JULY/AUGUST 2012
VOLUME 11, NUMBER 4

Yishu 典藏國際版 | Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art

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Zhang Huan's *Big Buddha*: Ten Years Later

Zhang Huan, *Big Buddha*, 2002, wood, steel, stone, 590 x 400 x 300 cm. Courtesy of Zhang Huan Studio.

It has already been a decade since Zhang Huan presented his sculpture *Big Buddha* in Europe, in 2002. Only recently did I become familiar with this work, when *Big Buddha* appeared to me at the turn of a page, in a chance encounter.[1] That the image represented a Buddha was made evident by the caption next to it: Zhang Huan, *Big Buddha*, 2002. The full-page photograph of a human skeleton rendered in wood and sitting in a birdcage conveyed both innocence and drama—innocence perhaps because of the unconcerned live doves encaged with the sculpture or the awkwardness of the figure's pose, drama perhaps due to the display of a human skeleton and to its monumentality, discernable when scaled against the doves as well as the large bird's claw that looms overhead. But why was it named "Buddha"? The essays accompanying the photograph made no reference to this specific work, leaving its meaning in a state of suspension. A prominent artist, Zhang Huan is the subject of several monographs, and within this literature it seemed likely that I would be able to find some indication of the significance of this work. Surprisingly, none of the references I consulted on Zhang Huan's work provided an explanation. To decipher Zhang Huan's mysterious and ambiguous work, I decided to turn in another direction and venture into scholarship focusing on the way the body of the Buddha is depicted in Buddhist art.

Before doing so, I will provide some background information about the artist. Born in 1965 to a modest family in rural Henan province, Zhang Huan first distinguished himself as a talented oil painter. As a student in the Oil Painting Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, China's most prominent art school, he was trained in the European classical tradition and became an admirer of Jean-François Millet, his "first big influence," for his respectful portrayal of humble people.[2] His work changed abruptly when, in 1992, he started staging performances in which he submitted his own (most often nude) body to intensive and extreme tests of endurance. Not everyone was seduced, but nudity may not have been as much the cause for reprobation as his self-inflicted mistreatment. Admittedly, as Chinese scholar Sheldon H. Lu observes, human beings appear nude more often in Western art than in Chinese art, attesting to the

Zhang Huan, *My New York*, 2002, performance, Whitney Museum, New York. Courtesy of Zhang Huan Studio.

disapprobation of the depiction of the nude body in the Chinese tradition. Lu remarks that since Liu Haisu introduced nude painting to China in the 1910s, however, and especially since the 1990s, nudity has been largely integrated into visual art in China, where it is tolerated—"no longer a novelty" and even commodified.[3] Nevertheless, Lu Haisu writes that Zhang's body art was perceived by the authorities and the general public as "ghastly, perverse, and grotesque,"[4] perhaps demonstrating the difference between looking at a representation of a nude body and facing a nude person in real life. Furthermore, Zhang Huan inflicted mortifying treatments to his own body. The display of these gruesome experiences brought him the attention that opened the door to his commercial success. In 1998, Gao Minglu invited him to participate in the landmark exhibition Inside Out: New Chinese Art, at the Asia Society in New York City, after which Zhang Huan moved from Beijing to New York, a city more hospitable to the pursuit of his performance works. Nudity, blood, and violence were typically part of the acts he performed, and these theatrical events have benefited, predictably, from wide exposure in the international media. Despite the fact that Zhang Huan's work has increasingly moved away from body art, the "performance artist" label sticks to him. Although in 2005 he completely ceased to make performances, numerous publications bypass his subsequent artistic production. As a result, only limited literature exists about object-based works such as *Big Buddha*, a piece that I find represents a turning point for him but remains under-evaluated. Several commentators have recognized references to Buddhism in Zhang Huan's earlier work and have pointed to concepts such as compassion and impermanence, but it was only in 2002, in this work, that Zhang Huan began to explicitly explore sculptural representations of the body of the Buddha. The lack of art historical analysis is due in part, perhaps, to the fact that among art critics there is a tendency to comment on Zhang Huan's work first as the work of a Chinese artist. Zhang Huan himself seems disappointed by this tendency, which he finds symptomatic of the state of contemporary Chinese art in the world: "When Westerners discuss contemporary art in China, they talk about 'China' first and 'art' later."[5] So to better understand *Big Buddha*, I started by wondering about the significance of the skeleton, the big claw, and the doves.

Zhang Huan, *Peace*, 2003, performance, Creative Time, Inc., New York. Courtesy of Zhang Huan Studio.

Nearly twenty feet tall, the size and name of *Big Buddha* could conceivably point to the colossal fifth-century stone sculptures of the Buddha in the caves at Yungang (Shanxi province, China) or to the Longmen Caves near Luoyang. Not only are these caves awe-inspiring cultural treasures, they are also located in the culturally rich Henan province, where Zhang Huan was born. Carved into the rock, they convey a sense of permanence that contrasts with the state of decomposition suggested in Zhang Huan's *Big Buddha*. The centuries-old images are as solid and imposing as the new one, with its skeletal structure, appears fragile and ethereal. Zhang Huan's sculpture is contained in a wood-frame cage with chicken wire panels, and *Big Buddha* is represented as a skeleton seated on a cube, in the so-called "European style" pose (*pralambapadasana*). A profile view shows his tailbone. The sculpture is made of the wood of a pear tree cut down by farmers in Shandong and was hand-sculpted by ten workers over a nine-month period. The large Buddha holds a standing human figure in stone about three feet tall, and by his own account, this figure signifies the artist himself.[6] The connection between the artist and the Buddha is emphasized by this proximity. The living material (wood) is used for the dead, and the dead material (stone) for the living being. After the death and life duality, the large and small, Zhang Huan addresses war and peace. On one upper corner of the cage hangs the menacing oversized claw of a bird of prey. The dozens of black and white doves fly inside the cage. Zhang Huan explains that in traditional Buddhism, releasing doves is an act of mercy and refers to the Buddhist tradition of setting live animals free to accumulate merit. Several of his performances, such as *Peace* (2003), conclude with releasing doves.

Big Buddha also makes me think of the Indian story of the hawk and the dove. This story is one of the Jātakas, the tales recounting the previous lives of the Buddha. King Śibi was a previous incarnation of the Buddha. According to this Jātaka, King Śibi sacrificed the flesh of his own body to protect the dove from being eaten by the hawk. Zhang Huan may be familiar with the Jātaka of King Śibi, as it was shown on the walls of Mogao Cave 254 (dated 386–534) and Cave 275 (ca. 420) near Dunhuang, in China's Gansu province. The Mogao Caves constitute one of China's cultural treasures, and the paintings in the mentioned caves depict one of Buddhism's most well known stories of compassion. Given that he is a Buddhist, it seems probable to me that Zhang Huan knows the tale. Several of these paintings portray King Śibi sacrificing his flesh to save the dove from the hawk .[7] He did so to look after the dove that had asked him for protection as the hawk was about to devour it. Recognizing that the hawk had to satisfy his hunger, King Śibi offered him some of his own flesh, in equal amount to the dove's weight. Visitors to the Mogao Caves familiar with the popular story would have known that in fact the two birds represented deities testing the king's compassion. As he left no doubt about his character, the deities rewarded King Śibi by insufflating him with even

greater strength. Buddhism scholar Etienne Lamotte has written that these stories of altruism parallel the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is less concerned with acceding to Nirvāna than with providing for the welfare of other living beings.[8] Could the sacrificing aspect of the narrative have resonated with Zhang Huan? As summed up by Wu Hung, at this point of Zhang Huan's career: "[M]asochism is a trademark of Zhang Huan's art: almost every performance he undertook involved self-mutilation and simulated self-sacrifice."[9] This was for example the case with *65 Kilograms* (1994), where the artist was chained horizontally to the ceiling, his blood dripping down into a pan placed on a white cloth.

Zhang Huan, *65 Kilograms*, 1994, performance, Beijing. Courtesy of Zhang Huan Studio.

With *Big Buddha*, the dove, commonly associated with peace, contrasts with the predatory bird signified by the menacing claw at the top right corner of the cage. The installation is for Zhang Huan a way to question religious practice. Acknowledging that "*Big Buddha* can make things happen for humans," Zhang Huan wonders about the large Buddha images: "Are they still working for us or not? How are they working? Can they help people? Can people help? Maybe they can get stronger. I hope to work to make things better. That is the idea of *Big Buddha*."[10] Zhang Huan's reflections on the effect of size are not limited to the large Buddha images. He questions the trend in oversized homes as well as bodies, noticing the problems and unhappiness large homes bring to family life and the detrimental health effects of over-enthusiastic bodybuilding. Three years after *Big Buddha*, as Zhang Huan became a Ju Shi Buddhist (that is, a lay devotee), is it possible that he found an answer to his philosophical questions?

Another title for the work later came to his mind: *Lost Body*.[11] This is no surprise if we recall the artist's preoccupation with the body's endurance in most of his earlier performances. Looking at this *Big Buddha* sculpture, images of *Emaciated Buddha* resurface. Although relatively rare, images of the emaciated Buddha are unforgettable, since, like *Big Buddha*, they differ drastically from the mainstream representation of a healthy Buddha. The emaciated Buddha sits cross-legged; his skin clings to his skeleton, and

Anonymous, *Emaciated Buddha (Fasting Siddhartha—Sakyamuni Buddha)*, Sikri, India, Kushana period AD, grey schist, H: 84 cm, Lahore Museum, Lahore. Courtesy of The Huntington Archive.

he presents all the signs of physical starvation. As Robert L. Brown points out, these images are found principally in the Gandhāran region and were produced in "the first four centuries C.E."[12] They speak of the ascetic life the Buddha observed during the six years preceding Enlightenment. Sākyamuni, Brown explains, understood that this rigorous discipline was ineffectual in helping him to achieve his spiritual goals. Indeed, once Sākyamuni started nurturing his body again, he finally reached Enlightenment. As Brown suggests, this narrative may be revealing a rejection of rival sects such as the Jains and the Ajivikas, which advocated similar intense conditioning. David White discusses, for example, the probable Jain practice of meditation that involved extreme fasting and breath control.[13] After testing this regimen, the Buddha offered his method, the Four Jhānas, which rejected asceticism and self-mortification. This trajectory seems to parallel Zhang Huan's experimentations, his practice and later abandonment of severe self-inflicted treatments. The Buddha remained for six years under the *nigrodha* tree, submitting his body to an extreme test of endurance. He then turned to the Middle Way, a path of moderation leading to Nirvāna. Brown suggests that if the images of the emaciated Buddha are rare, it is probably because they depict a behaviour the Buddha ultimately rejected. Furthermore, images of the emaciated Buddha, Brown indicates, represent suffering and death, which the Buddha is said to have overcome. The parallel between Zhang Huan's artistic trajectory and Sākyamuni's journey should not be overlooked. It took Zhang Huan nearly a decade to renounce performances involving physical austerities, and *Big Buddha* coincides precisely with the shift in his approach. Yet this is another coincidence that has not previously been observed: after 2002, the year *Big Buddha* was produced, Zhang Huan never again subjected his body to mistreatment. *Seeds of Hamburg*, performed in November of 2002, is the last performance in which the artist tested his endurance and tolerance for discomfort in this way. In this work, simply covered with honey and sunflower seeds, Zhang Huan shared a chicken-wired cage with a few dozen doves. The artist moved around the cage, lay on the floor, or sat under a leafless tree, and thus as bare as himself, in a pose similar to that of his seated *Big Buddha*. Although the conceptual similarities with *Big Buddha* are striking, the two works have never been analyzed side-by-side. Both are staged in a cage, similar in proportions, arranged around a central seat, amongst birds. *Big Buddha* holds a small being; Zhang Huan is covered with sunflower seeds. Coincidentally, the two works were conceived shortly after the artist became a father. Zhang Huan did not take his new responsibility lightly: "My little boy is seven months old now. I feed him, bathe him, clean up for him. I feel so happy as a father. . . . Sometimes I dream that we are in my hometown, where he is a Buddhist monk in the He Nan Shao Lin Temple."[14] And Zhang Huan wondered: "Will he appreciate me? I don't know. These pressures stifle me. I just want to live lighter."[15] The responsibilities that came with the experience of fatherhood seem to have contributed to Zhang Huan ceasing to inflict pain and suffering to his body, bringing him closer to the teachings of the Buddha. The Indian tale discussed earlier provides a new

Zhang Huan, *Seeds of Hamburg*, 2002, performance, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Hamburg. Courtesy of Zhang Huan Studio.

layer of meaning for *Big Buddha*. With *Seeds of Hamburg*, Zhang Huan appears to offer his body to the doves as nourishment, as in a Tibetan sky burial, the ultimate sacrifice, which he claims he would opt for if he could choose a way of dying.[16] This notion is pursued with *Big Buddha*, which as we have seen can be understood to also speak of self-sacrifice to appease a bird's hunger. To prevent the doves from pecking his body would only put an end to Zhang Huan's physical suffering, but his psychological state was aching, too.[17] Three years later, he ended his self-imposed exile in the US and returned with his family to China. Since then, he has been working with dozens of assistants in his vast studio in Shanghai, producing a large and diverse body of works in which Buddhism, tradition, and cultural history have taken centre stage.

Big Buddha has been for the most part ignored by critics and is quasi-absent from the literature about Zhang Huan. This paper began with an image of *Big Buddha* found in a 2004 collection of essays, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, a rare—if not the only known printed—reproduction of this sculpture. In this publication, Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob observe that contemporary commentators have refrained from providing much analysis about artworks inspired by Buddhist practice. Baas and Jacob note that "in recent years, religion and art have been a contentious mix" and suggest that "modern art criticism has been less than hospitable to aspects of the spiritual in art," even if many artists from Laurie Anderson to Bill Viola to John Cage have been said to incorporate Buddhist teachings in their work. In *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*,