

KING KONG

ISSUE 10

ZHANG
HUAN
NG

by YISHU WANG

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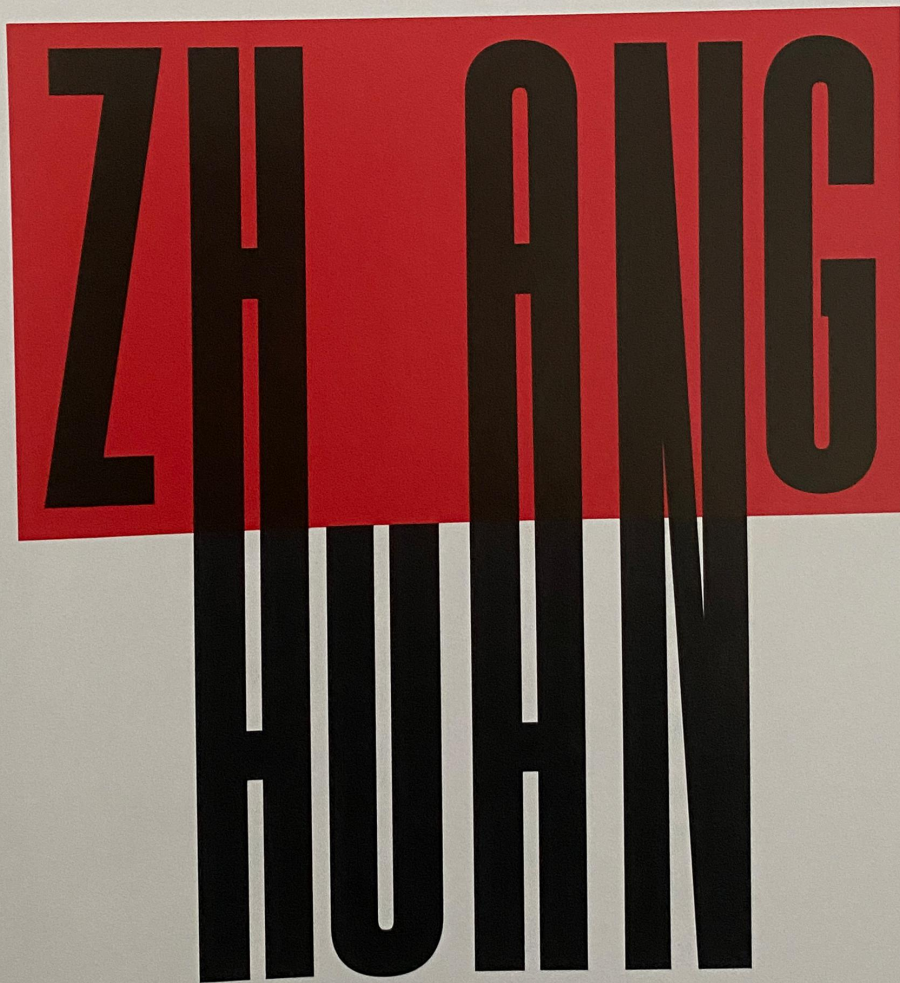


The artist Zhang Huan was born in China in 1965. For the West, this year marked the birth of Generation X, for China it marked a generation born at the start of the Cultural Revolution.

These generations, arguably both children of "revolutions", grew up through rather different iterations of the 70's and 80's. For the Western Youthquake, a sartorial progression from hippy flares to shoulder pads via Punk were markers of the decades. For Chinese youth things were a lot more serious. This generation, having avoided being part of the "sent down" youth of the decades before, were part of this post-Mao but pre-Tiger economy, and times were tough.

However, in the 90's artists and creatives from both sides of the world entered the decade at a time when the globalisation of Art had entered a strong period of growth.

His time in New York in the late 90's and 00's showed a sizing up of his performance art, and his return to China revived an interest in his country of birth. Now from his base in Shanghai his work looks beyond his own identity to address the complex issues of identity of China itself.



PHOTOGRAPHS **YISHU WANG** STYLING **AUDREY HU** / CREATURE STUDIO
MAKE-UP **MOUNTAIN GAO** PRODUCTION **QIU QIU / YIXIN**
PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT LIUMUMU PRODUCTION ASSISTANT BOBBI

KING KONG A/W 20

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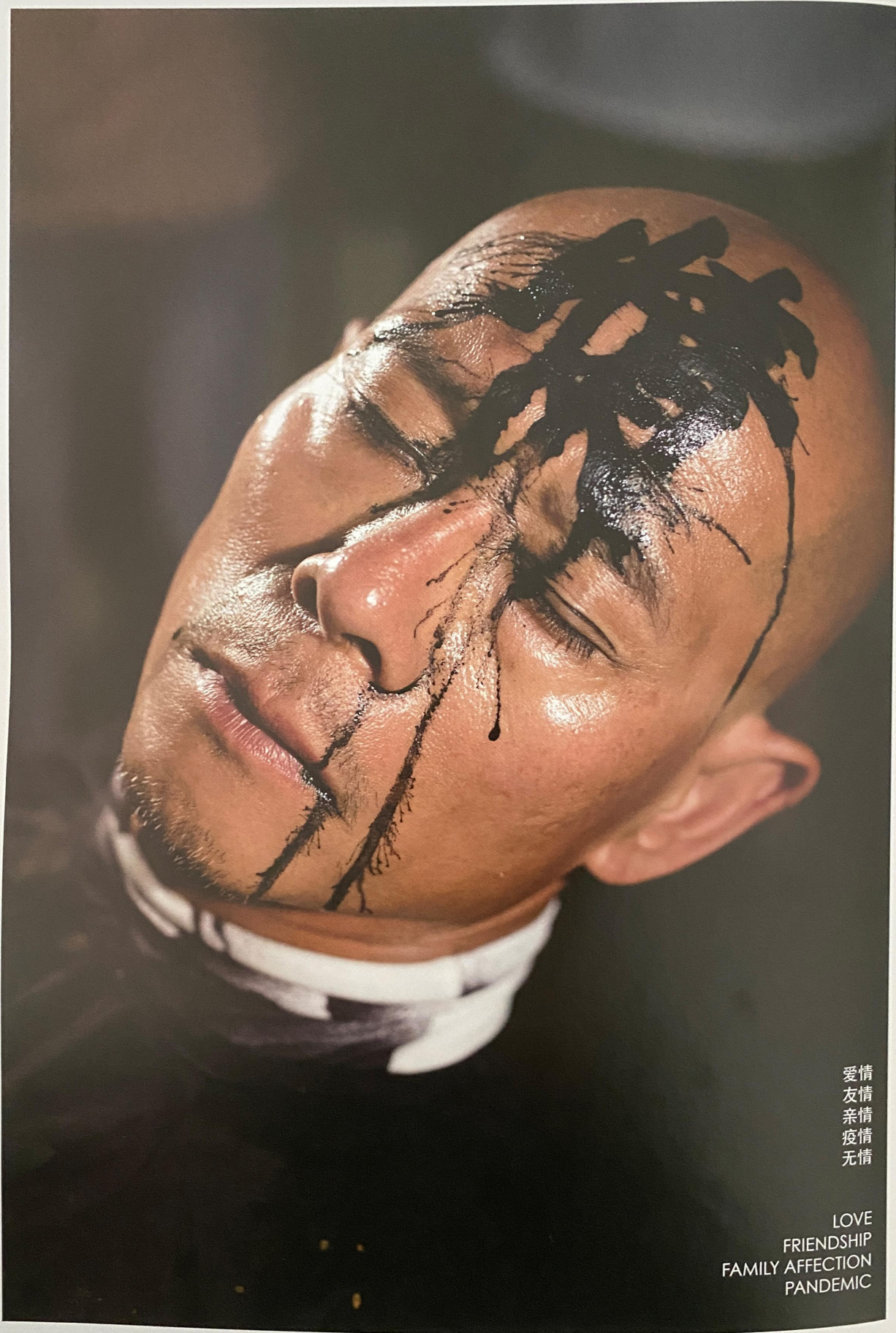
Coat RAF SIMONS
Pants PRONOUNCE





谁怕谁?
为什么?

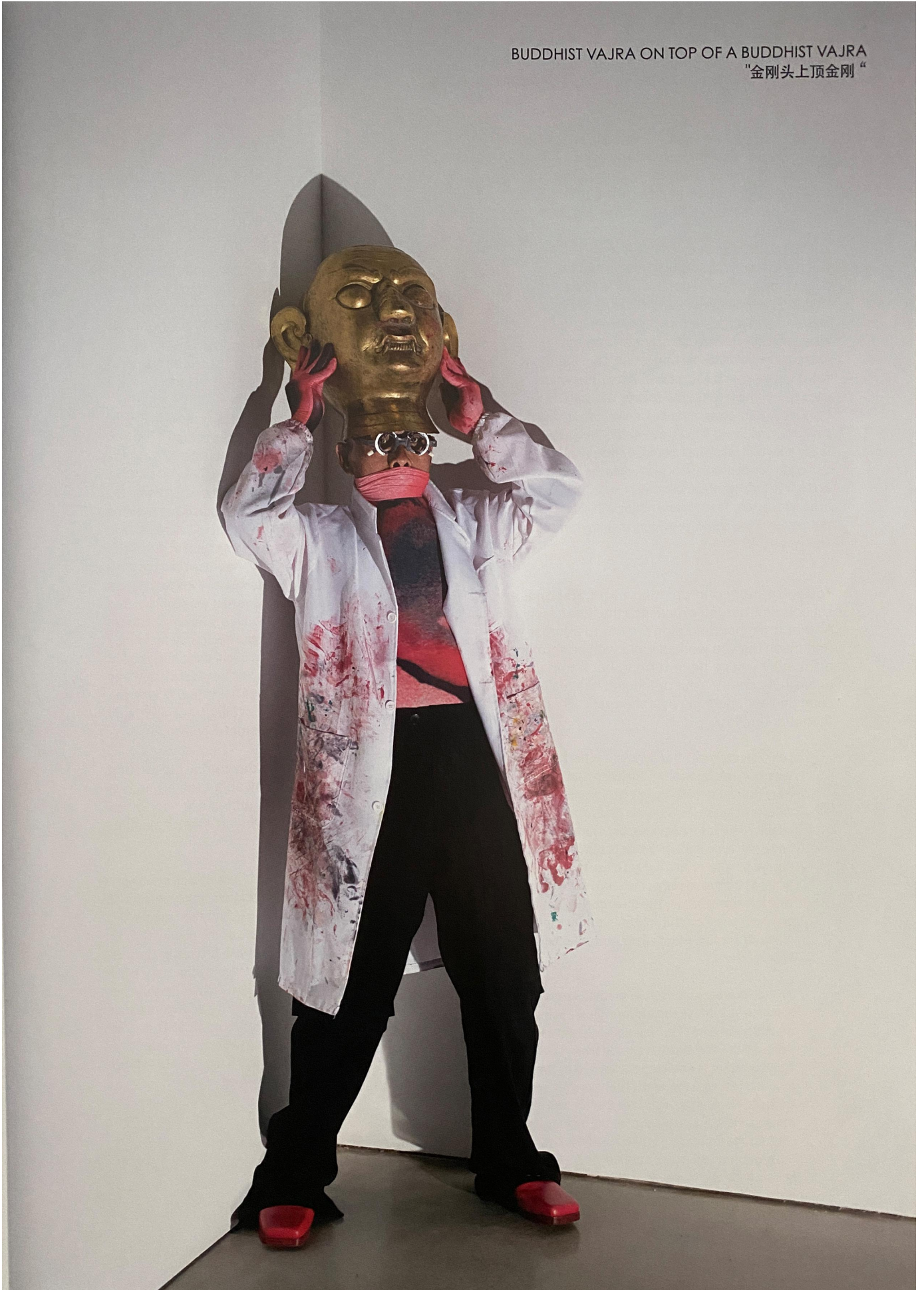
WHO CARES?
WHY?



爱情
友情
亲情
疫情
无情

LOVE
FRIENDSHIP
FAMILY AFFECTION
PANDEMIC

BUDDHIST VAJRA ON TOP OF A BUDDHIST VAJRA
“金刚头上顶金刚”



IN CONVERSATION WITH NORA HAGDAHL

NORA HAGDAHL: I want to start asking about where you grew up. You are born in Anyang in China, but spent your first years of life living on the countryside. What do you remember from this time and how do you feel that China has changed since then?

ZHANG HUAN: I was born in 1965, just prior to the Cultural Revolution in a small town called Anyang in Henan Province. When I was one year old I went to live with my grandparents, who lived on the countryside. I grew up around my grandmother, uncle, aunt and other children. We spent our days cutting grass in the fields, collecting ferments, clearing fallen leaves, and climbing trees. The earth was yellow and everybody wore blue-colored Mao suits. Our main foods were sweet potatoes, corn, carrots, and cabbage. The living conditions at that time were really poor and much has changed since then. China's rapid development from poverty to the country that it is to today is remarkable and marks itself out in human history. In the future, China will surely be the center of the world, providing mankind with a new way of life.

You were trained in painting at a traditional art school. How did you experience the time in school? At that time, painting didn't seem to interest you that much but you worked more with performance art. Lately you've been turning back to painting again, how come? Your practicing has really been changing and mutating over the years, what is your thoughts on that?

I didn't learn much from my time at the Kaifeng University. It was basically a Soviet system, where you were to paint something only with a sense of texture, volume or space. But it was a time in my life when I opened my eyes for new places, saw a lot of things and came in contact with new books. At that time, I always felt that I could not get close to the plane, so instead I tried to use other materials and techniques that felt closer to me. The directness of using my own body made me feel grounded and moved me the most. As a result, I started my art career doing performance art.

No matter what materials or methods I use, my inspiration has always come from ordinary people and my understanding of the relationship between their lives and the environment around them. I only care about whether the message conveyed by the work is consistent with my heart. I believe that both my work and I is changing over time, but the DNA always remains the same. In the process of making my art, what I try to experience is not the physical limits of the body, but rather the survival and truth of the human body and being.

What's also changed since you started is how you work. You started of working in East Village in Beijing in the 90s, a hub for China's first generation of performance artists. You were a group of artists, working both together and separately in a very low-key part of town. Now you lead a studio of over 100 employees. Do you want to tell me a bit about the time in East Village?

East village was a place I rented in Beijing, between the third and fourth ring roads. Next to it was a huge dump. After I settled down, a lot of my friends and acquaintances moved over there too, as the rents were cheap. The name "East Village" was borrowed from the East Village in New York, as an expression of our admiration for the free spirit of New York's East Village artists. I had also read the book *Thoughts on Contemporary Art in America*, written by Taiwanese artist Yang Zhihong, and heard about East Village in New York from Ai Weiwei, who was just back from America. I felt inspired, and I thought that China needed an East Village too. But our East Village was a village in its true meaning. It was the Dashancun Village of Dongfengxiao County in the Chaoyang District of Beijing.

How do you experience the day-to-day life in such a huge studio? We often think about the artist as a sole creator, but nowadays that is not very often true. How do you reflect on your artistry as a collaborative practice?

Individual creation is a campaign by one person, while team creation is the division of labor. The role I play in my team is more like the abbot of a temple or the commander in chief in war. I am the one to develop the principle and route. It is under my command what to do, when to start and where to finish, while my team members help me with production. No matter what materials or method I use, the most important thing for me is to create something of my own. What's the point of living if you don't make your own work?

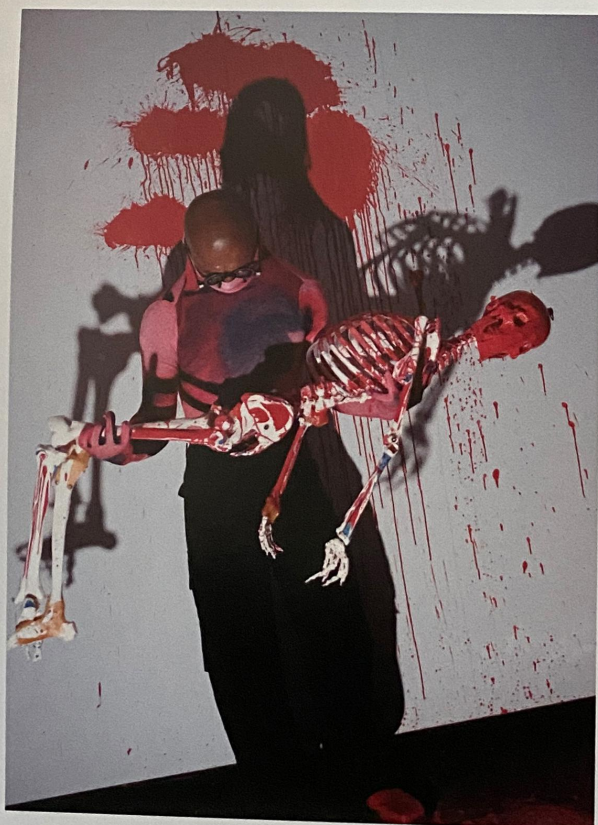


隔离器

ISOLATOR

Top, pants, shoes & necklace PRONOUNCE

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When you started working as an artist, your work wasn't very well received in China. At your first show at the National Art Gallery in Beijing you showed the work *Angel*, which resulted in the exhibition being shut down as well as you being forced to write a public self-criticism and paying a fine. How has the art scene and climate for art in China changed since then and how do you feel your work is received now, when you have gained huge recognition from other parts of the world?

The attitude of Chinese authority towards art is becoming more and more free. No other country is as open and free as China is today. For me, no matter how the external environment changes and how others view my work, what I want to do in my life as an artist is included in these words: "Zhang Huan, born in Henan, China in 1965."

In between the East Village and now you spent many years in New York City. What brought you to the city and what drove you away from it? Did you find making art in a Western context different from perceiving your career in Shanghai?

To live in New York was a dream when I was young. I spent eight years living on the other side of the earth and traveled to many other countries during that period. It was precisely because of the distance from my native land that I could see myself, my traditions and the most essential treasures of my ancestors more clearly. Then, New York lost its mystery, charm and vitality while things in China seemed to be the opposite. The experience overseas made me thoroughly understand the circumstances for Chinese people living abroad. My work *Hard to Acclimatize* (1999) is the expression of that situation. But I also gained a lot of inspiration from the eight years I spent away from my home and felt that I realized more clearly the direction my heart wanted for my art. It was a time when I experimented a lot with different techniques and gained a lot of instructive experience. This broadened the scope of my creating, and brought me a more powerful self-confidence and an independent mind, which were the more important things I treasured.

I've always understood your performances as a kind of ritual, letting the body carry out a simple task. I'm thinking about for example *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond*, *Family Tree* or *My America*. The body has often been at center in your practice. What are your thoughts on the body as a medium? You are in the first generation of artists in China working in the tradition of performance, how do you connect your own practice to early performance artists like Yoko Ono or Joseph Beuys?

I don't think it's important. Why would it be? The only criterion for an artist is sincerity. Your inner world is a ruler. This is a completely free and real state. You can do it when you want to do it. Beauty comes when you can make it real. The power of "truth" is too great.

Today you call yourself a Buddhist and your beliefs are visible in your practice through for example large Buddha sculptures. As I said, I've always felt you had a ritual element in your practice. When did you start exploring religion and what part does it have in your life and art today?

I believe in Buddhism. Buddhism opened a gate for me to understand the world and humanity itself. You are Buddha, I am Buddha and everyone is Buddha. We are all heroes at heart. Like the ashes that I collected from temples to use in my work, it is not just material but bears a collective spirit and soul as well as blessings for the people in China.

What do you hope to attain with your art? As it's ever changing, what things would you like for people to bring with them experiencing or reading about your work?

The artist should first of all have something to say and he has no feelings if he has no words. When he feels a lot, he shall speak out, express it and reproduce it. This is the fundamental condition of the artist. There are many ways of expression. One is to bring forward that what you would not have dared or been ashamed to say; the other is to take out a soul from their inner world. I hope my work can bring people real feelings, and make people experience and discover the true self.

The theme of this issue of *King Kong* is 'numbers'. Numbers can be symbols, tokens, signs and metrics of success. Do numbers play a role in your life/work, or have any special meaning to you?

Humans like to have money. For example businessmen like to accumulate wealth, the emperor in the past loved to live long, and today's celebrities like having fans. All these are numbers. However, in the end these numbers doesn't matter, because your life is short and insignificant to this world.



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Top & pants PRONOUNCE

我的祖国我的家
祖国万岁
MY MOTHERLAND MY HOME
LONG LIVE TO THE MOTHERLAND

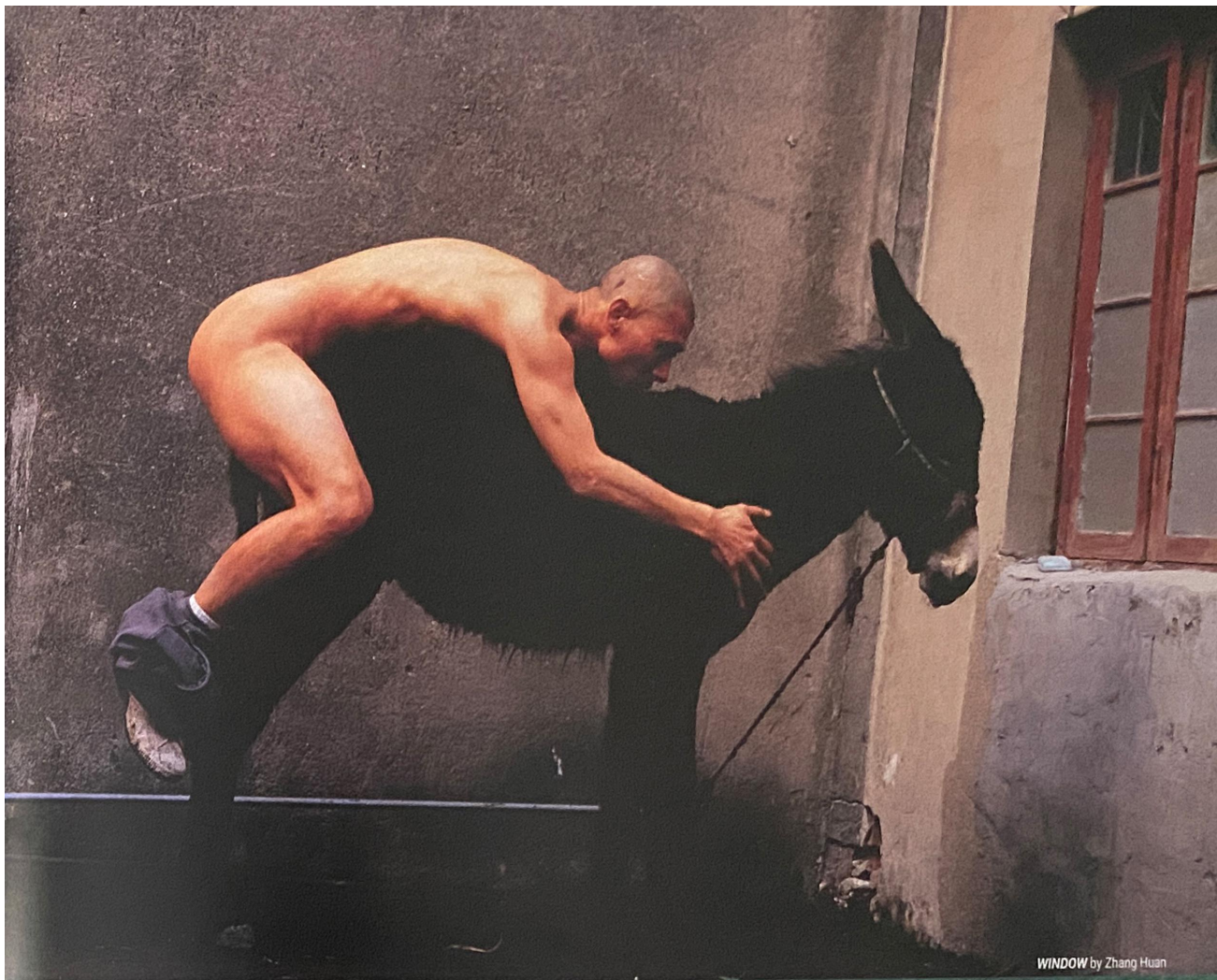


穿过金刚的头颅看你

LOOKING AT YOU THROUGH THE BUDDIST VAJRA'S HEAD

W





WINDOW by Zhang Huan



FISH POND by Zhang Huan



金剛

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DC

FINAL USE OF
FOR WOMEN AND
ON THE KISS OF
ROMANTICISM
THE CROWN JEWEL
FROM NEW YORK, AMERICA