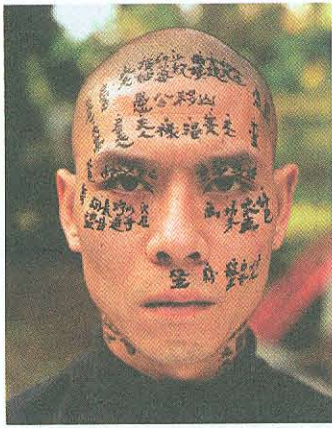




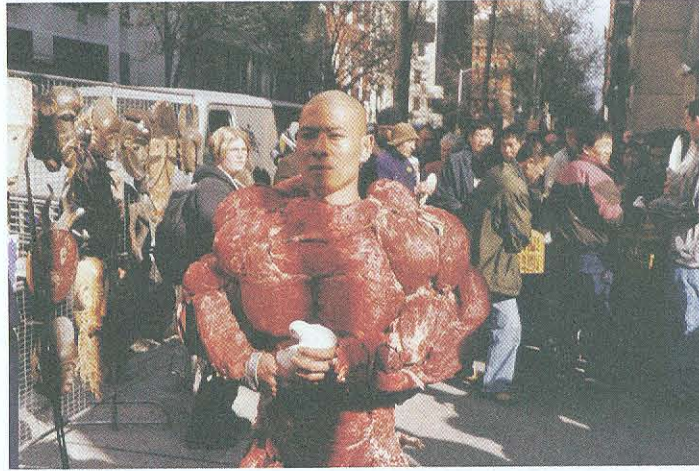




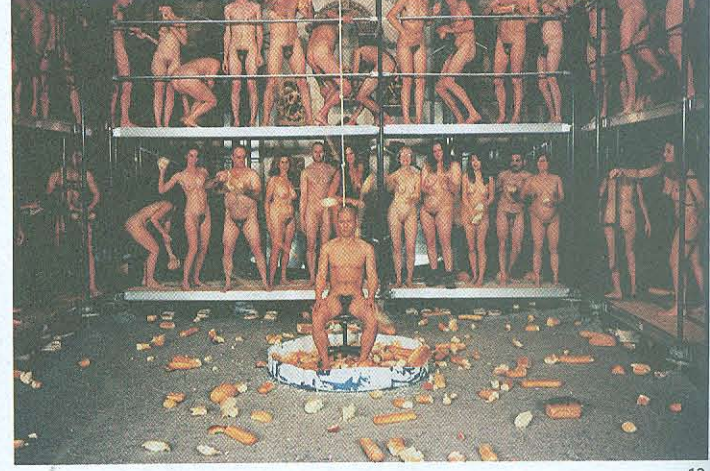




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(Previous Spread) **SEMELE**, 2009, still from a rehearsal for Zhang's production of the 1743 opera by Handel, depicting a scene in which sumo wrestlers compete and yet fall in love.

**12. MY AMERICA (HARD TO ACCLIMATIZE)**, 1999, documentation of performance, in which 56 volunteers pelted the artist with bread at the Seattle Asian Art Museum.

**10. FAMILY TREE**, 2000, documentation of performance staged in New York, in which three calligraphers wrote Chinese proverbs on the artist's face over the course of a day.

**13. SEMELE**, 2009, performance still from a production of *Semele*, in which Juno (right) awakens Somnus, the god of sleep (left), to ask for help defeating her husband's mistress.

**11. MY NEW YORK**, 2002, documentation of performance, in which the artist wore a suit of raw meat and walked the streets of New York, handing white doves to onlookers.

**14. Zhang Huan** giving directions on the set of *Semele*, a 1743 opera by Handel, that he directed and set-designed at the Théâtre Royal de La Monnaie, Brussels, 2009.



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reputation he had built in China, as well as the changing appetite of a cultural establishment that was beginning to look outside its own context for artistic talent.

Zhang began to incorporate explicitly Chinese objects in his performances, such as in *Pilgrimage – Wind and Water*, his first major work in the city, staged at P.S.1 in 1998 for the Asia Society exhibition “Inside Out: New Chinese Art.” Lying on a sheet of ice placed on a traditional wooden Chinese bed, Zhang attempted to instantiate the cultural shock he felt upon arriving in the city. With nine pedigree dogs of different breeds tethered to the bed, the performance presented a stark contrast between the pampered animals and Zhang’s discomfort as he attempted “to feel [the fear and culture shock] with my body, just as I feel the ice.”

Over the next few years, the focus of Zhang’s works began to shift from internal matters of the body to external matters of culture and state. In a similar vein to *Pilgrimage*, the artist’s performance of *My America (Hard to Acclimatize)* registered his discomfort, even humiliation, with the difficulties of assimilating into the US. Staged at the Seattle Asian Art Museum in 1999, he had 56 naked American volunteers stand in tiered rows on a scaffold and throw stale bread at him. However, by 2002, Zhang was assimilated enough to strike a nerve among American audiences with *My New York*, a post-9/11 performance for the Whitney Biennial, in which he walked through the streets of Manhattan in a bodysuit made of raw meat—shaped to make him resemble a Hulk-like superhero—handing out white doves to onlookers who then released them in an immediate evocation of the US as a superpower. In a reference to the US bodybuilding culture, he struggled under the weight of his raw musculature in a false display of strength that spoke to the geopolitical and psychological anxieties of the time.

Zhang’s exhibition schedule began taking him to increasingly remote cultural contexts and institutions in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, and the focus of his performances became more scattered. In *My Rome* (2005), he bafflingly climbed around a white marble statue, while in *Seeds of Hamburg* (2002) the artist appeared in a large, square birdcage at Der Kunstverein, naked and covered in honey and sunflower seeds. *Seeds of Hamburg* was reminiscent of *12m<sup>2</sup>*—this time, the concoction he wore was designed to encourage 28 doves and pigeons to peck at his body—and yet the performance had none of the socio-political relevance or raw intensity of the earlier work in the East Village latrine.

But Zhang was increasingly working less with performance and more with material forms of art practice, and often in mediums such as installation and printmaking. The transition is most clearly illustrated in works such as *Family Tree* (2000), in which he invited three calligraphers to write proverbs and fables in Chinese ink on his face until it was completely covered, obscuring his features in an attempt to invoke his own anonymity that was nonetheless clearly evocative of the use of blackface makeup in 19th- and 20th-century US theater and television. The work was not staged as a performance event complete with an audience, but instead for the camera, and it exists as a limited-edition series of prints of which Zhang is the sole author. In keeping with the performative but not collaborative spirit of his early works, Zhang has defined these working methods as “performance-based concept photographs.”

By 2006, both Zhang’s practice and ambitions outgrew the US, and he moved to Shanghai, a city he had only visited once before. In its southern suburbs, he set up a massive, highly departmentalized studio, occupying 75 acres, where he employs more than 60 assistants. There, he oversees the fabrication of a wide variety of monumental works, such as monumental installations of animal skins, sculptures in copper and paintings made of the ash from burned incense, depicting everything from anonymous flags



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**In the Shanghai suburbs, Zhang set up a massive studio, occupying 75 acres, where he employs more than 60 assistants.**

rippling in the breeze to fashion designer Christian Dior “in the comfort of his country home,” as was explained on the wall text at an exhibition at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2008. The studio is prolific, fabricating works in media with which Zhang had never previously worked, a reflection perhaps of the boundless opportunity and cheap labor and material offered in his home country, itself now a rising superpower.

Zhang’s return to China, however, is by no means a rejection of his relationship with the US, as he continues to mount ambitious shows in New York, as well as in Europe. Increasingly, Zhang has turned to Buddhist themes, such as in his giant sculptural series of fragments of the Buddha’s body re-created in ash and copper. He is also currently engaged as the director and set designer of an experimental production of Händel’s 1743 opera *Semele*, which premiered in September at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels and is due to travel to China in 2010. Despite the apparent lack of congruity—*Semele* is a comedy based on an ancient Greek tale of deities and adultery—Zhang says he is intrigued by the plot’s relation to Buddhist ideas of reincarnation and karma.

To many of Zhang’s East Village peers, the changes in the tone of his work have been stark and even disappointing. But to Zhang, it is a question of developing expertise and savvy. In a catalog essay for his major retrospective at the Asia Society in 2007, he wrote, “At the time, I was simple and naive; my only goal was to realize the performance. Afterward, I signed contracts with photographers and videographers for every performance piece . . . I believe that my experience is a good example for my colleagues and younger artists to be more professional.” Zhang’s involvement with *Semele* looks to sustain a performative element in his work, even if he is not the protagonist, and yet his original stake in the presence and simplicity of his own body as a medium for direct action appears to have been lost.