

ART ♦ FAITH ♦ MYSTERY

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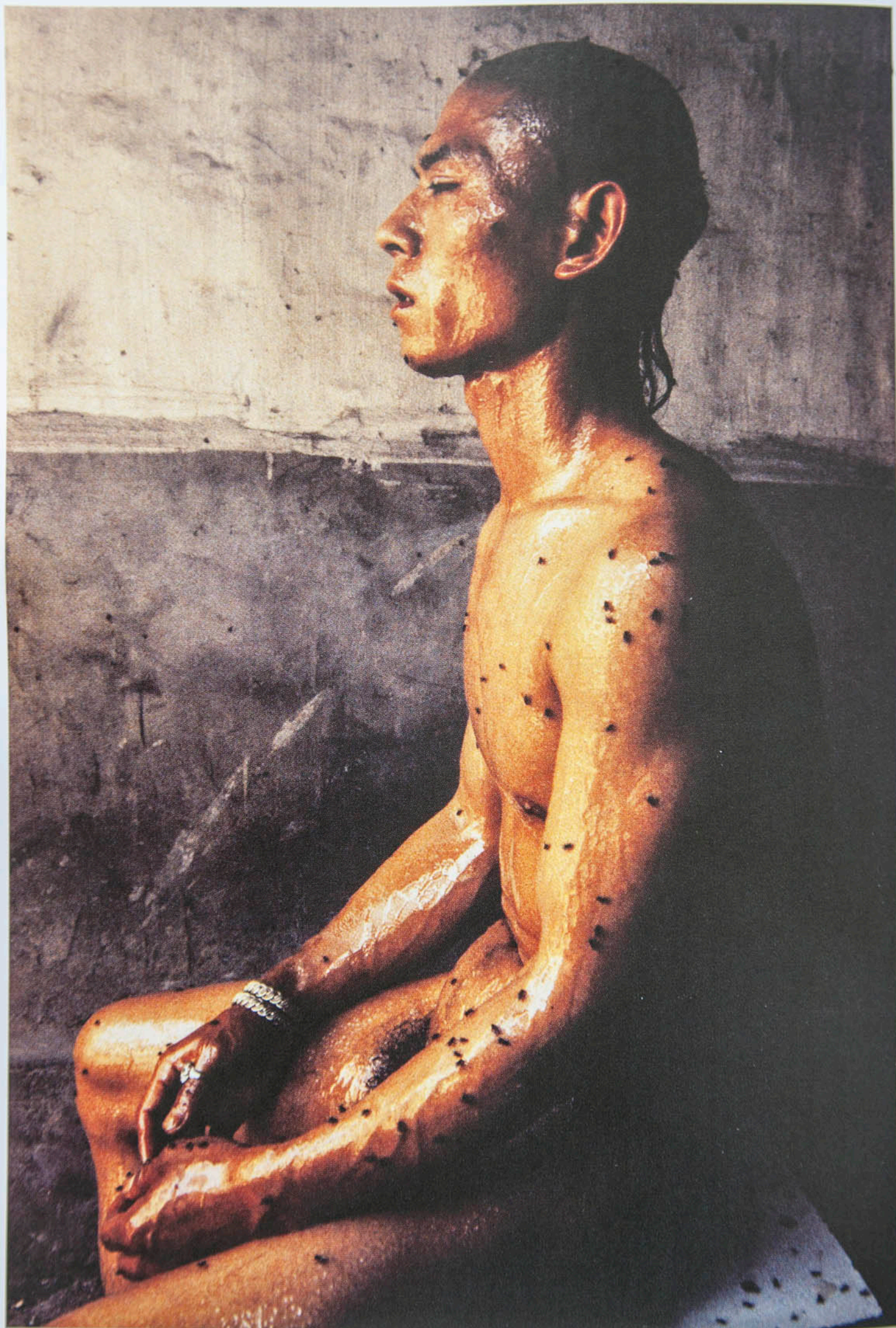


PLATE 6. Zhang Huan. *Twelve Meters Squared*, 1994. *Performance*. Beijing, China. Courtesy of Zhang Huan Studio.

Zhang Huan is another artist who puts his own body at risk. In 1991, wearing heavy winter clothing from his home in China, he jumped into a Florida swimming pool and tried to breathe underwater [see front cover]. The result is a touching and desperate portrait of a man strung between two cultures—his native Chinese culture being hostile to his enterprise as a free artist; his new American culture being hostile to how he fits into the world as a human person. Wearing old clothes from the first while drowning in the beautiful blue waters of abundance in the second, he tries to breath while struggling to swim, lost between two worlds.

His *Twelve Square Meters*, performed in the poor neighborhood of Beijing East Village in 1994, was a protest against the deplorable sanitation conditions of public toilets there [see Plate 6]. The toilets did not work, flies swarmed, and the stench of human waste was everywhere. Complaints to the government got no notice. So Zhang brought attention to the situation by lathering his naked body with honey and fish oil and sitting on a rough-hewn latrine in the public toilets until hordes of flies and insects covered him. In this way he shamed the authorities into cleaning up. The courage required to transgress against decorum, sanitation, and law, in a generation of young Chinese artists whom the government often jailed as unpatriotic for protesting human rights violations, is quite extraordinary. But it also put the artist in bodily and legal jeopardy.

Though there is no direct influence, Zhang's risk certainly bears resonance with Ezekiel's. In fact, Ezekiel's government soon became hostile and demanded to know what he was doing. They accused him of being unpatriotic for criticizing his people. Happily, Yahweh had instructed the prophet on how to face criticism. And in that instruction, we gain a rich insight into how we might think about this problem.

Yahweh's instructions to his prophets grant them a special social status, a sort of platform or set-apart place from which they may say or do otherwise objectionable things. From that platform, a prophet is permitted to operate symbolically, even when the symbolism is offensive, outrageous, or dangerous:

In the morning the word of the Lord came to [Ezekiel]: "Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, 'What are you doing?' Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God..., say, 'I am a sign for you: as I have done, so shall it be done to them.'"

Clearly, today a person can also operate under a special, set-apart status, namely as a performance artist. In both cases the notion that "I am a sign" becomes permissible, even if sometimes problematic or repugnant. We have seen that in these loose pairings of ancient and contemporary actions, though there may not be a direct or concrete influence, a sense of resonance sets them into relationship with each other and with us. They make similar use of elements that feel both ancient and modern—such as symbols of human dignity (bread, oil, wine, labor)

and life processes (eating, sex, cleanliness, excrement, death). But perhaps what most directly bridges the chasm between ancient past and present, religious and secular contexts, is this strategy by which the actor ceases his role as an individual person in order to become a sign. I find this strategy—a person driven by moral conviction to challenge corrupt power at considerable personal risk—incredibly interesting. It is inspiring even as it is problematic.

Both prophet and artist symbolically inflict upon themselves the present conditions of their culture and the sufferings, punishments, or humiliations resulting from the culture's practices. These are borne in their own persons first; and in that strategy of proclamation, they impute responsibility for their culture's corruptions to their viewers, who now find it more difficult to remain passive onlookers. The moral force of the performance is its implication that we, the viewers, have the power to alter social direction, ethical and spiritual contradictions, and political policy.

I have expressed reluctance to embrace without qualification a connection between these ancient and contemporary phenomena. The obstacles of time, cultural contexts, disciplines, notions of art, and theological versus secular paradigms are enough to justify such reluctance. But it strikes me, as I find the resonances so provocative, that there are other fruitful bases for placing ancient Hebrew prophets and contemporary performance artists in dialogue.

One of the inciting premises of contemporary performance art was Robert Rauschenberg's move from the high aesthetics of abstract expressionism into his performative work and combine paintings using found objects. Our class text, like every text on performance art, treats his famous explanation of this move as the iconic signifier of this paradigm shift in artistic practice: "Paintings relate to both art and life.... I try to act in the gap between the two." This is a break with the aesthetic decorum of art, but does not succumb to crass political alliance with life. And it is similar to the method of the prophets, who broke with religious decorum, but without succumbing to a blatant theocratic coup.

The meaning of that gap was to avoid highly personal or self-involved aestheticism, on the one hand, and glib, politicized social critique, on the other. If the former tends towards escape (whether aesthetic or spiritual), the latter tends to be reductive. But work made in that gap navigates both poles. Thus that gap becomes a territory, and a form in which the artist's or prophet's actions are conceived and experienced simultaneously as pragmatically actual and as symbolically set apart. The meaning is neither in the aesthetics (or religion) nor the politics alone. Rather it is in the relations between the two; the relations have now become a form—a dynamic, performative form. It is the agency of performative action—of relational form—to stimulate relation, whether critically or in celebration.

It is interesting that some recent art history has now declared the rich value of what is "between." For example, Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence: A History of*

the Image Before the Era of Art and David Freedberg's *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* both use the discipline of art history in a new way that allows art history also to operate, so to speak, in that gap favored by Rauschenberg. They do so by studying how people have *used* images, rather than how style or iconography or semiotics have organized art's development. Their interest in how people have responded to images within the practice of their lives offers an interesting model for relating these ancient and contemporary realms of performative images.

As Freedberg succinctly put it, "This book is not about the history of art. It is about the relations between images and people in history. It consciously takes within its purview all images, not just those regarded as artistic ones." Echoing that, Belting speaks of how images were used in late antiquity and medieval art "by people before the development of fully self-conscious notions of Art." I believe that what drove Rauschenberg—and his drive stands in for much performative art beyond him—is a similar fascination with how people use images simultaneously as life and art.

What becomes interesting then, is not the important yet peripheral problem of how to relate practices divided by time and cultural context, but rather, how the deeply felt need to make vital images that confront, negotiate, and enrich human lives within their cultures always continues. Even if Isaiah going naked can no longer raise an eyebrow in the very church that claims his heritage, the idea that a naked Isaiah might meet and dance with a naked Kusama and disturb us once again is a remarkable one. If there is a degree of perversity in my forcing these comparisons, it is because of the inherent challenge to culture that this deep structure of sacred discontent and its desacralized distant cousin, the avant-garde, still bear. Perhaps this is what art historian Mieke Bal meant by allowing what she calls "willful anachronism for the sake of history." It is the very ambiguity and enigma, the very irresponsibility of these pairings, that makes them all the more authentic and potent, reminding us that something wilder and more true than our disciplinary categories and our rationalized histories is what determines human experience and meaning.