

Rong Rong's East Village

1993 ~ 1998



Wu Hung

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Foreword

In the short but eventful history of contemporary Chinese art, the East Village in Beijing was the unlikely birthplace of some of the most innovative art to have been produced in China in the last decade. Although it was in the east of Beijing and had perhaps at one time been a village, the Beijing East Village had little in common with its New York counterpart. With its decaying tenements, drug scene, storefront galleries, night clubs and bars catering to all tastes, the New York area had a seedy glamour that was too fragile to last very long. In Beijing the East Village was much less urban, a desolate area closer to the most benighted slums of Paris or London in the nineteenth century. For a number of artistic renegades and misfits, however, it became home and the fertile breeding ground for artistic experiments that owned nothing at all to the official Chinese art world that continued to flourish in the more salubrious parts of town.

No artist has done more to further this myth than Rong Rong, the talented photographer whose later work was shown at Chambers Fine Art in January 2001. Although photographs from earlier series had been exhibited outside China, notably in *Transience* curated by Wu Hung in The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Oregon Museum of Art and The Hood Museum of Art, it became apparent to me that the international audience was not yet fully aware of Rong Rong's role in creating the mythology of the Beijing East Village. The artists who were his neighbors and whom he photographed went on to have individual careers after the village ceased to exist but it is through his eyes that we see them today. Other photographers were present at many of these performances, providing invaluable documentation, but Rong Rong's photographs move beyond that.

Believing strongly that it was important to make this distinction, I proposed to Rong Rong that he should publish a book or portfolio of photographs related to the East Village. Wu Hung, who has done so much to further international appreciation of Rong Rong's work, approved of the idea and the results can be seen in this portfolio, the contents of which are a selection from the hundreds of photographs taken between 1993 and 1998.

A reading of Rong Rong's diaries and letters in conjunction with the photographs reveals how self-conscious he was at a time when it could not have been so easy to know what was going to happen from one day to the next. Shortly after arriving in the East Village, Rong Rong met most of the artists and musicians - Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, Xu San and Zu Zhou among others - who were to become his major subjects in the ensuing eighteen months. "I want to take pictures of everybody in the village," he told Duan Yingmei when he went to visit her late in 1993. Six months later he wrote to his sister: "Now I use Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and other east Village residents as my models. I am not only recording their performances. I also have my own ideas and opinions. I think that holding a camera in my hand enables me to move away from reality."

Quite how far he moved away from "reality can be seen in one of the photographs in which Rong Rong used himself as a model. Generally speaking the photographer is clothed and the model is nude but here the artist has stripped for the occasion. Hand on shutter, his image in the

mirror appears to be almost as insubstantial as the pattern of filigree shadows behind him. He sees himself here as the creator of illusions and, in the atmospheric photograph of his sister's shoes on an empty bed as the poet of loss and melancholy.

More often Rong Rong focused his camera on the performances of his friends, some of which were carefully planned whereas others were more spontaneous and were classified as performances after the events. Rong Rong's photographs of two of the more sensational performances, Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms* that took place on June 9 and June 11, 1994 respectively are among the most dramatic of all. In his diary and letters he gives a vivid description of Zhang Huan's self-imposed ordeals. He describes the filth of the public toilet in which Zhang Huan sat for an hour in *12 Square Meters* and the ominous atmosphere of the room in which he was suspended in chains from the ceiling in *65 Kilograms*, while his blood dripped on to a heated plate on the floor. In his photographs, however, unexpected camera angles and dramatic chiaroscuro transform the squalor and chaos of the actual events into dream-like images that add a new dimension to what Zhang Huan had in mind when he decided to submit himself to these tortures. Zhang Huan himself was surprised by the Zen like calm that characterizes the expression on his face in some of the photographs.

Rong Rong sensed that in the context of Chinese art, something important was happening in the East Village during the short period that he lived there. There are many different types of images - general views of the village, portraits and self-portraits, photographs of performances etc. - but as a participant in many of the events Rong Rong the photographer shaped and defined them. In this way his photographs differ from the many images of Happenings in New York in the 1960s and 1970s which record that something happened and convey the chaos of the events but are seldom memorable as photographs in their own right. Although he was not able to define how this would happen, he knew that his photographs would eventually be the primary means by which the East Village would be remembered.

This project has evolved over several years and I am deeply indebted to Rong Rong for his enthusiasm and willingness to clarify the development of his thought and oeuvre in countless conversations. As important has been my ongoing dialogue with Wu Hung whose knowledge of the world of contemporary art in China is second to none. I am profoundly grateful to him for contributing his fascinating Introduction. As always John Tancock has taken a lively interest in the development of this project and his suggestions have been invaluable. Without the support of Jeffrey Moy, President of Art Media Resources, Ltd., this project would have taken much longer to come to fruition. Finally I would like to thank Jerry Chen for his far-sighted recognition of the importance of this project and the staff of Chambers fine Art - Tonia Hsu, Christina Yu and David Lim - for their good humor and attention to detail.

Christophe W. Mao

New York City

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Rong Rong' East Village

Wu Hung

Located at Beijing's east fringe, between the Third and Fourth Ring Roads, was a small, tumble-down village called Dashanzhuang. Before it was finally demolished in 2001 and 2002 and assimilated into the ever-expanding Chinese capital, it consisted of some sixty to seventy farmhouses connected by narrow dirt roads. In its own history Dashanzhuang was utterly unimportant: not many native Beijingers knew this name even when the village still existed, and its eventual disappearance created no noticeable stir among local residents. But under a different name - the East Village (Dongcun) - the place is famous in an unofficial history: the history of contemporary Chinese experimental art. Between 1992 and 1994, a group of struggling artists and musicians moved in there. Attracted by the low-rents and close proximity to downtown Beijing, they made Dashanzhuang their foster home. Some of them further formed an avant-garde inner circle and began to create a series of highly challenging works - mainly performances and photographs - which sent an instant shockwave throughout the community of experimental Chinese artists in Beijing and beyond. Adopting the name of an area of New York where many artists lived, they renamed Dashanzhuang the East Village, and called themselves "East Village artists" As a live-in artists' community, this Chinese "East Village" ceased to exist after June 1994, when the police arrested two of its members and forced the rest to leave their rented houses.

Now living in different places in Beijing, the East Village artists were nevertheless able to continue their working relationship and even expanded their circle. Some of the projects they carried out in early and mid-1995, such as *Primordial Sounds* and *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, have become classics in contemporary Chinese art. Such large-scale collaboration ceased after the summer of that year. Although individual artists in this group continued their experiments, these later projects owed less and less to their identity as "East Village artists" An additional factor further eroded the relationship between these artists: after the East Village community became known to the international art circle through photographs, the authorship (and also the ownership) of these photographs became an issue of dispute among some of its members. Two questions lie at the heart of the dispute. First, do these photographs simply record the performances, or should they be considered the creative work of the photographers as well? Second, did the performances result from group participation or individual creativity? Intensified by desire for status and fame, different answers to these questions turned old friends and comrades into competitors and enemies.

This brief introduction provides a background to understanding Rong Rong's photographs collected in this album: these are both invaluable records of a crucial moment in the history of avant-garde Chinese art and important examples of contemporary Chinese photography created by an East Village artist. Their significance is actually threefold - historical, artistic, and autobiographical; to read them purely as historical archive or personal expression inevitably restricts their meaning. In other words, what these photographs represent is Rong Rong's East Village, not a total and "objective" image of the artists' community. Accordingly, this essay aims to explore the historical, artistic, and autobiographical dimensions of

these photographs. I will connect their artistic innovations with the photographer's personal experience as an East Village artist, and I will also frame this experience in the general context of contemporary Chinese art. The story I am going to tell is therefore about subtle interactions between interior and exterior spaces – between an artist's inner world, including his dreams, vision, excitement, and anxiety, and a collective, retrospective history.

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Rong Rong arrived in Beijing in 1992 with wide-open eyes and a newly purchased camera. A farm boy from the southeastern province of Fujian, he had never left home before. He was skilled at working in the fields but had failed almost every course in elementary and junior high school except for studio art. This was followed by three unsuccessful attempts to enter a local art school (mainly because of his poor performance on exams in math and other general subjects). By chance he discovered photography and developed a passion for it. First he rented a double-lens Seagull camera to take his sister's portraits and landscape shots. He then struck a bargain with his father, the manager of a local shop, to work as his employee for three years in exchange for the freedom to leave home and a sum of money to start his new life with. So this was how he got his own camera and went to Beijing in 1992, which by then had become a Mecca for young avant-garde artists throughout the country.

In Beijing, Rong Rong attended photography classes and soon became quite good at making the kind of arty, sentimental pictures favored by popular photo magazines. Some of his photos of portraits of his younger sister Yali in a desolate landscape were published in these magazines. One of them even found its way to entering a National Photography Exhibition. But life was hard and the occasional public exposure of his pictures had little financial return. When his savings were gone he tried various odd jobs, including taking passport photos in a commercial studio. He changed addresses frequently, often guided by the cheapest housing on the market. In early 1993 he moved into Dashanzhuang -- later known as the East Village. The photographs Rong Rong made there constitute an important component of "East Village art." As mentioned earlier, these photos are valuable as records of various aspects of the East Village community of the artists and musicians, their physical environment, and especially their performances. On the other hand, these images exist in their own right as important works of contemporary Chinese photography. In particular, they signify the emergence of a new type of Chinese photography around the mid-1990s: no longer affiliating themselves with professional photography and its various institutions, a small group of photographers (including Rong Rong, Xing Danwen, Ai Weiwei, and Liu Zheng) allied themselves with avant-garde artists working in other mediums, deriving inspiration from and making crucial contributions to a burgeoning "experimental art" (shiyanyishu) movement. As is well-known, this movement completely transformed contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s and made it a vital part of international contemporary art.²

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To understand the significance of the East Village and Rong Rong's "East Village photographs," therefore, we must place the artists' community and these images in the context of experimental Chinese art at the time. The development of this art in the early and mid-1990s, in turn, was intimately connected with China's socioeconomic transformation during the two previous decades. As soon as the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, a new generation of Chinese leaders initiated a series of reforms to develop a market economy, a more resilient social system, and a new diplomatic policy that opened China to foreign investment and cultural influence. The consequence of this transformation was fully felt in the 1990s: major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai had been completely reshaped. Numerous private and joint-venture businesses, including private-owned commercial art galleries, had appeared. Educated young men and women moved from job to job in pursuing independent careers or personal well-being, and a large "floating population" entered metropolitan centers from the countryside to look for work and better living conditions.

Many changes in the world of Chinese experimental art were related to this larger picture. Two phenomena especially gave this world a different outlook in the 1990s. First, many experimental artists chose to become freelance, "independent artists" (duli yishujia) with no institutional affiliation. To be "independent" also meant to become "professional" – a move which changed not only these artists' career paths but also their social status and self-perception. On the surface, freelance artists were free from institutional constraints. But in actuality, to support their livelihood and art experiments they had to submit themselves to other kinds of constraints and rules. It was in the 1990s that experimental Chinese artists learned how to negotiate with art dealers and western curators, and how to obtain funding from foreign foundations to finance their works. Quite a few of them developed a double persona, supporting their "unsalable" experiments with money earned from selling paintings and photographs.

Second, starting from the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s, a large number of experimental artists from the provinces moved to major cultural centers, especially the country's capital Beijing. The result was a situation that differed markedly from the 1980s: in the '85 Art New Wave an avant-garde art movement in China that continued from 1985 to 1989 – most experimental art clubs and societies emerged in the provinces and were active on the local level, while Beijing maintained its traditional position as the stronghold of official art and academic art. In the 1990s, however, Beijing drew young experimental artists from throughout the country. Local experimental communities of course still existed. But Beijing emerged above all these places to become the unquestionable center of experimental art, mainly because it constantly attracted talented young artists from all over the country. These immigrant artists, mostly in their twenties, emerged after the 1980s. To this new generation of experimental artists, the Cultural Revolution had become remote past, and their works mainly responded to China's current transformation, not to history and memory. They found such stimuli in Beijing, the city most sensitive to social changes and political tensions in the 1990s.

A direct consequence of these two changes was the emergence of residential communities of experimental artists, known as “artists’ villages” (huajia cun). The first such community was located in Fuyuanmen village in Beijing’s western suburbs, near the ruins of the former imperial park Yuanmingyuan (and is therefore often called the “Yuanmingyuan artists’ village”).³ Avant-garde poets and painters began to live there as early as the late 1980s; but it was not until 1991 that the place acquired a reputation as the home of an artists’ community. It attracted media attention in 1992 as reports of its bohemian residents stimulated much popular interest. Around the same time it was also “discovered” by art dealers and curators from Hong Kong and the West. The place established its reputation as the “window” on Chinese experimental art in 1993 and 1994, after the “cynical realist” painter Fan Lijun, who was then living there, appeared in three large international exhibitions, including the China’s New Art, Post-89 in Hong Kong, Chinese Aventure-Garde Art in Berlin, and the 45th Venice Biennale.

In a broader sense, the artists’ community at Yuanmingyuan introduced a particular lifestyle and set up a model for many later “villages,” including the one centered in Songzhuang east of Beijing, which was founded by some of the Yuanmingyuan artists starting in the mid-1990s. Located in rural settings, these communities are also close enough to downtown Beijing to maintain close ties with the outside world. The initial reason for artists to move into such places is mainly economic: it is cheap to buy or rent houses there and to convert them into large studios and residences. But once a community has appeared it brings additional benefits to its members. First of all, it generates a sense of comradeship: the residents share an identity as independent artists, and some of them are close friends who have known one other for a long time. Living in close proximity promises convenience for socialization and occasions for entertainment. Visitors, including important foreign curators and art dealers, can see works of a dozen or so artists in one day. On the other hand, although artists in such a community are subject to mutual influence (especially by those “successful” styles and subjects), in most cases they do not form close groups based on common social or artistic causes. Such lack of shared commitment explains most communities’ ambiguous artistic characteristics: while “villages” like those at Yuanmingyuan or Songzhuang can attract a large number of experimental artists to a single location, they do not necessarily inspire new ways of thinking and expression.

To this general situation the East Village was a noticeable exception: the group of immigrant artists who lived there between 1993 and 1994 did work together closely to initiate a new trend in experimental art. Also unlike the communities at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang, the East Village artists developed a much closer relationship to their environment -- a polluted place filled with garbage and industrial wastes -- as they considered their moving into this place an act of self-exile. Bitter and poor, they identified themselves with the place and derived inspiration from it: the works they created during this period were energized by a kind of intensely repressed desire absent in other artists’ villages.

It is necessary to remember that although some of the East Village artists are now internationally renowned, they acquired their reputation only after their struggling days in the Village. This situation thus also differs from the artists’ communities at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang, whose members dif-

fered from each other vastly in social and financial status. The most crucial significance of the East Village community, however, lies in its formation as a close alliance of performing artists and photographers, who inspired each other’s work by serving as each other’s models and audience. Viewed in the context of contemporary experimental Chinese art, this alliance initiated one of the most important developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when experimental artists working in different mediums increasingly envisioned and designed their works as performances, and when many of these artists were also increasingly attracted by photography, not only deriving inspiration from it but also making photographs themselves.

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Looking back, Rong Rong can see that his life as an individual artist began in the East Village. His move there was coupled with his divorcing the kind of popular photographic style that had earned him a place in magazines and official exhibitions. Living in the Village, he became fascinated in exploring the secrets of its refuse-filled courtyards with his camera, his young face and bare torso occasionally reflected in broken windows in his pictures. As his friendship with other bohemian artists, musicians and writers in the Village deepened, he also began to photograph them: the rock poet-singer who called himself Curse (Zuzhou); the tough-faced performance artist Zhang Huan; the unfailingly sympathetic painter Little Duan (Duan Yingmei); the narcissistic cross-dresser Ma Liuming.

This was then followed by a burst of collective creativity in the Village that lasted about a month. Without much planning, a number of performance artists and photographers staged joint projects from mid-May to mid-June, 1994. The centerpieces were, among others, Ma Liuming’s Fen-Ma Liuming’s Lunch, and Zhang Huan’s 12 Square Meters and 65 Kilograms. These performances became known to the outside through photographs made by Rong Rong, Xing Danwen, and Ai Weiwei, which appeared in the same year in an underground publication, an untitled volume known as Heipi shu or Book with a Black Cover.⁴

This burst of creative energy was abruptly stopped by a heavy blow: after Ma Liuming’s performance on June 13, 1994, the police arrested some members of the community for the performance’s alleged obscenity, and also kicked out other Village artists, including Rong Rong, from their rented farmhouses. This event brought about some important changes in Rong Rong’s photographs from the second half of 1994. First, his fascination with performance led him to develop various autobiographical modes. He returned to Fujian that fall, tracing his childhood memories with a new vision. Although he had always been interested in making self-portraits, from this point on he increasingly appeared before his camera, acting while recording his acts; the strong performance quality of these photos resonated with changes in his personal life.

Second, returning from Fujian to Beijing he began to develop a new relationship with former East Village performance artists, who had by now all left the Village and scattered in different villages on the east side of the city. He continued to photograph their group projects and individual performances. The

former started from the Primordial Sounds in January 1995; the latter included Cang Xin's Tramping Faces, Zhang Huan's Metal Case, Ma Liuming's Fen-Ma Liuming and Fish, Zhu Ming's Bubbles, and a joint project by Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming called The Third Contact. In both types of activities he assumed a more active presence: he contributed a performance piece to the Primordial Sounds, and frequently initiated individual performance projects and photographed them. As the East Village gradually became history, toward the late 1990s his relationship with his former collaborators changed further. No longer a spontaneous participant in a performance project, he began to act more as an independent observer, recording while analyzing what he saw. (Sometimes he provided the services of a professional photographer, working for a performance artist as a hired cameraman. Under such agreement he does not claim authorship for his photographs.) He also no longer limited his subjects to the East Village circle, but photographed performances by other experimental artists such as Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Wang Jin, and Zhu Fadong.

Third, from 1996 onward Rong Rong increasingly focused on a new subject: the dramatic transformation of Beijing's cityscape. Starting from the series Untitled, he discovered a bond with half-demolished houses, which provided this rapidly developing city with a major visual spectacle.⁵ His eyes were captured by the torn images of glamorous pin-ups left on the broken walls, whose visual power seems to have only been enhanced by their ruinous state. Going one step further, he staged performances inside half-demolished houses and photographed them. Looking through these pictures, one can see that despite their disparate subjects, they all utilize the master figure of ruins: whether a destroyed house or a piece of abandoned furniture, a torn poster or a cut-up film negative, the incompleteness of these images declares loss and propels the viewer to imagine the photographer's life and psyche.⁶ These "ruin pictures" belong to a new phase in Rong Rong's art after his East Village period ended.

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Images collected and reproduced in this album – both the individual plates and the pictures accompanying this essay – constitute what Rong Rong calls his "East Village photographs." Although not all of these images were created when he lived in the East Village, to him all of them are intimately related to the Village or, more precisely, to his experience as an East Village artist. These photographs can be divided into three groups according to their subjects and dates of creation. The first group, taken from 1993 to June 1994, portrays the East Village artistic community in its physical context. The second group records continuing performances by East Village artists from late 1994 to 1997, after the community itself had been forced to disperse. The third group consists of Rong Rong's self-portraits taken both in his East Village days and afterwards. My discussion will follow the general chronology of these images (with selected examples running alongside the text) and contextualize them with information about the photographer and the East Village community. I will also weave Rong Rong's own words – diaries, letters, notes, memoirs – into my reading of the pictures: this combination of images, personal account, and historical analysis will construct a narrative pertaining both to the creativity of an individual artist and to the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Entering the Village



Finally we found a small room here so my sister and I can settle down. It is a room on the side of a courtyard compound. The landlord seems friendly and cheerful. The rent is 80 RMB, which seems reasonable.

I really hope that we don't have to move anymore. I came to Beijing less than a year ago, but I have already had to move six or seven times. I think this time the situation should be more stable. As long as I can stay in Beijing, things should be fine. It is early spring right now and the snow is melting. There is a jujube tree in our courtyard that is just beginning to sprout leaves. It just went through a harsh winter. The thought of its resurgence makes me happy.

Rong Rong's diary, February 28, 1993

A series of photos, taken by Rong Rong about a year later, shows the entrance to the Village. A roadside sign identifies the place as the East Village in both Chinese and English; the ink is still fresh. The sign stands on a mound of rubbish behind a windowless house. Posters on the wall advertise secret cures for venereal diseases. A pick-up tricycle is passing by: a villager has collected some junk and is on the way to sell it for a few RMB.

The village's official name, Dashanzhuang, means literally the Manor on a Big Hill; though there is neither a hill nor a manor. Karen Smith, a British writer and art critic based in Beijing, described the environment of the place in the early 1990s: "In the shadow of the metropolis, many of the village's indigenous population scrape a living by collecting and sorting rubbish. Waste accumulates by the side of the small ponds. This pollutes the water, generating noxious fumes in the summer. Raw sewage flows directly into the water. Slothful, threadbare dogs roam the narrow lanes between houses. People stare with the blankness of the illiterate and benighted."⁷

Smith's account qualifies the Village as a "place of death," the kind of space I have termed wastelands: morbid fields filled with garbage; graveyards of refuse that defied disintegration; "Black holes" in a landscape that absorb time and escape change.⁸ This space and its contents are the subject of a number of photographs that Rong Rong made in the Village. Among them, a broken mannequin watches a muddy lane filled with garbage. A pair of torn armchairs appears several times, either exposed under the sun or covered by a veil of light snow. Differing from romantic ruins lamented in classical poetry and painting, a discarded (and scarred) object like this does not inspire sentiment or stir up memory. Instead its attraction lies in its disassociation with both the past and present – a tombless corpse that stays with the living.

Judging from these images, Rong Rong's moving into the Village did not just satisfy his need for cheap housing; instead his renewed creativity there must be considered the consequence of a voluntary self-exile. He and other Village artists were fully conscious of the "hellish" qualities of the Village in contrast to "heavenly" downtown Beijing. Rong Rong wrote on the third day after moving into the Village:

I went to school this morning, and my sister stayed alone at home to paint. I rode a bicycle back late at night. As I moved farther away from downtown Beijing there were

fewer and fewer streetlights and just the occasional sound of a dog barking. I was a little scared – Is this still Beijing? Soon after the glimmering lights of the Third Ring Road suddenly disappeared I arrived "home." The owner's dog started to bark even before I reached the door. The landlord opened the door for me, and said that the dog would need some time to learn to recognize me. "It will be OK in a couple of days," he told me. Suddenly I felt safe.

Rong Rong's diary, March 1, 1993

Eager to adapt to the new environment, Rong Rong appreciated any human contact that would make him feel at home. But such contact could never ease the place's staggering contrast with the city of Beijing. In fact, as more and more glamorous hotels and shopping malls were added to Beijing's east side, an area less than a ten-minute bicycle ride from the Village, such contrast only grew further. So while Rong Rong bicycled everyday into the city to attend classes or do odd jobs, his home – the destination of his return journey – seemed to sink deeper and deeper into Beijing's shadow. This growing alienation energized him, however, for he and other Village artists saw themselves as fallen angels who had nevertheless found freedom in this place of darkness.

Tonight I rode home, with my sister sitting on the back of the bicycle. The construction work at East Third Ring Road carries on day and night. The noise is overwhelming. Lined with banners promoting the country's Olympic application, the well-lit road seems to extend into the distance with no end in sight. But we had to turn right at the Great Wall Hotel, and here the road became darker and darker; the dogs never stopped barking. I suddenly felt as if I was biking towards hell. Turning around, we saw the Lufthansa Mall, Kunlun Hotel, and the Great Wall Hotel -- like lights from Heaven, it is a totally different world out there.

Rong Rong's diary, November 12, 1993







Little Sister

Rong Rong was excited to move into the Village partly because he would no longer live alone in an alien city: his new home would belong to him and his sister Yali. Four years his junior, Yali shared Rong Rong's dream of becoming a free artist. A deep bond between them formed early on: from her childhood Yali adored her tall, sensitive older brother; and when she gradually grew up, Rong Rong found her the only person to whom he could reveal his inner feelings. After he failed three times to enter the art department of the Jimei Normal School at Xiamen, he spent much time tutoring Yali in painting, and was ecstatic when his little sister passed the entry exam on her first try. By 1993, Yali had graduated from the school and returned to her native village as an art teacher. Dissatisfied with her job assignment, she obtained an unpaid leave for a year, hoping to use the opportunity to pursue the career of an independent artist just like her older brother. This was how she also traveled to Beijing and moved into the Village with Rong Rong.

Elated, Rong Rong was eager to tell Yali everything he had learned in and about Beijing. The day after they settled down in the Village he wrote in his diary: "It is my sister's first visit to Beijing. She has never experienced the seasonal changes of this city." But spring soon passed, then summer and fall. Little change took place in their lives; both brother and sister's dreams remained distant ones. While Rong Rong left home during the day, Yali stayed in their small room painting. Her works gradually covered the walls of the room; her only audience was her older brother.

The New Year is approaching. My sister has been in Beijing for almost a year. We have a lot of her paintings in our room now. Most of them are her self-portraits; a few others depict the corners and windows of the room. I like my sister's paintings a lot. But only today did she tell me that she had tried to sell some of her paintings on the street when I was not home. She didn't care about the price, as long as someone was willing to buy them. Nobody inquired about them, however, and all she got were strange looks from passersby. Having come to Beijing with our dreams, we settled in this village without jobs. Just surviving, paying rent and buying food, are far from what we would like to be doing. I think this is the cheapest housing available, but with my small income we still have to worry about the rent each month. This place is actually a garbage dump for Chaoyang District. All sorts of people, such as garbage collectors, construction workers and the unemployed, live here. I don't know how we are going to survive here on my income from limited and occasional shots for newspapers, and when my sister's paintings cannot be sold for even one RMB.

Rong Rong's diary, November 12, 1993

Yali never smiles or frowns in her self-portraits, but always stares out from the canvas with an unchanging inquisitive expression. Rong Rong's portraits of her echo these self-portraits: slowly, her eyes open and lock the spectator's gaze. Rong Rong's other photographs of Yali give more details of her daily life: she is painting herself from a rectangular mirror. Behind her, on the walls, were sev-



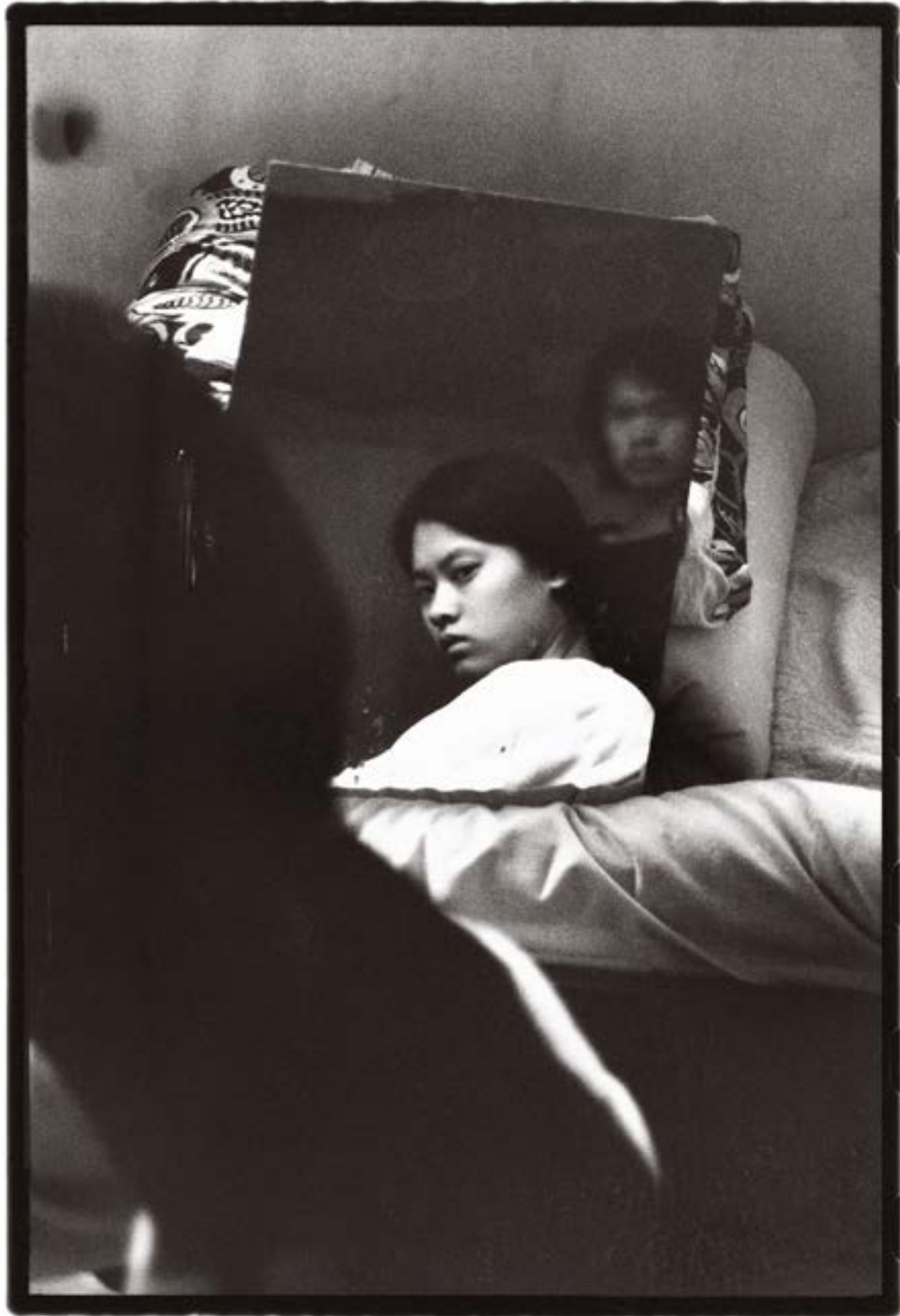
eral of her finished self-portraits of different sizes; she was now making a new one to join them. Rong Rong moved with his camera around her and was looking at her inside or outside the mirror. In one instance, Yali turned sideways to look at herself in the mirror, and found her brother standing behind her, also looking at her reflection.

A third group of Rong Rong's pictures of his sister does not actually show her likeness: Yali had left the Village and returned to her job in Fujian. After a yearlong solitary but inconsequential effort, she had decided to abandon her plan to become an independent artist, at least temporarily. Substituting for her in these photographs is a pair of her shoes: a kind of simple canvas shoe worn by ordinary female students, with a horizontal strap across the open top. Rong Rong photographed the shoes over and over from different distances, but kept them at the center of each composition like a cherished icon. My favorite image in this group is taken from the farthest distance: the shoes appear small, neat, and delicate; placed under the window they seem to glow in the dim room. As her "leftover things" (yi wu in Chinese), the shoes register Yali's existence as well as her absence. The style of the photographs also retains much of the quality of Rong Rong's portraits of his sister, especially the feeling of calmness and coolness. But with Yali gone, the shoes also mediate Rong Rong's loneliness and his longing for the missing subject:

After Chinese New Year, my sister decided to return to our hometown and continue teaching (her yearlong leave of absence from work having just expired). I went back to the Village all by myself. Everything appears the same, as though nothing has changed. My sister's paintings were hanging everywhere in the room. I put my lock and keys on her empty bed, along with some shoes she left.

Rong Rong's diary, spring 1994





New Friends



Rong Rong moved into the Village without knowing he was following the footsteps of other Bohemian-type artists, who had made Dashanzhuang their home before him. In fact, it was not until five months after he settled in the Village that he and Yali became acquainted with these artists. While Yali, as a girl, attracted some male artists's attention, Rong Rong's friendship with them started through making their portraits.

Today is Saturday so I didn't go to school but stayed at home with my sister. She told me that two young men had come to our courtyard yesterday. "They said that my paintings looked like van Gogh's. They also told me that they were looking for a room to rent, but the owner of our house rejected them." Our landlord interrupted: "The guy with the long hair is a liar. He claims that he is only seventeen and is applying for college. I know his name is Ma Liuming. The other guy is Zhang Huan, who is renting a room on the other side of the village as his studio." The landlord told my sister not to talk to them. After hearing this, I remembered that I had surely seen them before. Oh, yes, in the morning, at the public toilet ... They seem also from the provinces. I wonder who these guys are and what they are doing here in this village.

Rong Rong's diary, August 16, 1993

Yesterday in school, a girl named Duan Yingmei came to talk with me and said that she had seen me before in the village. She asked if I could take some pictures of a rock and roll musician. His name is Curse and lives in the same village as us. Duan Yingmei seems to know many people here and told me a lot about things in our village. She knows Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming as well. She said she is the only female artist in the village.

The next day, before I woke up, Duan Yingmei came and called from outside, asking me to take pictures of Curse. After I got ready, she led me to his place. Curse is tall and

wears a pair of dark sunglasses. Before photographing him I asked: "Can you take off your sunglasses please?" "I don't even take them off while I'm sleeping," he answered. Later, he let me listen for a while to some strange and bizarre music. Before leaving I told him: "You know you should have let me listen to this music first."

Today's experience made me feel uncomfortable. The sunglasses he wears make him distant. If he wants me to take pictures of him, he should follow my instructions. Later that night, I told my sister what happened today.

Rong Rong's diary, August 8, 1993

Curse's real name is Wu Hongjin. Born in Nanjing in 1970, his father was a chief boatman and his mother also worked in the same boat. From his childhood he was used to hearing boatmen's work songs and fell in love with their unpolished voices. Later he learned to play the electric guitar on his own, and decided that his destiny was to become a singer and songwriter. He went to Beijing in 1993 because, in his words, "Beijing is the only place [in China] where one can make avant-garde art."⁹ Although the capital of China was far from an ideal place for a rock musician, the most important thing to him was that there was already a Rock and Roll culture with a growing number of bands. In addition, "there is no audience in the south for this music," he told the reporter Wang Jifang in late 1993, "Beijing has an audience and therefore also has a market."¹⁰

In Beijing he met Zhang Huan, one of the earliest artists to reside in Dashanzhuang, and immediately moved into Zhang's neighborhood. With no job or income, he spent his savings to rent a tiny cell





as his living space and an adjacent room as his studio. Surrounding himself with posters of the Sex Pistols and other popular western rock bands, he sang for the other artists in the Village. One of his early songs is called Mofei (Isn't It ?), which according to him is the name of his dead girl friend. In one private performance in his studio, "he shouted out the name Mofei dozens of times till his voice broke. Some artists in the audience covered their faces; others had tears in their eyes."¹¹

Rong Rong's portraits of Curse are extensive. The earliest images that he took when he visited the singer for the first time on April 8, 1993 – are self-consciously artistic. The tone is dark and heavy. The atmosphere is mysterious. Hidden behind the sunglasses, Curse's face is also half covered by his long hair. The uncomfortable "distance" that Rong Rong felt from the singer seems to have animated these portraits: instead of discovering the real Curse, the photographs further mystify him.

This distance disappears from Rong Rong's later portraits of Curse, in which the singer has taken off his sunglasses and poses in front of the camera as an ordinary young man. Though less dramatic, these photographs signify a different interest on the part of the photographer, as he has changed his role from reinforcing Curse's self-imposed persona to revealing what lies hidden behind the singer's dramatic props (in addition to the sunglasses, Curse normally wore a black leather jacket and matching jeans, black leather boots, and a big metal ring decorated with a sculpted skull). What these later portraits imply, therefore, is Rong Rong's desire to "unmask" – to humanize and familiarize – a fellow artist with whom he shared a living space. Among these portraits, a moving sequence shows Curse's severely burned face after an accident. Attended by the unfailingly sympathetic Duan Yinmei, the singer sits helplessly in bed in an empty room. His head leans on an embroidered pillow, a kind that one finds in any ordinary Chinese household.

There are also several series of photographs that portray Curse together with other members of his band -- images that attract me for two different reasons. The first is the relationship between the musicians and their environment; and the second is their charm and physical appeal. Most of these pictures situate the musicians in the Village: dumps of industrial garbage; a dead tree lying in front of an open field; narrow lanes between village houses; the poster-lined interior of Curse's studio. The band, which Curse established three months after he moved into the Village, is called NO. Beside Curse himself, two early members were the bass player Ye Qian and the guitar player, Bianba Pingcuo. Ye was still a college student in Beijing's Institute of Sciences and Industry, while Bianba, a native of Tibet, had served in the Music and Dance Company of the Tibetan Autonomous Region before coming to Beijing to pursue the career of a rock performer. The fourth member, Lu Qi, joined the band slightly later.

In photographing the group Rong Rong seems to have just followed them around the Village, taking pictures here and there without interrupting their natural dynamics. The musicians were certainly aware of the photographer's existence but nevertheless kept their casualness. Even when they stopped and posed before the camera, their bodies were relaxed and their expressions were informal or ironical. I find difficult to move my eyes away from some of these pictures simply because of the physical attractiveness of the musicians, especially the contrast between Curse's strong, rough manner and Ye Qian's femininity and theatricality. These are four young men of entirely different personalities and backgrounds, who have come together to realize their shared goal of becoming rock stars in a seemingly unlikely place – Beijing.



Little Duan

Rong Rong's photographing Curse in August 1993 appears to have been an isolated occasion engineered by Duan Yingmei. It was not until two months later that he came up with the idea of systematically portraying all the artists living in the Village. Although he was still not entirely clear who these artists were, he sensed their existence around him, and could also feel that they were connected to him because of shared life experiences and artistic goals.

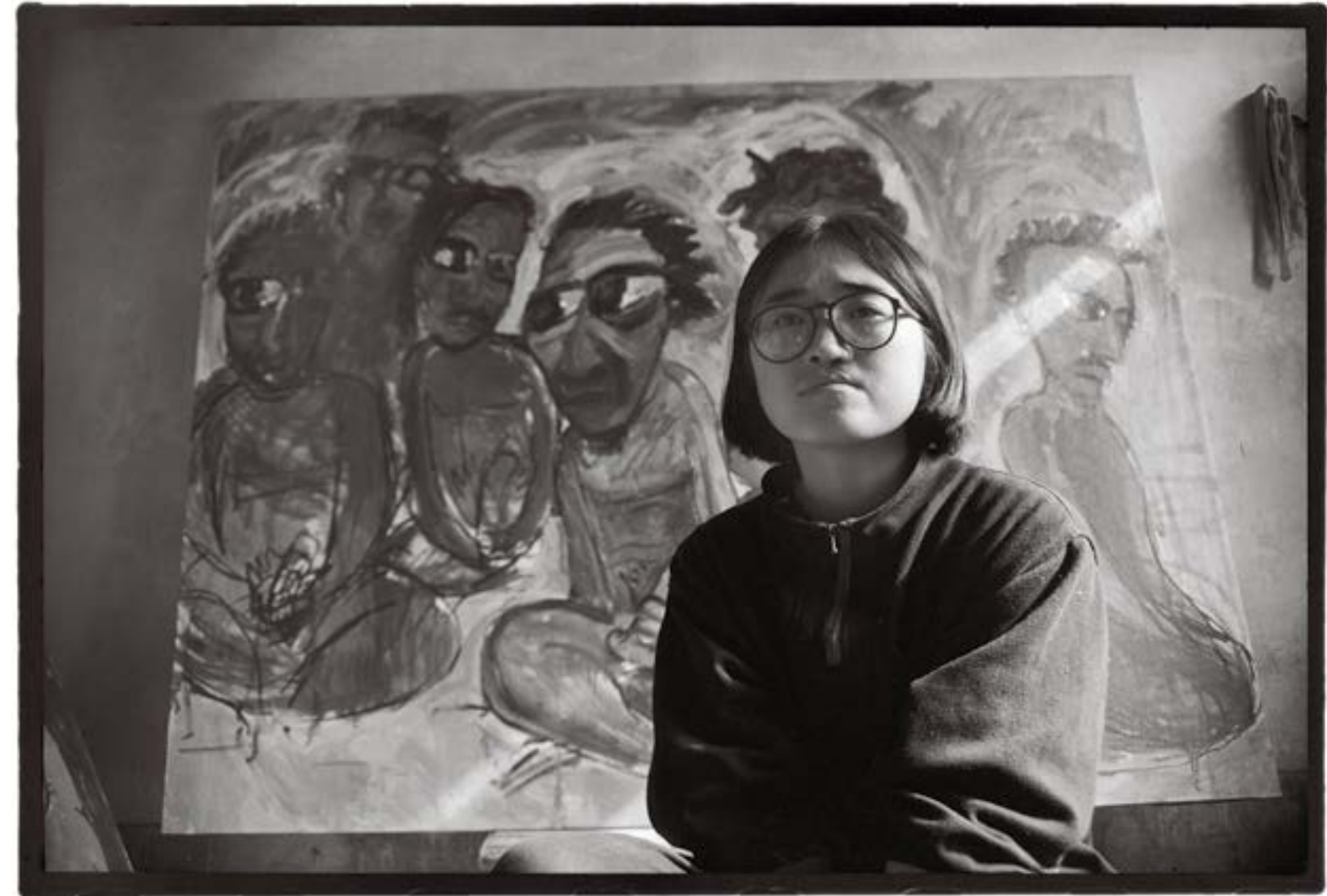
At night, I feel there is something in the air that attracts me to this place. We have been here for almost a year, but are barely in contact with the other people in the village except Curse and Little Duan. My sister told me that Little Duan came to chat with her today and told her a lot of things about people living in this place. She told her why they came here, what they did before and what they hope to do later. She said most of them are graduates from art academies. Some of them were teachers from the provinces but had resigned in order to move to Beijing. In truth, all for the sake of "Art." I feel the same: these people and I are all so much alike, here. Is it a coincidence? Do we all only live here because of the cheap rents?

Suddenly I turned to my sister: "I want to photograph us and our lives here – all these drifters who live in this village."

Rong Rong's diary, October 13 1993

It was no accident that the person who introduced Rong Rong to other Village artists was Duan Yingmei. Fondly called Little Duan (Xiao Duan) by her fellow artist-villagers, she was short and student-like, and was commonly regarded as the most energetic, sympathetic and practical personality in the group. With straight hair framing a round face, her eyes sparkled with genuine enthusiasm behind a gigantic pair of black-rimmed eyeglasses, immediately making a stranger feel he or she was talking to a friend. Her image and personality hardly evoked the cool presence of an avant-garde artist, and in fact she did not consider herself especially ambitious or visionary. What drove her to the Village was mainly a kind of incessant boredom. First she was bored of her job: after graduating in 1990 from an oil engineering collage in Manchuria, she received a work assignment to Daqing, the largest oil field in China, as a technician. One year later she abandoned the job and all her professional training, traveling to Beijing and enrolling in an art school. But she soon felt bored again – this time simply by living a normal life in a big city. Supported by a monthly stipend from her well-to-do family, she had no need to look to Dashanzhuang for cheap housing. Rather, she moved there because she liked the bohemian artists there and found their ideas and lifestyle stimulating.

It is doubtful whether the Village completely cured her chronic boredom, however: in Rong Rong's portraits of her, Little Duan looks bored again and seems annoyed by her own paintings that surround her in all directions. Some of the distorted figures in the paintings allude to other (male) Village artists; most of the images are her self-portraits. Sitting or standing in front of the oversized can-





vases she looks like a little girl, young and defenseless. But her restrained presence still overpowers her transformed, sometimes violently distorted self-portraits, which mix her recognizable features with German expressionism and other modernist styles. Rong Rong's diary records the photographic session:

Taking my camera, I followed the directions that Little Duan gave me yesterday and arrived at her home within two minutes. She welcomed me happily. She occupies one side of an irregularly shaped courtyard, and her room is filled with her paintings. I told her that I wanted to take some pictures of her. Little Duan replied shyly: "You don't have to. I am not that attractive." "I want to take pictures of every artist in the village." I said. She smiled, still a little shy, and instead started to show me her paintings.

"In this one, the figures are artists in our village –the lonely masturbators. Actually, I think all of them are." Little Duan pointed to one painting, speaking in a very serious voice.

I asked her to stand in front of the painting for my photograph, which she did but with an unhappy face.

In front of her self-portraits, she started to smoke.

Rong Rong's diary, November 1, 1993



Ma Liuming

Rong Rong photographed Ma Liuming on the same day. One of the “lonely masturbators” in Little Duan’s view, Ma arrived in Beijing on June 9, 1993, from Hubei. Unlike Curse or Little Duan, he was trained in a prestigious art school – the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts – which became a base of the nationwide avant-garde art movement in the second half of the 1980s. When Ma Liuming was still a student there, he participated in a dark, prophetic performance called Suicide Project No.1. Designed by his college mentor Wei Guangqing, it featured a wounded man swathed in white bandages, lying across railroad tracks and waiting for a train to run him over. A few months later the June Fourth Pro-Democratic Movement broke up in Beijing and ended in bloodshed. Many student-demonstrators refused to leave Tiananmen Square when the government’s tanks were approaching: utterly disillusioned and desperate, they took self-sacrifice as their only means to influence the future.¹²

Ma Liuming’s professional career suffered from such involvement in avant-garde art: although he studied oil painting in the academy, upon graduation he was given a designer’s position in a local electric company. Two months later he left the job. In making the move he was encouraged by his second older brother, a key figure in his life who had introduced him to painting and provided financial support for his education and art experiments. So Ma Liuming went to Beijing, and wrote excitedly upon his arrival: “Today I finally came to this city called Beijing – the center of Chinese avant-garde art!”¹³ An ambitious young man of twenty-four, he was determined to earn himself a name in the world of contemporary art. As he told a reporter in a 1993 interview: “My art must be highly challenging and controversial, and must be totally original and individualistic. As an avant-garde artist I can only be the best, otherwise I would rather pack my suitcase and go home.”¹⁴

Guided by inside information about Beijing’s housing market for jobless artists, Ma Liuming immediately moved into Dashanzhuan. But in 1993, the recognized “center of Chinese avant-garde art” was still Yuanmingyuan. So instead of developing a working relationship with the artists in his own village, he visited Yuanmingyuan (which was located on Beijing’s northwest suburbs) on the fifth day after his arrival in Beijing. After meeting the “celebrities” in Beijing’s avant-garde circle such as Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Gu Dexin, and Wang Jinsong, he became an insider of this circle in less than two months. His visits to these artists, on the other hand, also made him realize that his oil paintings, though considered rebellious from an academic point of view, were still far from “totally original and individualistic.” Looking for new directions, he finally made a breakthrough two months later, as he recorded in his diary on August 2: “Watching my photos on the wall, I suddenly realize that my image is already art. This beautiful face and this slender torso – they are a product of this society and must also reflect this society.”¹⁵ A month later, British artists Gilbert and George held their exhibition in Beijing and visited Dashanzhuang on September 4. “Excited, Ma Liuming conducted an extemporaneous performance on the spot. To Pink Floyd’s music, he took off his shirt, looked around the room dreamily, and finally spotted a crack on the ceiling. He climbed onto a table and stroked the crack tenderly. The crack cut his finger and blood ran out, streaming down from his hand to his arm and body. He felt dizzy and was about to fall. Zhang Huan rushed forward to take him down from the table...”¹⁶ Ma Liuming later titled this performance A Conversation with Gilbert and George.

By the fall of that year, Ma Liuming had not only decided that the most effective way to express

himself was through performance and using his body, but had also come to the realization that his own physique would provide him with a unique opportunity to create a transgendered figure. October marked the beginning of Fen-Ma Liuming, a long-term performance project that, according to him, “addresses the gap and ambiguity that lie between image and actual being.”¹⁷ Shoulder length hair, face delicately made up with cosmetics, and supple limbs exposed totally, he pursued this goal through the simplest form possible by combining and contrasting a man’s body with a woman’s face.¹⁸ In his first transgender performance held in October that year, “having made up his face with women’s cosmetics, and buffed his nails to a shine, Ma then draped himself fully naked on a sofa, and with lustrous fingers masturbated himself.”¹⁹

Rong Rong took the first group of his Ma Liuming portraits around this time. These pictures are especially interesting because they show Ma Liuming performing in real life. In other words, Ma’s supposed “natural state” in these photographs is already characterized by a high degree of ambivalence between reality and fiction and between male and female – ambivalence that he then developed into more deliberate and articulated forms in his public performances.

After visiting Little Duan, I asked her to take me to Ma Liuming’s place. Once there, both of us smiled as we had observed each other too many mornings at the public toilet, but had never said hello to each other. So terrible!

I told him that I want to photograph the village community. “You two guys stay and chat. I need to go,” said Little Duan. Ma Liuming showed me some of his paintings. He said that he’d graduated from the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, but not wanting to work for any commercial company, decided to move to Beijing.

Ma has an elegant face and beautiful long hair. I saw that his smoking hand moves in an unusual way and his hairstyle is also unique. The room is filled with his self-portraits. He told me that many people think he’s a homosexual. But he is not: “I actually like pretty girls.”

I told him: “I want to take a picture of you.” He turned towards a mirror, took out a comb from his bookcase, and started to comb his long hair. For a long time, he was absorbed in looking at himself in the mirror. He had his long hair down to cover his forehead, nose, chin, to and neck, and parted it in such a way that his face was divided into two halves, one yin, and one yang.

Rong Rong’s diary, November 1, 1993





Zhang Huan

When Zhang Huan moved into Dashanzhuang in 1992, he was still registered as a student in the Oil Painting Department in the Central Academy of Art. But moving into the Village marked an entirely new beginning in his artistic life.

Born into a worker's family in Anyang, Henan, Zhang Huan spent his childhood in the countryside. Although he got some bad grades in humanities and science courses (a failure he attributes to his "backward" background), his artistic talent was recognized even in elementary school. In high school he spent hours and hours painting plaster statues and still lifes. After graduating from high school he applied to the Art Department of Henan Provincial University, but passed the entry exams only after two failed attempts. In college he found his artistic ideal in Millet's portrayals of ordinary lives, paintings in which humble people radiate with classical beauty. A work Zhang Huan made under such influence was his graduation painting *Red Cherries*, which depicts a mother peacefully nursing her baby next to a bowl of cherries. This penchant for classical beauty persisted even after he advanced to a two-year training program in the Central Academy of Art, which attracted him mainly for its strong emphasis on the European classical tradition.

Nothing in Zhang Huan's life before he reached 27, then, seems to have prepared him for his sudden change in 1992 and 1993, when he abandoned the noble art of oil painting, and began to stage a series of violent and masochistic action projects that later became his trademark. He planned the first such project, *Weeping Angels*, as part of a group exhibition of the twelve students in his class. With the grandiose title '90s Art, this exhibition took place in Beijing's National Art Gallery and was supposed to showcase the artists' achievement after having received advanced training in the Central Academy. Even before the show opened, however, the submissions of two artists (Ma Baozhong and Wang Shihua, both living in Dashanzhuang) were censored. Zhang Huan was able to carry out his performance because he staged it unannounced: five minutes before the exhibition opened, he stood above the gallery's front door wearing only underpants. Raising a pot over his head, he slowly poured blood-like liquid, along with the head, arms and legs of a broken baby doll, over his head. He knelt down, collecting the dismembered parts of the doll and tied them together, which he then carried into the exhibition hall and hung in front of a black canvas. This unauthorized performance cost him a fine of 1,000 RMB and the entire exhibition, which the gallery canceled immediately after Zhang's performance.

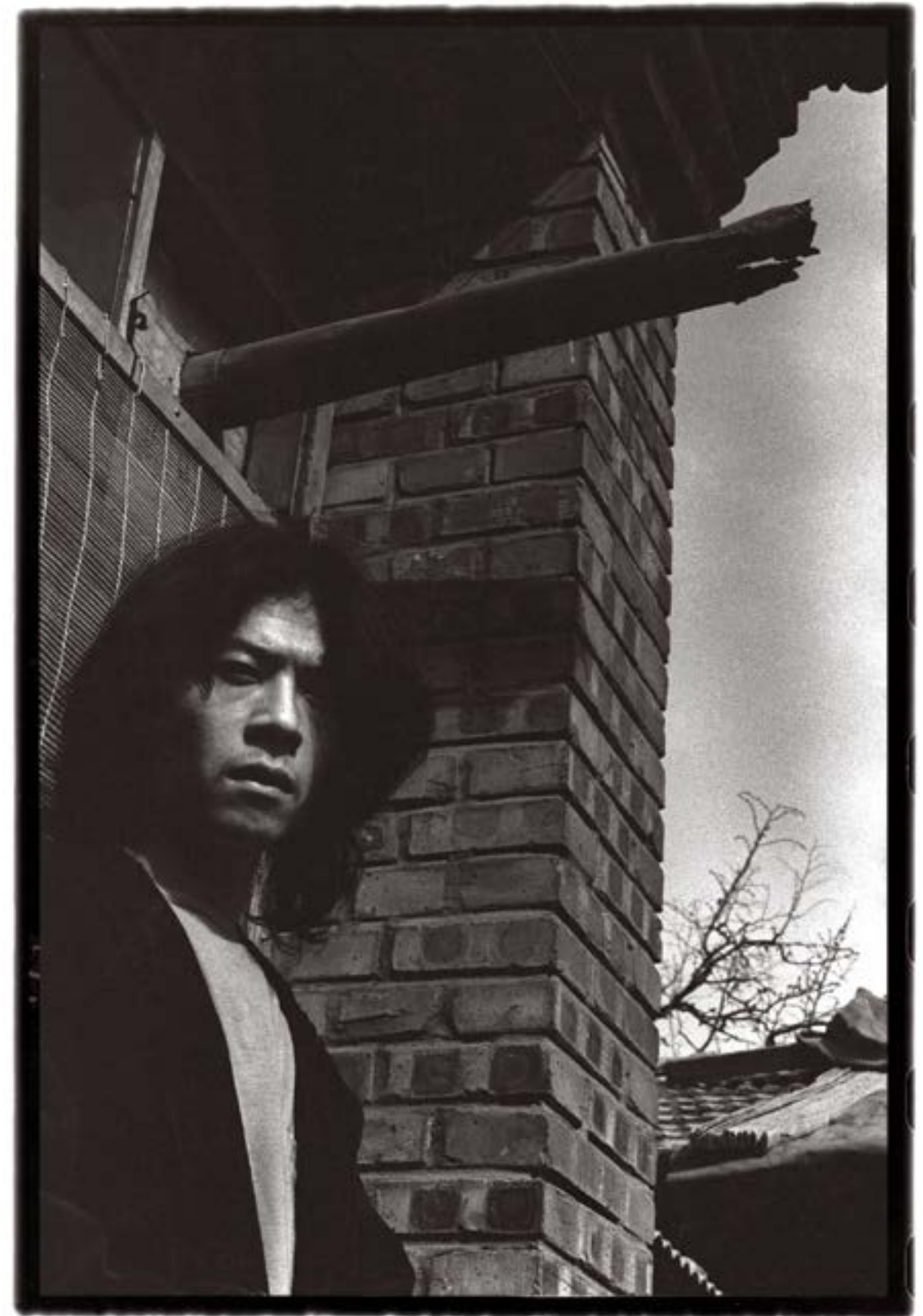
Rong Rong photographed Zhang Huan in his Village studio a few days after this aborted exhibition, and recorded the occasion afterwards:

I knocked on the door but didn't hear anything, so I asked the landlord if Zhang Huan was home. "Must be," he said, "I haven't seen him at all this morning, so he must be sleeping,"

From inside I heard, "Who is it?"

"It's me."

Zhang Huan opened the door before I had time to thank the landlord. His hair was in disarray, and his eyes were only half open. "Ah, it's you. You're the guy who took



pictures of Curse. Do you live in this village.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t expect such a good photographer in this village.” Zhang said. (So he had seen my photographs of Curse and his band).

“I came by today to take some pictures of you. I’ve already photographed Curse, Little Duan, Ma Liuming... I want to take pictures of everybody living in the village who came here from somewhere else.”

“That’s a great idea.” Zhang Huan seemed pleased and started to comb his hair.

“No. Stop! Let me take some right now before you touch it.”

“No, no, no. I always comb my hair smooth and tie it in the back.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s a different look. Much more interesting.”

“But ...”

I pulled him to the entrance of the room and took several pictures.

Then we sat in his studio and started to chat.

Filling his studio were parts of a great number of plastic dolls – heads, torsos and limbs – all in various positions and combinations. Some were hung from the ceiling while others were installed on top of beer bottles. “This is my work,” he said, “I picked them out of the garbage dump nearby.”

Zhang Huan began telling me his life. He was married before he came to Beijing. Now divorced, he came here to study painting and enrolled in the Oil Painting Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

He lit a cigarette. Smoke slowly rose and surrounded the plastic dolls behind him, creating an alien world.

Looking at Zhang Huan and his room with this fascinating array of objects, I asked: “Can I take some photographs of you in front of this background? Some different pictures?”

“In what way different?”

“Without your clothes on – like the dolls.”

“Sure. That’s exactly what I would like to do” he replied willingly.

I found a piece of canvas, put it on the dirty floor, and asked him to lay on top of it.



How should we start? I grabbed a plastic artificial limb for a cripple and threw it to him. Zhang Huan fixed it onto his body.

Now the three-legged Zhang Huan rolled around in an increased state of craziness and ecstasy in front of my camera.

While we were both absorbed in our collaboration, Zhang Huan's girlfriend, Binbin, walked in without knocking. She couldn't help bursting into laughter as Zhang held the fake leg and ran to her.

Rong Rong's diary, November 2, 1993

This first collaboration between Rong Rong and Zhang Huan produced two different kinds of photographic images. One group is dominated by Zhang Huan's larger-than-life presence: fearfully handsome, cool as steel, eyes so harsh they seem relentless. The other group shows the same person abandoned in action: crazy, monstrous, and dangerous. Together with the portraits of Ma Liuming and Little Duan that Rong Rong took the previous day (November 1), these pictures defined two principal modes that the photographer would continue to explore and refine in the following years. In late 1993, however, it was the second mode that indicated a new type of "performance" photography in China. Most important, instead of simply recording a premeditated performance, this type of photography often stimulated performances and became part of them. The significance of taking such photographs also lies in its communicative role: it brought the Village artists together and gave them confidence. In fact, before these artists were accepted by the outside world, their identity as experimental artists was first recognized in their photographic images.



Yesterday morning, I went to school and developed the film from the day before. It turned out just the way I expected. Looking through the negatives I became very excited, and enlarged some of the images in a rush.

In the afternoon, I took these photos to Zhang Huan's place. Curse and Kong Bu (a Chinese homophone for Terror) were there too. Upon seeing me, Zhang Huan asked: "Well, want to take more pictures?" "No, but I brought you something to look at."

I showed them the photos. "Huh ...," Zhang Huan stared at his images with sparkling, excited eyes for a long time, as if asking himself: "Is that really me?"

"This guy looks great in the pictures," said Curse.

"This one looks master-like," said Kong Bu.

"It's strange that black and white pictures are always so much more powerful. Why don't you use color?" Zhang Huan asked.

I answered, "I'm semi-colorblind." They all laughed.

That began a discussion about which pictures were good and which were great. The conversation in the room started to heat up. In this forlorn and abandoned village, where you would never imagine that anyone would care about art, it was through my camera lens that these guys were recognized – for the first time but without any doubt – as serious artists.

Rong Rong's diary, November 4, 1993



The Birth of the East Village

Writers on contemporary Chinese art habitually equate Dashanzhuang with “the East Village.” But in actuality the latter name did not exist before mid-1994: it took more than two years for the “East Village artists” to acquire this collective identity for themselves.

No one remembers clearly when and how this community started. Several insiders identify Wang Shihua as the first artist-settler in the Village. Coming from Inner Mongolia and considerably older (he was forty-one in 1993), Wang spent his youth in the Cultural Revolution working in the countryside and learned painting on his own. In the early 1990s he enrolled in a training program in the Central Academy of Fine Arts and became a classmate of Zhang Huan’s. Later he also participated in the ‘90s Art exhibition and, as mentioned earlier, had his submission censored even before the show opened. Entitled Portraits 45, this work consists of forty-five grotesque faces painted over posters of glamorous fashion models.

Following Wang Shihua, a number of students in the Central Academy moved into Dashanzhuang in 1991 and 1992. These included Tan Guangye, Li Guomin, Yang Lei, Zhang Yang, Xiang Weiguang, and Zhang Huan. Most of them were painters, and they centered their artistic activities in the academy, not in the place they lived. This situation changed in 1993 and especially in early 1994, when some of these academy students (such as Wang Shihua and Zhang Huan) turned freelance after graduation, while an increasing number of jobless artists (including Ma Liuming, Rong Rong, Cang Xin, Zhu Ming, and Xu San) settled there after emigrating from the provinces. The Village became increasingly an “art space,” where unofficial, self-styled avant-garde artists carried out their experiments and socialized with one another. Performance also replaced painting to become the dominant form of their artistic expression. As their confidence increased there was also a growing sense of an artistic community; both factors finally led these artists to reclaim Dashanzhuang as their own – a new “artists’ village” in Beijing. The following letter from Rong Rong to his sister Yali provides an important piece of evidence for a historical event: the birth of the East Village.

Dear Sis,

You can have no clue as to what is happening here. Nor do you know that we have changed our village’s name to “Beijing’s East Village.” It has become an art village, with several new people having arrived since you were here. There are now more than ten artists – not a small number. It’s not lonely or deserted anymore like it was. I have a lot of friends now, and we feel we really understand one another. Some of them saw your paintings in my room and found them quite original. They asked me why you don’t come back. Their question makes me sad. I know you must be thinking of Beijing and your paintings. I know.

Our group visited a veteran avant-garde artist the day before yesterday. He just came back from New York. You must have heard of him. His name is Ai Weiwei and is the son of the famous poet Ai Qing. Even in the late 70s he was a central figure in the Star Movement. Ai Weiwei has been living in New York for the last ten years,



where artists are the most active. He said that he’s tired of the life in New York, and has decided to settle back in Beijing. More important, he is going to publish an avant-garde journal to give those of us who have different ideas an opportunity to express ourselves and a place to publish our works. He will call it Book with a Black Cover. We are all surprised and very excited about what he told us.

Ai Weiwei lives in a big courtyard compound in a lane near Dongsu. I cannot believe that I had the pleasure to meet his father Ai Qing, who was sitting in a wheelchair, enjoying the sun.

I saw some of Ai Weiwei’s work. They are very interesting. He also likes to photograph. He has a rather strange expression – seems always in contemplation, even when talking with us.

Ai Weiwei invited us for dinner, including Zhang Huan, Curse, Kong Bu and me. It was the first time that I tried Erguotou (a brand of local hard liquor) since arriving in Beijing. We all had a good time and I will never forget this dinner for the rest of my life. It was truly “spiritual food” for me.

Ai Weiwei promised that he would soon visit us in the Village. He is very interested in our work.

Sis, you know, an art village has existed near Yuanmingyuan for years. They call it this “West Village.” where most of the artists are painters. But in the East Village of ours, we use all kinds of media. Curse plays rock and roll and writes poems. Kong Bu is an art critic and curates exhibitions. Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming are performance artists I’m the only photographer here. We’re such a diverse but united community. I believe we can do something meaningful.

Sis, everyone here is like me, far away from home in order to pursue our dreams. We are all runaway children, always feeling hungry.

You know that I won’t be coming home. I like the weather in the north and the seasonal changes. Sometimes a season passes so quickly, and seems to disappear after the blink of an eye. I do not have this feeling in the south, where every day passes with little change to the senses. Here, I feel something is always in transition.

I hope you can come back to Beijing soon to join us. But I also don’t know when I can make enough money for both of us. I really don’t want to shoot commercial photographs. They are so fake – including the wedding photo studios. I don’t feel anything for them.

I’m sure I can use my camera for better things. I want to use it to tell you and everyone else about our art and our real life.,

Rong Rong’s letter to Yali, May 4, 1994





New Beginning

Partly due to their common interest in performance, the East Village artists developed much more focused art projects than their peers at Yuanmingyuan, who mostly made easel paintings and socialized only as a pastime. In contrast, East Village artists favored group activities, and they found performance a shared platform for developing interactions between different art forms, including photography, painting, installation, acting, and music.

The first group of these projects took place in early June 1994; the three centerpieces were Zhang Huan's 12 Square Meters (June 3), his 65 Kilograms (June 11), and Ma Liuming's Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch (June 12). Prior to these planned art events, however, an important transformation had already occurred in May: if artists in the Village (identified in Rong Rong's letter to Yali cited above) had had only sporadic interactions until this time, now they were fashioning a new image for themselves based on the idea of a collective in the East Village -- that they were simultaneously creating. This creative process thus had a two-fold intention and significance. On the one hand, instead of taking "East Village" as a clever but superficial label, they viewed it as a serious project in itself: as a meaningful artistic community, the Village had to be substantiated by actual content, including planned group projects and spontaneous interactions between its members. On the other hand, the creation of the Village was inseparable from these artists' desire for individual success and fame. Because each artist largely retained individual "authorship" of his or her part in a group activity, the success of a performance-based project did not just belong to the performance artist, but also resulted from the participation of other artists and benefited these artists as well.

It can be said that these two simultaneous and interrelated agendas were the real reasons for the emergence of the East Village. (The "artists' villages" at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang followed a different logic, as many of their members achieved professional success independently and did not feel much need to rely on collective efforts.) We find the first clear indication of these two agendas in an event in late May. Seldom mentioned by art historians, it was arguably the earliest collective activity of the East Village artists. Rong Rong recorded this event both in his photographs and in a letter he wrote to Yali:

Dear Sis,

How are you?

Today I went to Wangfujing with Kong Bu, Xu San and Zhang Huan. We found a state-owned barbershop there. The barber saw that all of us had long hair and said: "Ah, you are from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Why do you want a haircut?" "No, it's just me who wants one," Zhang Huan said. "Then why did all of you come?" Kong Bu said, "the fact is that we designed a hair style for him and we need you to realize it." So we drew a picture to show him what we wanted: to shave Zhang Huan's head bald except for a tuft of hair on the back in the shape of a cross.

The barber was unhappy, and definitely not eager to do us this favor of cutting his hair into such a strange shape. We begged, but he remained puzzled why we wanted such a haircut. We didn't give up and pleaded: "Please just do it as an experiment. It



doesn't matter. We'll stay here while you are doing it."

By then, Zhang Huan had already sat down in the barber's chair and was waiting, facing the mirror. The barber saw that he couldn't kick us out, so he started to prepare to cut Zhang's hair. I walked back and forth before the mirror, trying to find good angles to shoot. The barber was even unhappier. "What? You're also taking pictures? I don't want to be in them."

Next, however, in a bold movement he cut off a handful of hair from the front of Zhang Huan's head, and proceeded to treat the other parts.

Soon, the front of Zhang's head was bald. Holding my camera tight and looking at him through the finder, I felt I was also receiving a "baptism." With more and more of his hair falling onto the floor, Zhang Huan's face changed. Like the sun breaking through clouds, his eyes shone like lightning. I was convinced that I was witnessing a new Zhang Huan in the making.

In the end, Zhang Huan was completely transformed. Wearing a Mao suit, with a cross at the back of his head, he became an instant focus of people's attention -- when we walked out to Wangfujing Avenue, they stared at him with a puzzled and curious gaze.

Rong Rong's letter to Yali, May 21, 1994

It is significant that in this account, Rong Rong states that Zhang Huan's hairstyle was designed by "us" -- a group of East Village artists including himself and the critic/curator Kong Bu. It is also significant that he considered the haircut a symbolic, ritual act -- a "baptism" -- not only for Zhang Huan but also for the other members of the group. What he describes here is therefore the experience of a collective rebirth: it is as if Zhang Huan played the role of a shamanistic medium, whose transformation gave the whole group a new identity.

This transformation paved the way for the three performance projects in June, described in the following sections in this essay. Another crucial factor that prompted these projects, one that Rong Rong pointed out in his May 4th letter to Yali, was Ai Weiwei's arrival and the strong support he gave to the East Village artists. To these young artists who were still largely unknown even in the circle of experimental Chinese art, such endorsement from a veteran avant-garde artist was enormously reassuring, and encouraged them to produce works that could prove their originality. Ai's plan of publishing an underground art journal further provided a direct reason for carrying out such projects immediately. Ai Weiwei recently recalled that after he became acquainted with the East Village artists, they met every week, sometimes several times in a row. "It was during this period that Zhang Huan staged some of his early performances," he wrote, "We discussed these performances together, and also recorded them in photographs."²⁰ In fact, Ai Weiwei not only photographed Zhang Huan's 12 Meters

himself but also videotaped the performance.²¹ Xing Danwen, another talented photographer (and Ma Liuming's girlfriend at the time), took excellent pictures of Zhang's 65 Kilograms and Ma Liuming's Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch. But only Rong Rong recorded all three performances, before artistic activities in the East Village were suddenly brought to a halt.





12 Square Meters

Dear Sis,

It's almost a month since that last time I wrote to you, and you won't believe what has happened here.

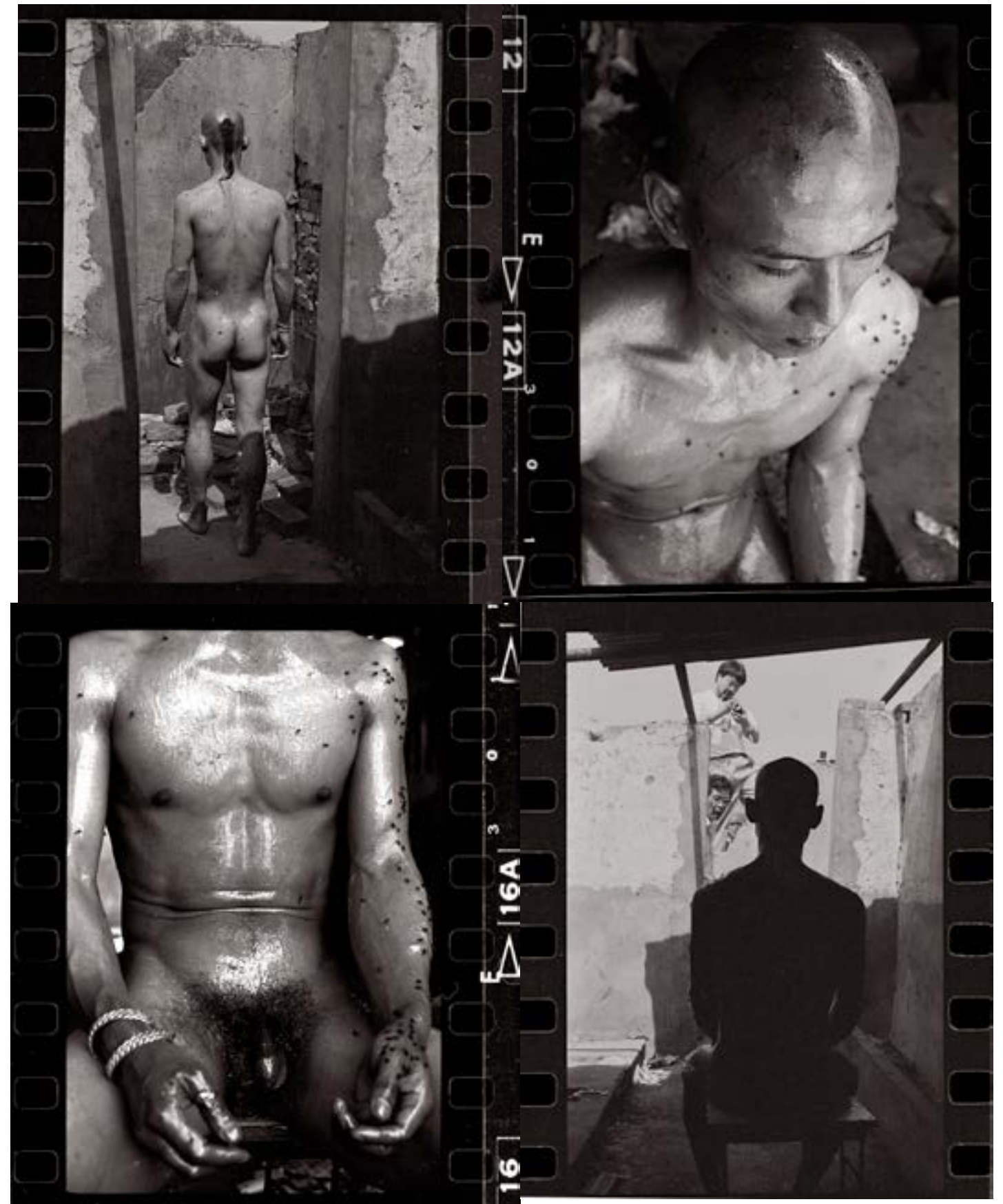
Let me tell you: a couple of days ago Zhang Huan, Curse, Kong Bu and I were talking about carrying out a performance piece. Zhang Huan said that he would do an experiment in the dirtiest and smelliest public toilet in the East Village. (It is the one at the entrance of the village, next to the pond.) In the toilet, and completely naked, he would cover himself with fish sauce and honey. Countless flies would be attracted to his body, for a whole hour!

11:30 am yesterday, Ai Weiwei, Curse, Kong Bu and Xu San arrived at the toilet. Weiwei and I selected a spot for Zhang Huan. Zhang Huan put a stool in the walkway before the latrine pits, and we set up a stationary camera focusing on him. Zhang Huan took off all of his clothes, letting Curse cover his body with the concoction. In a few minutes, swarms of flies started covering his body. I had put on a mouth cover that I had prepared the day before. You know how stinky that public toilet is. On top of that, it was more than 38 degrees centigrade yesterday. I don't know how I managed to take pictures in those conditions; all I can remember was the noise of the flies and the sound of the shutter lens. Amazingly, Zhang Huan remained unflinching, even with the flies moving about and biting him. More and more flies accumulated, on his face and his nose. The worst was watching flies trying to get into his ears. Still Zhang Huan didn't flinch a bit, sitting as still as a statue. Holding my camera, I felt that I couldn't breathe, it felt like the end of life.

After a while, some local villagers walked in the toilet and ran out after seeing this. I heard somebody saying: "What the hell? How can he sit in the toilet naked? and for so long! It's summer! Won't he suffocate?!"

I heard one of us say it had been sixty minutes. Zhang Huan then stood up and slowly walked out of the stall. There's a pond right behind the toilet, so Zhang Huan slowly walked towards it and went straight into the pond. Under the burning sun, as the water got deeper and deeper, Zhang Huan's body slowly disappeared, leaving only countless flies floating on the surface of the water.

Zhang Huan called yesterday's performance 12 Square Meters, because the toilet is 12 square meters in size. He said to me that this performance was a tribute to Ai Weiwei. Weiwei told Zhang that when he was little, his family was exiled to Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution. Every morning, little Weiwei would go with his father to clean several of the worst smelling public toilets. Those toilets were no better than the one at the East Village.



I don't know what we shall do next. Today I heard some of the local villagers were gossiping about us, accusing us of making pornography. This makes me think about the China/Avant-garde exhibition in 1989: an artist staged a performance in the National Art Gallery, in which she used a gun to shoot at her own installation. The exhibition was immediately closed down.

It is late at night now ...

So that's it for today!

Rong Rong's letter to Yali, June 3, 1994

Earlier I emphasized an important characteristic of the East Village artists, which was their shared affinity with the place they lived – a junkyard like a contagious corpse that suffocated people with its deadly excrement. The ambivalence toward making hell a home was best articulated by Zhang Huan in this performance, which in effect reduced him to the surrounding waste. The project does not just create such an equation, however, but also problematizes the artist's relationship with the environment. On the one hand, by subjecting himself to an unbearably filthy public toilet for an hour, Zhang identifies himself with the place and embraces it. On the other hand, he was clearly suffering during the whole ordeal while struggling to keep his composure under the inhuman conditions. In a "project statement" of the performance he links this experience to a general "relationship between people and their environment" in contemporary China,²² where numerous public toilets in similar conditions continue to exist in cities and towns, hidden in dark alleys in the most densely populated areas and in the shadow of glamorous skyscrapers. It is in this sense that Zhang Huan's 12 Square Meters combines personal expression with a social critique.²⁴

Rong Rong's camera followed Zhang Huan throughout the performance and beyond. The absence of the photographer in the photographs, on the other hand, attests to his participation as an invisible gaze. It is clear that to Rong Rong, the event was a collaborative undertaking rather than a one-man show: again, in his account it was "We" who "did [it] yesterday." This view is confirmed by the "project statement" from Zhang Huan, in which he conceives the project only as "to experience his essential existence" in the toilet and does not mention the "bathing" part.²³ But Rong Rong's camera followed Zhang after he emerged from the toilet and walked into the pond. The sequence of his photos, showing Zhang gradually disappearing in the water, gives the performance a poignant and unforgettable ending.²⁴

Dear Sis,

I developed all the film. Delightfully surprised, Zhang Huan thought that the pictures abstracted the performance, making it more concentrated and dense. One of the pictures was not taken at eye level, and he felt it conveys a spirit of Chan (Zen) Buddhism that transcends his original plan. For my part, I always feel that the sequence of



images showing him stepping into the pond after the performance foretells something hidden and unseen.

This is the power of photography. I like my photographs. Sis, ever since you left, I haven't taken many good photographs. Now I use Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and other East Village artists as my subjects. I'm not simply recording what I see, though. I have my own ideas and views. The camera in my hands enables me to go beyond reality.

I had a strange dream last night. I was playing on the bank of the small river in our home village. My camera slipped out of my hands into the river. I struggled to pull it up while yelling for help. But when I reached for the camera to drag it out, it turned into a badly corroded, rusty piece of metal. I was horrified and woke up...

Now many people who don't even live here know the name of the "East Village" and that the artists there include painters, musicians and performance artists. Suddenly it has become a famous place!

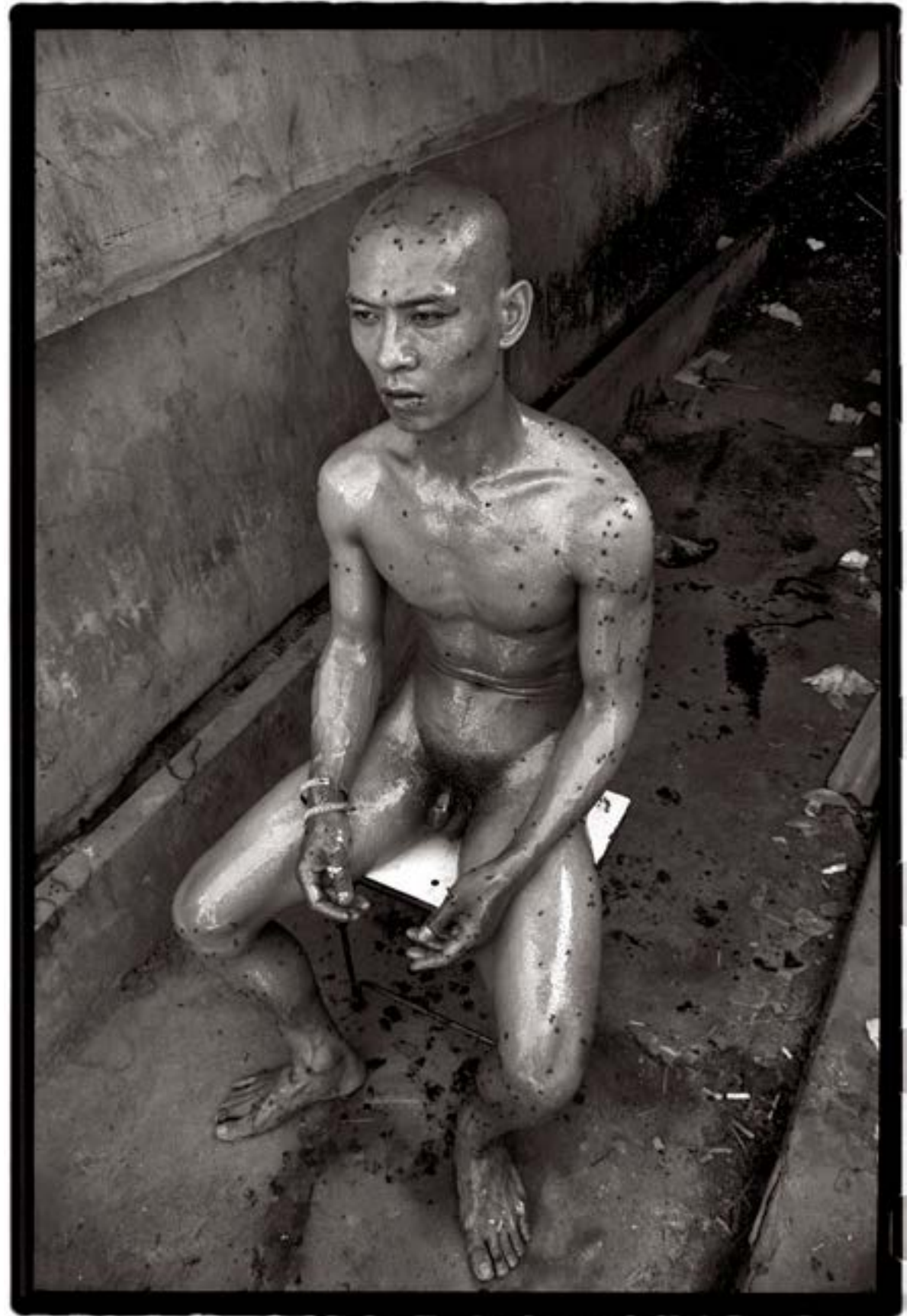
But as far as I know, none of us East Village artists have sold anything yet. So each person has his or her own way of making a living. Ma Liuming's older brother sends him money each month. Curse sells pirated VCDs. Zhang Huan paints commercial paintings for some company. I occasionally work for the Worker's Daily or take commissioned stage photographs; the income is just enough for me to buy film to make pictures that I really want to make. (Oh, elder sister and brother sent me some money again a couple of days ago. They keep doing this and it makes me feel guilty.)

I don't know how long we can live this way, but as long as we survive that's what's important. Don't you agree, Sis?

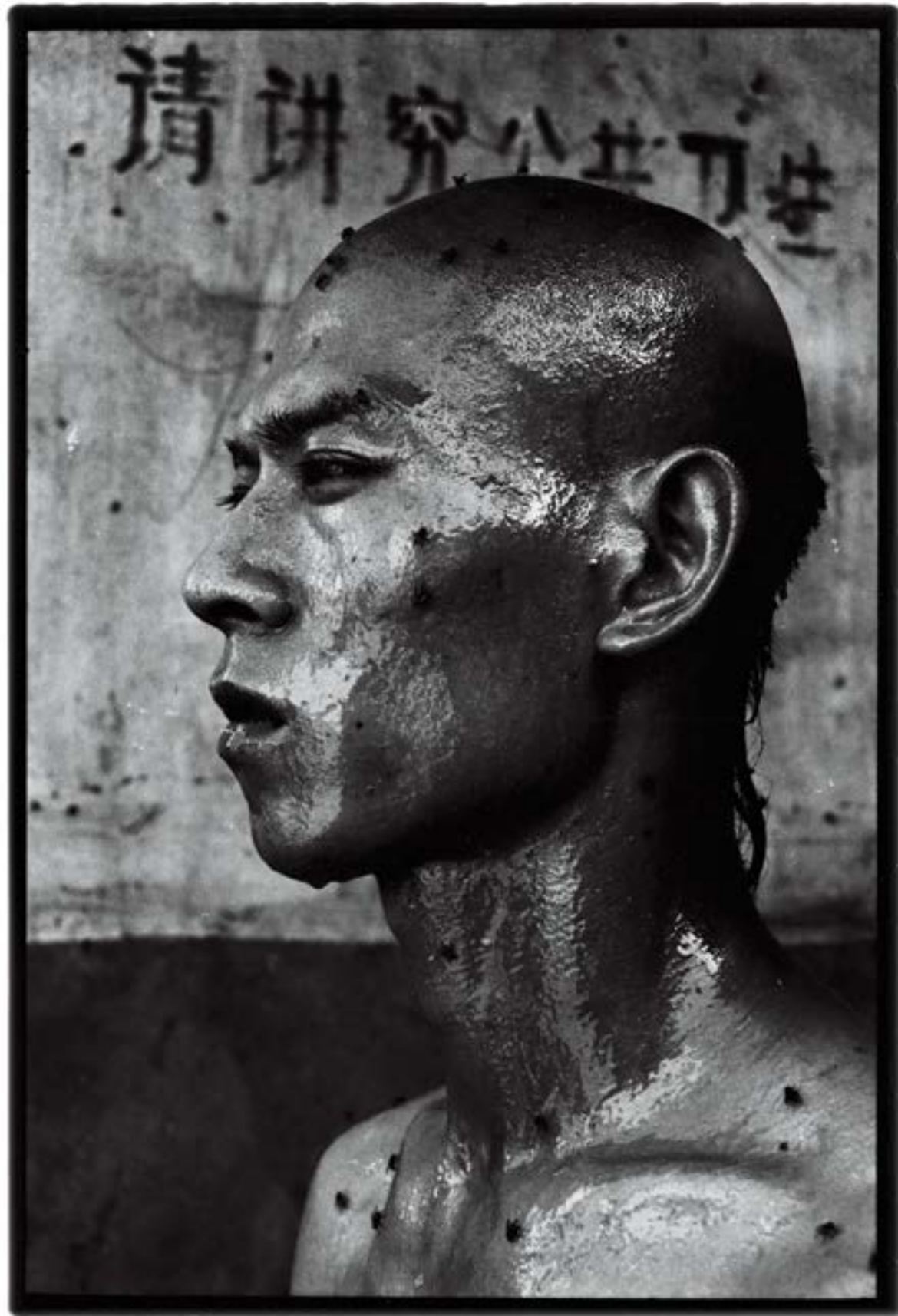
Sis, I really never knew how you felt after you went home. If there are certain things you don't want to do, then just don't do it then. Try to paint more. I hope you can come back to Beijing soon. But I'm also worried. Please take care of yourself.

P.S. Ai Weiwei saw some of the pictures of Zhang Huan's performance that I took. He liked them and selected one for his upcoming Book with a Black Cover.

Rong Rong's letter to Yali, June 9, 1994







65 Kilograms and Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch

Zhang Huan conducted his next performance a week later. A sequel to 12 Square Meters, it took the masochist tendency in the earlier project to an extreme: hanging himself naked on chains from the ceiling in his room, he let his blood drip from his wounded neck onto a heated plate on an electric burner. What he was experimenting within this project, therefore, was no longer the attempt to reduce himself to nothingness, but actually to experience death. This is also why he titled the performance 65 Kilograms ÷ his body weight.

In fact, Zhang Huan's dramatic transformation from an admirer of classical beauty to a masochist exhibitionist was intimately related to his accumulated experiences with death, which finally reached a critical point around 1993. He told me in an interview: "Maybe it goes all the way back to my childhood in the poor countryside of Henan. There everything was colored by the yellow earth. I got hepatitis -- because I had nothing to eat. There were many deaths and funerals. I can never forget the funerals of my grandmother [who raised Zhang Huan] and other relatives. Maybe it was also because of my personal life in Beijing: you could not keep your child when your girlfriend was pregnant. . . Girls of my generation have to go through many abortions; some have done it twice or three times, some five or six times. Many unborn babies died. This is the situation of the 90s."²⁵ This second experience directly inspired his performance piece, Weeping Angels, in the National Gallery. But if this early performance expressed his guilt towards destroyed fetuses, he confronted death himself in 65 Kilograms and forced his audience to share his experience.

In sharp contrast, Ma Liuming had been developing a performance project that was basically about the essence of life. Entitled Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch, it consisted of two pieces staged consecutively in April and June. Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch I was concerned with both internal and external transformations of life that keep the world harmonious and diverse. Internal transformation means the circulation of energy within the body; external transformation refers to the destruction and recreation of the body. The performance was a framed tale because these two kinds of transformation were conducted not by Ma Liuming perse, but by his transgendered alter-ego Fen-Ma Liuming, and so is entitled Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch. As the performance started, this fictional character, with his masculine body and feminine face, boiled live fish



in a pot, placed them on a glass table, and then, seated before the table, he attached one end of a plastic tube to his penis, and put the other end in his mouth. (Ma later stated, "Through the link of the tube, I wanted to circulate my yang, my masculinity with my yin, my femininity.") After offering the fish meat to the audience, he put the left-over carcasses into an aquarium.

Ma Liuming conducted Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II on June 12, the day after Zhang Huan performed his 65 Kilograms. Rong Rong witnessed and photographed both performances, but recorded them only retrospectively in very different circumstances: by the time he wrote the following letter to Yali, Ma Liuming had been arrested and Rong Rong himself was in hiding.

Dear Sis,

Things are very bad now at the moment, and I am hiding at a friend's home. I can't go back to the East Village, because I heard that Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming and Duan Yingmei were all arrested by the police. I didn't at all expect that things could become so serious.

Here is what happened. At noon on June 11th, Zhang Huan, naked, hung himself from the three meter high ceiling of his studio. He invited three doctors from the Concord Hospital to help him transfer blood. Blood dripped onto a white metal tray on the floor, which was heated by an electric heater below. The sound of each drop of blood seemed so vivid and loud. The room was full of people -- foreigners, famous art critics, many photojournalists. The room smelled strongly of blood, and the performance gave the horrifying feeling of death approaching. The air was still. Fresh blood turned black and became burnt, emitting a distinctive stench, which, mixed with the smell of sweat from the audience, filled the whole room. (Sis, I'm glad that you weren't there.)

At that time, I felt dizzy, and my eyes became heavy. Things became blurred in front of me. Zhang Huan had already been up there for sixty minutes. He almost passed out when he got back to the ground.

Even now, I can smell the blood on my hair and my clothes.

On the same night, Ai Weiwei invited about ten of us to a small restaurant in the East Village. In the outdoor space we sat around a big table made up of seven or eight small ones. Everybody was excited about the "success" of Zhang Huan's performance today. (Now that I look back on it, that dinner was actually the "Last Supper" for the East Village.)

The next day, June 12th, Ma Liuming also staged a performance piece in his courtyard -- entitled Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch. About 12:30 pm, a lot of people were already in the courtyard. After a long wait, Ma walked out of his room and appeared in front of us completely transformed. Everyone suddenly stopped talking. His beautiful hair





was let down to shoulder length, and he stood naked with make-up on both his face and hands. At first glance, Ma Liuming was not himself any more. What we saw was a feminized image, an illusion created from his body. It was hard to tell if this image was a man or a woman. Gently he turned on the gas, put a pan on the stove, and dropped some potatoes in it. He picked up a leaf from the tree behind him, wrote something on it, and also put it into the pan. After about twenty minutes, steam came out from the pan. Ma Liuming took off his watch and earrings and put them into the pan too. After a while, he removed the top of the pan, took out the cooked potatoes and buried them under the tree in the courtyard. He then walked back to his room. When he walked out again, he was fully dressed. People started to clap.

Zhang Huan, Curse, Kong Bu and I left Ma's courtyard for lunch. It was this lunch that saved us. We learned later that less than ten minutes after we left, policemen from the Chaoyang Branch came and, without any explanation, arrested everybody who remained in Ma Liuming's courtyard.

None of us knew that things would turn out like this. Now I have hidden my film at a friend's place and don't dare go outside. I had to hide here. I heard that Zhang Huan, Curse and Kong Bu have taken a train and fled to Inner Mongolia. Only I am left here in Beijing. I am concerned about my room in the East Village, but don't dare go back.

I don't know exactly why they were arrested. As far as I know, Zhang Huan's performance on June 11 may have already evoked hostility among local villagers. Some of them reported it to the local police station. Today I couldn't help but call Mr. Li Xianting, asking him what actually happened. His voice was low: "the police found some videos at Ma Liuming's place. They turned in the videos to a professor at some university and asked if it was art. The answer was no. Right now they have put Ma in a detention center together with thieves and criminals. They don't allow anyone to see him."

At last, Old Li asked me to hide for a while, and said that sometimes it's hard to explain things clearly.

God have mercy on us. I hope I will see them again someday. I cannot imagine them in a detention center in such hot weather. They are very fragile.

Sis, after you read this letter, please either hide it in some safe place or burn it. Don't let our parents know.

Please don't worry. I'm safe at this friend's place. But I'm really concerned about my room at the East Village. There are also a lot of your paintings there.

Rong Rong's letter to Yali, June 15, 1994



Fleeing

Rong Rong lived in agony for the next two months. Too young to have lived through the Cultural Revolution, he was for the first time in his life experiencing political persecution. He worried about the fate of his Village friends and comrades, some of whom were now behind bars and unreachable. He missed his home in the Village and was heartbroken when he had to abandon it. As if the earth had suddenly vanished under his feet, the East Village no longer existed and he had no place to go. Wandering in Beijing, he felt rootless again. Two letters he wrote to Yali in June, cited below, best reveal his psychological and emotional state during this period.

Dear Sis,

I have to let you know this: I couldn't control myself tonight and secretly biked back to the East Village.

The landlord was surprised. He thought I was arrested too. He asked me not to talk loud, and told me that the police had sealed the houses of Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming. They also issued a 1,000 RMB fine to each of the landlords, and warned them not to rent rooms to artists anymore.

He said that the day before yesterday, policemen had come to our courtyard at night. Using flashlights they searched my room. They were alarmed by the photo next to my bed (one of my favorites) and yelled: "Look at that picture! Why is that person putting his head against a wall?" They told my landlord that if I returned home, he shouldn't let me take anything away, and should immediately report me to the local residential committee.

Before I left, the landlord said that he would call me soon to make an arrangement. I could then secretly move my things at night, and he would pretend that he didn't know anything about it. Upon hearing this, the weeks' distress finally began to catch up with me and I was on the verge of crying. I realized I couldn't live there anymore and I had to think what I would do in the future. And what about my friends, who are all in exile some place?

I really wanted to stay one more night in my room, but the landlord said that policemen might come to check. I took a last look at the little room, the only space that had belonged to me, and left.

Night. I biked once again on this familiar road. Surrounding me was a deadly silence ...

Rong Rong's letter to Yali, June 23, 1994

The landlord called the next day, and Rong Rong returned to the Village later that night to pack his belongings and took them away. On the same day he also received a letter from Yali: responding to one of his earlier letters, she was anxious about her brother's safety.



Dear Sis,

I received your letter. Please don't worry about me too much. Things will get better. We still haven't heard anything from Ma Liuming or Zhu Ming, but we found the place where the police detained them. Through the connection of a friend of Xing Danwen's we went to see Ma Liuming. In the end, however, we couldn't see him in person and could only send him some cigarettes through the guards.

At midnight yesterday, with the help of my friend Xiao Lin, I sneaked back to the East Village again to secretly pack our belongings. I took your paintings out of their frames and rolled them into a big bundle. The landlord didn't want me to leave either, but we had no choice. With a heavy three-wheeled bicycle, we moved my "home" away. I am so sad. I had hoped that you could return to the Village one day, but now, it's over. It all happened too quickly.

But sis, please don't be too sad for me.

Even though the East Village doesn't exist anymore, we can appreciate the fact that all of us are still alive. As long as we are alive and don't lose hope, we can still amount to something.

I truly believe every East Village artist is strong enough to live on. One day we will come back and get together again. We will. Believe me!

P.S. It's good to know that you're going to spend the summer vacation with our parents. I don't want them to worry about me so I won't write to them for now. Again don't worry and have a good summer.

Rong Rong's letter to Yali, June 25, 1994, late night

Probably afraid of increasing Yali's worry, Rong Rong did not mention one of his secret journeys to the Village during this period: making sure the police were not around, he revisited and photographed the room where Zhang Huan had staged his last performance, now empty. As shown in the photographs he took there, the stains of blood on the mattress seem still fresh and moist. The chains Zhang used to hang himself are coiled on the mattress, snake-like. Some broken dolls lie next to the chains; Zhang had collected and used them to make installations and also for the performance Weeping Angels. As Rong Rong had written earlier, 65 Kilograms "made everyone feel death was approaching", these photographs show the aftermath of death at the end of the East Village.

The sense of hopelessness seemed omnipresent during this period; and the feeling of an abrupt "ending" was generated by multiple events and images. Among these events was a mysterious attack: some strangers beat up Zhang Huan severely in a bar on June 30, the day before the forty-fifth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. Rong Rong's photographs of Zhang, taken right after Zhang received emergency treatment in a hospital, portray the fearless performance artist as a wounded soldier. Zhang's head is wrapped in a thick, white bandage; his face and neck still bear fresh bloodstains, and he stares ahead motionlessly. I cannot help but to compare these images with the photographs Rong Rong



took on May 21, when he accompanied Zhang Huan for the haircut in Wangfujing and recorded the event. As mentioned earlier, this “haircut” marked the beginning of group activities of the East Village artists. The sense of “beginning” is strongly manifested in Rong Rong’s portraits of Zhang Huan in the barbershop: fiercely determined, Zhang was ready to embark on an avant-garde mission. The injured Zhang Huan on July 1, on the other hand, was silent and expressionless. We still sense strength; but his task now is to survive a heavy setback.

Today I received a phone call from Binbin, Zhang Huan’s girlfriend. She told me that Zhang Huan was beaten in a bar, and is now in a hospital behind the National Art Gallery. She said that the situation is serious. Zhang Huan’s head was severely injured and he lost a lot of blood.

In fact I had a feeling that something horrible would happen. Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming are still under arrest. And now Zhang Huan ...

Around noon, Kong Bu and I bought a black-boned chicken²⁶ and went straight to the hospital. When we arrived we saw Binbin and Wang Peng were already there. A doctor has put some medicine on Zhang Huan’s head. I could not believe this was Zhang Huan: with a bandage wrapped around his head, he has bloodstains smeared around his right ear and a long row of stitches on his neck. I was shocked, and couldn’t say anything.

Silently I took out my camera, which felt as heavy as a stone.

Later we left the hospital together. Zhang Huan put a hat on his head when we walked to the street. It is summer now and very hot in Beijing. With a bright white bandage under the hat, he reminds me of Vincent van Gogh.

Why ...?

Kong Bu and I took Zhang Huan to Binbin’s place, and she started to tell us what happened the night before. “It was in a bar next to the Worker’s Stadium. Zhang Huan and I ordered two beers. Less than ten minutes after we had sat down, out of the blue two people walked toward us, grabbed our beer glasses from the table and smashed them on Zhang Huan’s head. Zhang Huan fell to the floor instantly. I held him in my arms, and his head was covered with blood.”

“I became defenseless even before I knew what was going on,” Zhang Huan added in a weak voice.

Binbin stopped Zhang Huan and asked him to speak less because he needed rest and talking was not good for his stitches.

“I took him to the hospital immediately and called Ai Weiwei. Weiwei was not home,

so Ai Dan came instead and helped us.”

“Why didn’t you report it to the police?” I asked.

“Would they be helpful? You know they’d be happy about this.”

I don’t know how long we stayed there. Before we left, we told Zhang Huan to stay home and get well.

Kong Bu and I biked shoulder to shoulder but we had nothing to say the whole way home. Suddenly my pedal went into his wheel, and we both fell down hard. Thank god my camera was not damaged!

Rong Rong’s diary, July 1, 1994







Reclaiming the Past

Homeless and in despair, Rong Rong left Beijing for Fujian around the end of that summer. No joy brightened this homecoming trip. The family's old house looked even older and shabbier, and so did his parents, relatives and neighbors. The smell of mildew, a natural element of this rainy southern climate, now seemed too overwhelming. He roamed around. The hills and ponds were the same but he no longer felt like climbing them or jumping in them. The only thing that made his heart suddenly feel a jolt was a piece of old furniture; it also became the only object that he photographed over and over on this trip.

He saw it when he walked into an unused room on the second floor in his old home: an enormous, traditional-style bed with a canopy frame and screen-railings on three sides. It was empty and dusty: his parents had long abandoned it for a more comfortable "western-style" bed. Stripped of curtains and bedding, its timber structure was exposed to full view. Certain parts of it -- especially the bottom of the carved canopy posts -- were shiny and dark due to years of touching. The screen-railings bore scratches, showing marks of tiny fingernails. Rong Rong recognized some scratches as coming from his own hands. He also remembered that he used to jump up and down in this bed while holding the canopy posts. He recalled that when he was a little boy he slept in this bed with his parents. His two younger sisters later joined him, all crawling in under their parents' feet.

These instantaneous recollections identify this old bed as an *yi wu* -- a Chinese term meaning "remnants from the past." In traditional literature *yi wu* refer to possessions left behind by a bygone subject, either a person, a family, or a dynasty. But generally, an *yi wu* is always a surviving portion of a vanished whole; by accident it has broken away from its once existing body to become part of the alien world of the present. Thus to Rong Rong, his rediscovery of the forgotten bed meant the resurrection of his childhood with all its innocence. To reclaim the past one must perform the past. So with his camera as his audience, he stripped, became an infant again, and lay in the empty bed.

It is also on this trip that Rong Rong began to write poems, an art form that allowed him to directly express his melancholy mood. Here is one example:

Unable to escape from myself, everything is deemed to disappear.
Even if images can freeze moments, what's the meaning of all this?
I am confused, but I photograph and my only remaining desire is to photograph.
Wanting to abandon everything, I also hope to abandon myself, leaving only emptiness behind.
I should not have come here, dad, ma.
The world -- this world -- is not my world.
Rong Rong, you are far away from life, far away.
But now you are sleeping on the same bed that you came into this world on!

At home, August 9, 1994

"home" remained the central theme in the poems Rong Rong wrote after he returned to

Beijing that fall. But where was home? Just a few months earlier, he was full of enthusiasm about his "home" in the East Village and embraced Beijing completely as his "hometown." Now with the Village gone, Beijing also seemed alien and frightening. Yet his old home in Fujian never really belonged to him: it only housed his childhood memories and would remain as such.

Why? I am in need of something else.

Photography, my heart --

Why can't I abandon it?

Go, be more practical, and make some money.

Make some money! What are you doing, Rong Rong? Why?

Maybe only photography can keep me alive.

But perhaps the joy of life is not limited to this?

I miss my old home, my old home in the South, but there memories are everything.

I keep thinking about my childhood:

Carefree childhood -- painful childhood.

I think of nights in the South -- sounds of rain, sounds of rain.

The North, the dreadful North

Why do I choose this land?

A sky with no rain,

It makes me dry, dry!

October 6, 1994







Returning to the Present

In September Rong Rong rejoined Beijing's avant-garde scene. Ma Liuming had been released. Members of the group, now scattered in different places on the east side of Beijing, met again. Zhang Huan and Cang Xin had moved to Dougezhuang, Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming to Anjialou, and Rong Rong to Liulitun. Interestingly, their new homes were all in close proximity to Dashanzhuang, the former location of their community. Without much coordination, all these artists still attached themselves to the East Village, now a dematerialized, conceptual center that continued to identify them as "East Village artists." A series of Rong Rong's photographs records a reunion of these artists in Liulitun where he lived. They exchanged their new addresses, and joked that their forced separation would nevertheless engender a wave of "guerilla warfare" of avant-garde art against official oppression. Recovering from the setback, these energetic young men had largely regained their confidence and sense of humor.

Walking on the dirt road in Liulitun, everyone felt as if we had returned to the East Village again. Laughing and joking, we said that while this year has been a year of turbulence, next year will be a year of upheaval.

Zhang Huan suddenly fell silent and stopped in front of a withered tree, on which a rubber bicycle tire was hanging. The shop sign of a bicycle repair service in this village. "This thing looks scary," I joked, "It seems to be prepared for someone to hang himself." Even before I finished my sentence, Zhang Huan leaped forward and grabbed the tire, putting his head into the circle. I raised my camera and encouraged him: "Show me an agonized face!" He immediately stuck out his tongue, turned his eyes upward, and kicked his feet as if in a desperate struggle. We all began to laugh.

Rong Rong's memoir, January 13, 2003

Many "performances" of this kind took place during this period. Unlike the much more serious, public presentations that Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming undertook in June, these were performed spontaneously during the artists' private, informal gatherings. Few art critics and historians have paid any attention to these events; we know them mainly from Rong Rong's photographs, which have captured these moments for posterity. In addition to Zhang Huan's "mock suicide" in Liulitun, we also see him in a deserted Beijing lane flanked by dilapidated traditional houses on both side. Facing an old wall with his penis protruding, he seems in the middle of the unceremonial act of urinating in public. The photographs, on the other hand, make it clear that this is a performance: dressed in a brand new Mao suit but wearing a weird Punk haircut, Zhang seems an alien intruder in an intimate, vernacular space. The oddity and artificiality of his image is highlighted by his exposed "penis," which seems strangely oversized and white. Looking closely, we find that it is a plastic dildo sold in a sex shop. (Zhang Huan's girlfriend Xiao Hong bought it for him in Paris.) Rong Rong recalled the context of this performance:



Zhang Huan and I met in the Back Sea (Houhai) area. Xing Danwen and Bai Shuiling (Robyn Beck, a journalist from the French News Agency) also joined us there. Xing and Bai, both female, had no idea what kind of trick Zhang Huan was planning, until Zhang took out a dildo from his fly, faced the lake and made various gestures. Feeling duped, the two girls soon left for other business. Zhang Huan and I wandered around in the narrow lanes in the area, which are famous for their old-fashioned, ruined courtyard houses. Mockingly I turned to Zhang Huan: "Why don't you take a piss here?" Delighted by the suggestion, he again exposed his fake penis while standing in front of a peeling wall.

Rong Rong's memoir, January 13, 2003

Other East Village artists conducted similar impromptu performances in response to Rong Rong's suggestion or request. One of them was Zhu Ming. Born in 1972 in Changsha, Hunan, Zhu was the youngest among the East Village artists, and his petite size and innocent expression reinforced his child-like appearance. Perhaps not coincidentally, he also derived a principal image for his performances from a children's game of blowing bubbles. He conducted the first of such projects on April 30, 1994 when he was still living in the East Village: naked, he hung a glass jar from an easel with liquid soap in it, and placed a large mirror on the ground below. Blowing air incessantly into the jar through a plastic tube, he produced countless bubbles to fill the space, finally burying him inside a mound of translucent foam.²⁷ It was not until five months later, however, that Rong Rong first photographed Zhu Ming, after the latter had just been released from a detention center.

I remember one morning three months ago, I ran into Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming while walking out from my courtyard in the East Village. Ma Liuming introduced Zhu Ming as his best friend, and told me that, like himself, Zhu was also interested in both painting and performance art. Zhu Ming was tiny and fragile, and spoke in a soft voice. But he also looked very alert. I said to him: "When I have time I will visit you and take some pictures of you." "That would be great," he replied.

Who would have known that today when I do see Zhu Ming again it is already three months later, and that he had been held at Changping detention center for two months. Here is what happened: he was among the audience of Ma Liuming's performance, Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch, on June 12. Police interrogated him, asking why he was with Ma Liuming, and searched his living space in the village. They found a wrinkled national flag in a corner of the room and had a fit of fury. Afterward they took him away without citing any specific reasons.

Zhu Ming says that at first he thought that nothing would happen because he hadn't done



anything wrong. All he did was watch Ma Liuming's performance. So when the police questioned him he didn't take their questions too seriously. Then they accused him of lying.

As result, he was put together with thieves and criminals in the detention center for two months in an unbearably hot summer.

Zhu started to tell me about life there. He said he was still lucky: although he shared a room with twenty or thirty criminals, all sleeping on the floor, these people were friendly to him. They thought he was cute and different, unlike "bad guys" like themselves. He also said that although the only food they could have was Wo Wo Tou (a kind of coarse corn-bread), not tasty at all, it was guaranteed that they would be fed regularly, unlike life in the East Village where sometimes he had nothing to eat.

I joked with him saying: "It sounds like you enjoyed the life there and didn't want to leave!" "One of the thieves there had been arrested a couple of times. He said that he had become used to the life in a detention center which guaranteed housing and food."

"Whatever," I said, "I've taken pictures of most of the people in the East Village except you. I should take photographs today in case you're arrested again & I don't want to lose the opportunity a second time."

I continued, "Well, how should we take these pictures? I heard that you had planned to bike from Beijing to Guangzhou blowing bubbles all the way. Can I have a preview?"

"OK, after having been locked up for this long, I really need to 'vent some air' now ('chu kou qi,' normally means to 'vent one's spleen,' is used here as a pun for blowing bubbles)!" Zhu Ming said without hesitation.

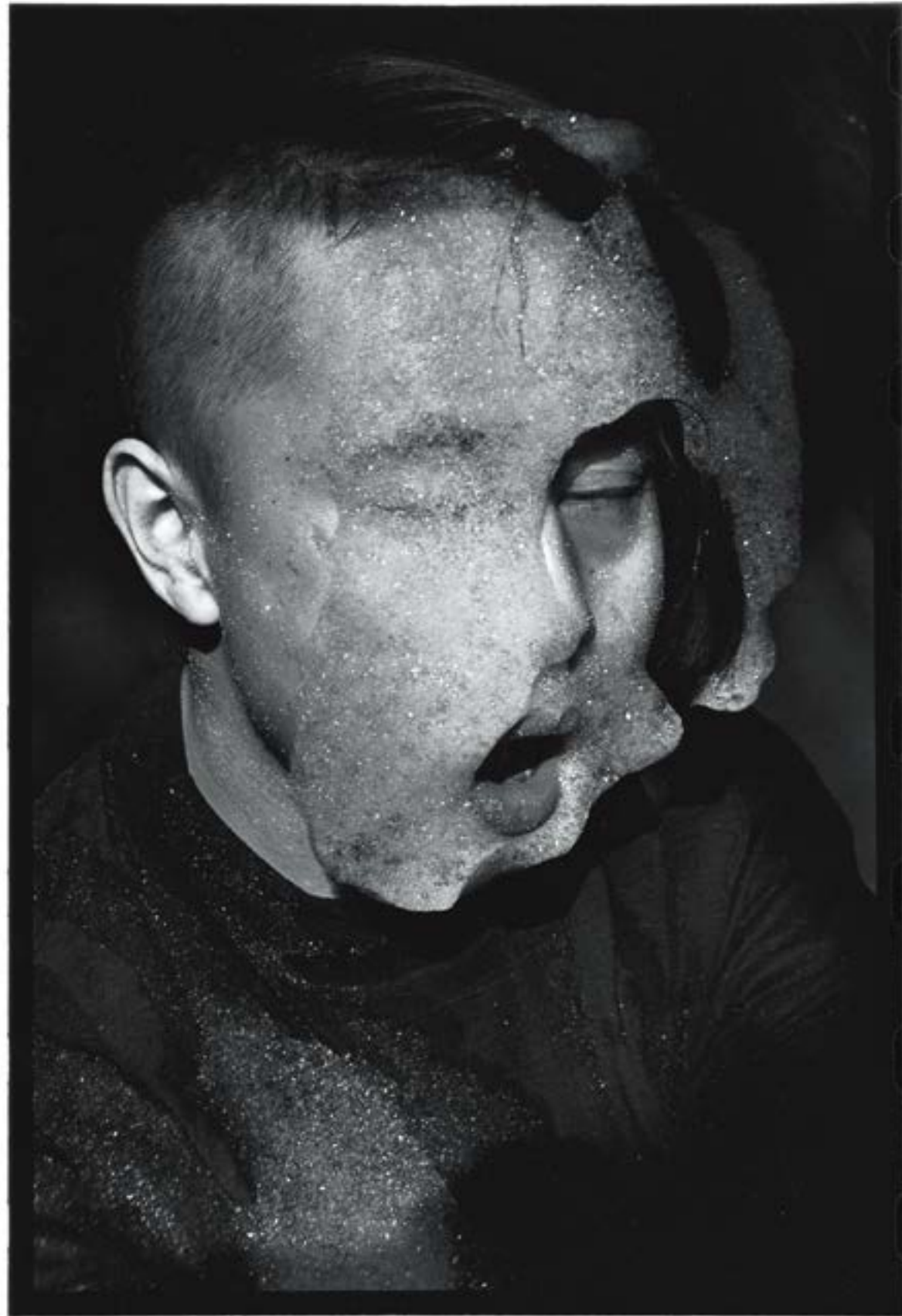
"Hold on a second. Let me take a portrait of you first, right in the middle of this infamous national flag and your paintings."

"Fuck. It was because of this flag that I had to stay in the detention center for two months! I've learned my lesson and will now hang it on the wall nicely. If they ever ask me again I'll be sure to tell them how much I love our country..." Zhu Ming continued to pour out his anger but I wasn't listening anymore. My camera was like a greyhound that had spotted a rabbit. Zhu Ming lit a cigarette. White clouds came rolling out of his mouth and rose to the ceiling.

Then he pulled a large washbasin out in the courtyard, and poured half a package of washing powder in it, mixing it with water. Using his hands he started to stir the soapy water.

After a little while, white foam started to form a miniature snow mountain. Zhu Ming dug his head into this "Pile of snow" and came out like Santa Claus.





He opened his eyes wide and stared at me. Foam covered his head, eyes, ears, and nose.

Then he lay on the ground, blowing out transparent, crystal-like bubbles from his mouth. The bubbles reflected the colorful world surrounding him, and then broke immediately. Bubble after bubble, bubbles everywhere, until he couldn't make them anymore. Lying still, now only white soapy water came out from his mouth.

Rong Rong's note, September 1994

Another spontaneous performance that Rong Rong recorded during this period was by Ma Zhongren, who was one day bitten by a dog in the village where he lived. Before visiting a doctor, he called in some of his artist friends to help transform this incident into an art project: lying facedown at the spot where he had been attacked by the dog, he stretched his arms and legs open to form the Chinese character da 大 "big." His friends outlined his body with white lime, in the same fashion that policemen mark a crime scene. Ma then stood up and walked away, leaving the empty outline of his body behind with a note inside: "Be warned: There is a yellow dog who bites people!" Rong Rong was among the artists who helped Ma conduct the performance, including taking photographs of the "Crime scene." His participation in this performance, on the other hand, also triggered his recollection of the bygone East Village:

... I heard that almost all the artists who lived in the East Village had the experience of being bitten by dogs. I myself never had such an experience and still don't fully believe these tales. But it was perhaps because unlike me, the other artists all loved liquor and tended to wander around at night after heavy drinking.

The yellow dog of my landlord in the East Village was a nice one. It always wagged its tail to welcome me when I pushed my bicycle in the door, and it also accompanied me when I strolled around the pond in the village. Instead of frightening me it made me feel safe. Its name was Big Yellow.

Rong Rong's memoir, January 13, 2003

As free, spontaneous expressions, these informal performances often resulted from the artists' direct reactions to specific situations and events. Satiric, narcissistic or angry, these projects stemmed from the artists' life experiences and deliberately blurred the boundary between art and reality. While this kind of experimentation enabled the East Village artists to explore the possibilities of body art, to articulate a critical strategy and artistic vocabulary, it also distanced them from many other Chinese experimental artists, who had closer ties with the academic world and/or commercial galleries. It is important to note that within the circle of Chinese experimental art, the East Village artists



from early on had the reputation of being “Unscrupulous;” their body art was often misunderstood as a quick means to win recognition. Now, as rumors about their “extreme and outrageous” experiments spread, they found themselves not only persecuted by the authorities but also denounced by many experimental artists. Their reaction to this situation was a deepening antagonism toward social norms. Again, they expressed such antagonism through extemporaneous performances.

Today is December 31, 1994, the last day of the year. We heard through the grapevine that it was the art critic Karen Smith’s birthday, and there would be a birthday party for her at a Sanlitun bar. Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Cang Xin and I all heard about this and wanted to go. Xiao Lin and I took a taxi from Ma Liuming’s place and went straight there.

Around 11 pm, a big crowd of people began to gather at the place. On the table Mr. Li Xianting placed a big birthday cake he had prepared for the occasion.

Ma Liuming showed up, dressed like a woman.

Zhang Huan and Binbin sat in a corner. I noticed that he had brought two bulky bags filled with something.

Can Xin looked very serious, busily arranging candles on the table next to Zhang Huan’s.

By about 11:30pm the bar was packed. Many celebrities in the circle of Chinese avant-garde art were there: Xu Bing, Wang Guangyi, and many others.

Soon, the clock in the bar pointed to five to midnight.

Zhang Huan was preparing something in the corner, and constantly taking candles from Cang Xin’s table to his side. One candle, two candles, three candles....

The big cake next to Li Xianting was lit up. People moved to the table and cheered.

Zhang Huan, holding a big saucepan on his head, danced to the center of the bar. Smoke came out from the pan; something was burning inside.

Many people started to dance around Zhang. Ma Liuming danced with him; the two of them moved in rhythm. The music was getting louder and louder and everybody started dancing. The whole bar seemed to be shaking.

“Pa-pa!” My back felt a chill. Someone was throwing beer in the crowd. People were getting even more excited.

Suddenly I saw something white flying in the air, and then heard a scream. Before

most people realized what was going on, someone had thrown another big piece of cake at them. Suddenly everyone stopped dancing, anxiously trying to find out who was responsible. They turned their eyes to the table where the cake was: Cang Xin stood there with his hands full of cream. No doubt it was him!

“What a stink! Something’s burning,” a voice cried out.

Not until then did people realize that the bar was filled with horrible smelling smoke. (Zhang Huan had sneaked out of the bar. The saucepan on his head was full of burning hair.)

“This must be a conspiracy,” someone concluded.

Rong Rong’s diary, December 31, 1994





From Tramping on Faces to Primordial Sounds

Not all the performances by the East Village artists that Rong Rong photographed in late 1994 and early 1995 were informal and impromptu, however. Some of them were thoughtful undertakings with serious messages. One outstanding project of this kind by an individual artist was Cang Xin's *Trampling on Faces*; for group projects, *Primordial Sounds* initiated a new type of collaboration between the East Village artists.

A native of Handan in Henan province, Cang Xin moved to Beijing in 1993 to join the avant-garde scene there. Like several other artists living in the East Village, he started as an oil painter, but soon turned into a passionate performance artist after joining the East Village community. "Although I had only very vague ideas about body art at that time – ideas mainly from fragmentary translations of western theories," he recalled later, "I was convinced that this art could interact more directly with society and could express more straightforwardly what I wanted to express."²⁸ His first large performance project, *Virus Series*, started at the end of 1993 and consisted of a number of pieces that aimed to study different "physical manifestations of psychological disturbance." He traced the impulse behind this project to his mother's mental disorder as a result of her tragic marriage, and to his own troubled childhood.²⁹

He continued this project after the East Village community was forced to disperse. *Virus Series* No.2 had the subtitle *The Highest State of the Mundane*. But most people know it as *Trampling on Faces*. For this performance Cang made a mold from his own face, and used it to cast fifteen hundred plaster masks in a month. Each mask bore a white paper strip on the forehead, on which he wrote the time of the cast's manufacture. He then laid the masks on the ground to fill the entire courtyard of his house, and also hung some masks on the walls as witnesses of the forthcoming performance. During the performance, guests were invited to walk on the masks to destroy them, until all these artificial faces (of Cang Xin himself) were turned to shards. Finally he stripped and jumped on the broken masks, using his naked body to fragment them further.





Cang Xin later explained this performance in an interview: "The face is the essence of a human figure. Its importance is universal and unconditioned by country, region or race. Everyone cares about his or her face no matter whether it is beautiful or ugly. To make a plaster mask [from my face] was delicate work. How soon does the plaster harden? Can the cast register the minute rise and fall of my face? – I had to consider all these questions carefully; slight negligence would lead to imperfection. After making each cast I immediately recorded the year, month, day, hour, and minute of its manufacture on its forehead. As the masks increased in number, however, the production became a meaningless repetition and my boredom grew. My decision to destroy the masks was based on the realization that a damaged image could better convey the idea of perfection and beauty than a perfect and beautiful image. People now only value things in terms of quantity. They have become increasingly identical to one another. All men and women are busily pursuing practical gain, like shadows that have lost their spiritual home."³⁰

The essence of this projection is therefore to transcend the conventional ideal of art creation, which is to produce perfect but standardized images. This also means that Cang Xin had to transcend himself, because he was a product of this convention and embodied its values. If the first stage of the project – the painstaking process of making fifteen hundred "perfect" models of his face – embodied the logic of conventional art creation, he invited the audience to join him in destroying it. His purpose was not to destroy the notions of perfection and beauty, however. Rather, as he stated, the shards of the masks "could better convey the idea of perfection and beauty" than the originals.

Rong Rong's photographs vividly record this destructive/evocative process. One particular image seems especially poignant: numerous masks, many of them destroyed, lie behind the figure in the foreground, who holds up a mask to cover his face. The date written on the mask's forehead is "2: 21-26 pm, November 26, 1994." The mask is damaged, with the left eye and a portion of the forehead missing. The figure behind the mask is not Cang Xin, but Ma Liuming, recognizable from his shoulder-length hair and delicate hand. So here Cang Xin and Ma Liuming have interchanged their roles: wearing Cang's face, Ma makes himself a surrogate of the performer and the subject of a simulated destruction. But it was the photographer Rong Rong who designed this "performance within a performance" as a subject to be photographed.

§

Unlike all previous performance projects of the East Village artists, *Primordial Sounds* was a true "group performance" conducted by multiple artists. On the other hand, unlike later group projects such as *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* and *Nine Holes*, it was not a synchronized, single performance piece; each participant conceived an independent piece and conducted it in sequence. In fact, although the artists together envisioned the event, they kept their individual plans to themselves till the last minute. Their performances could thus generate a strong feeling of spontaneity. Because of this feature, *Primordial Sounds* marked an important turning point in what may be called "East Village performance art."





This project also signified an extended definition of “East Village artists”: no longer restricted to those who lived in the same neighborhood, this term came to refer to a group of performance artists with similar ideas and vision. Among the twelve participants in this event, only six originally lived in the East Village (Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Rong Rong, Cang Xin, Wang Shihua, and Curse); others were their friends and new collaborators. During this period, these East Village artists developed close ties with a number of Beijing performance artists who shared their ideas and interests, including Song Dong, Zhu Fadong, Zhuang Hui, Wang Jinsong, and Wang Pu. It is therefore no accident that Song Dong and Zhu Fadong appeared in *Primordial Sounds*.

The project took place in the public domain but did not pursue a public viewership: it was the artists who also served as each other’s audience. As for Rong Rong, he no longer remained invisible behind the camera, but expanded his role to become a formal participant in a group performance. In fact, looking through his many self-portraits taken in the East Village days and afterward, we realize that he always had a strong desire to perform in front of the camera. His solitary journey to Fujian (during which he photographed himself lying naked on the bed in which he was born) further made him a self-conscious performance artist. In *Primordial Sounds*, he collaborated with Gao Fu in a performance piece, and also appeared as a mock photojournalist throughout the project: secretive about whether his camera was actually loaded, the clicks of the shutter release did not necessarily signify picture taking. The message was that when the photographer became a performer, the camera became simply a prop in the performance.

It was the night of January 23, 1995. Twelve artists – Curse, Luo Lin, He Ruijun, Rong Rong, Gao Fu, Song Xiaohong, Zhu Fadong, Cang Xin, Zhang Huan, Song Dong, Wang Shihua, and Ma Liuming – met under the raised highway intersection near Beijing’s Dongbianmen Gate to carry out a performance. Each of them, in his or her own way, was to make a most poignant “primordial sound.”

The first to begin was Ma Liuming. He had been preparing for his part since 7 pm. He did so by drinking five bottles of beer beforehand in order to have a long pee. Everyone arrived promptly at 10 pm. Ma Liuming was already facing a wall and couldn’t hold it in



any longer. All we could hear then was the sound of pouring water; afterwards we saw hot steam rising from the floor. The urinating lasted for at least three minutes. The urine slowly spread, melting the ice surrounding it.

The second piece was by Curse, who began by raising his head and yelling into the dark night three times. The performance was then finished.

Rong Rong and Gao Fu's performance followed. Rong Rong directed his camera at an anonymous girl (Gao Fu), who held a candle to light up her face. Rong Rong took her pictures rapidly from all angles. With each change in the angle he edged closer and closer to her. The flashbulb went off uninterrupted, together with the crisp sound of the shutter release. He moved closer and closer, until the camera almost touched the girl's face; the clicks of the camera mixed with the breathing sound of the two performers. The candle-light then suddenly went out, leaving behind pitch blackness.

After a while, no one knew how long, a lullaby came out of nowhere. We turned towards the direction of the sound and saw Xiao Hong sitting above the raised highway. She slowly unbuttoned her white nightgown and lowered her head, holding her breasts to suck them. She repeated the lullaby and then closed her eyes, falling asleep.

People started to clap.

One after the other, the artists performed their pieces.

* * *

Zhang Huan chose to start from the highway. He emerged from the dark, naked, and began laughing hysterically. Suddenly he fell onto the concrete surface of the highway, standing up, and then falling down again. From a distance, his actions looked as if he was fighting a battle. But he was the only warrior in the battlefield while his opponent was himself. Falling and rising, he repeated this motion until reaching the edge of the highway, from which he then jumped off. Now backed into a corner beneath the highway, he began to stuff earthworms into his mouth.

He then proceeded to lie on the floor, facing upward and remaining still. Earthworms slowly began to emerge from his mouth. It was a dark and cold winter night in Beijing. Under that streetlight, I saw something probably more horrifying than death itself. Everything surrounding us was completely still, as silent as death.

After a long while, as if awakened by a nightmare, he moved and turned his back towards us, and started to sob. This tiny sobbing from a man broke the silence.

The night was not peaceful at all.

The last performance was Song Dong's. He also chose to perform on the highway.

Holding a thick but wordless book in his hands, he read it page by page. His mouth moved rhythmically but soundlessly. Only the steam from his breath was visible on this cold night. The steam appeared and disappeared, evoking the feeling of a magical charm.

On the way back, we heard a dog barking in the distance. This made me feel more depressed.

I need silence.

A death-like silence

Why do I take these pictures? Is this what life is all about?

I want to return to the beginning of mankind, but then why am I still holding a



pen searching?

What is the point of photography anyway? Without it life still goes on, day after day.

What am I trying to seize?

Death ...

Rong Rong's diary, January 23, 1995



Later Performances

In retrospect, we realize that the nature and form of collaborations between the East Village artists changed over time, resulting in three consecutive patterns. First, when the East Village community emerged in mid-1994, some groundbreaking performances by individual artists served as focuses of collective creativity. Although these projects are now conventionally credited to these individual performers, other members of the community, including both artists and art critics, contributed ideas to the projects' conceptualization, helped facilitate their realization, served as the audience, and recorded them in video and photographs. While this type of collaboration continued and, in fact, provided a basic mechanism for conducting avant-garde performances in China, Primordial Sounds in early 1995 introduced a new type of collaboration. As mentioned earlier, twelve artists participated in this group activity. Although the whole project had a strong theme, each artist conceived his or her performance piece independently and carried it out in a personal, spontaneous manner. This then led to the third and last kind of collaboration, represented by two group performances on May 22, 1995. Rong Rong did not take part in these two activities: he went to Fujian on a job assignment and missed the occasion. Because of the importance of these two performances in the history of East Village performance art, however, it is necessary to briefly introduce them here. One of the two performances – To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain – has become widely known after being featured in the exhibition Inside Out: New Chinese Art.³¹ The other performance -- Nine Holes -- is seldom mentioned because of its more explicit sexual content. These two projects, however, should be studied together because they were conceived as closely related works and conducted on the same day in the same place. Here are the original plans of the projects written in May 6, 1995, fifteen days before the actual performances. To my knowledge, this document has never been published before.

To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain A collaborative work by ten East Village artists, Beijing

Time: May 1995

Place: An anonymous mountain in the Miaofeng Mountains, Beijing

Organizers: Kong Bu, Zhang Huan

Artists: (arranged according to their weight, starting from the heaviest)

Wang Shihua (80 kg), Cang Xin (70 kg), Gao Yang (68 kg), Curse (65 kg), Ma Zhongren (65 kg), Zhang Huan (64 kg), Ma Liuming (55 kg), Zhang Binbin (55 kg, female), Duan Yingmei (55 kg, female), Zhu Ming (46 kg)

Photographer: Huang Quan³²

Cartographer: Jin Kui, Xiong Wen

Relative height of the anonymous mountain: 86.393 m

Added height to the anonymous mountain: 1 m

Rules of the performance: At the same time and spot, the ten artists, all naked, lie on top of one other in sequence from the heaviest to lightest, all facing down and remaining still.

Nine Holes A collaborative work by nine East Village artists, Beijing

Time: May 1995

Place: An anonymous mountain in the Miaofeng Mountains, Beijing

Organizers: Kong Bu, Zhang Huan

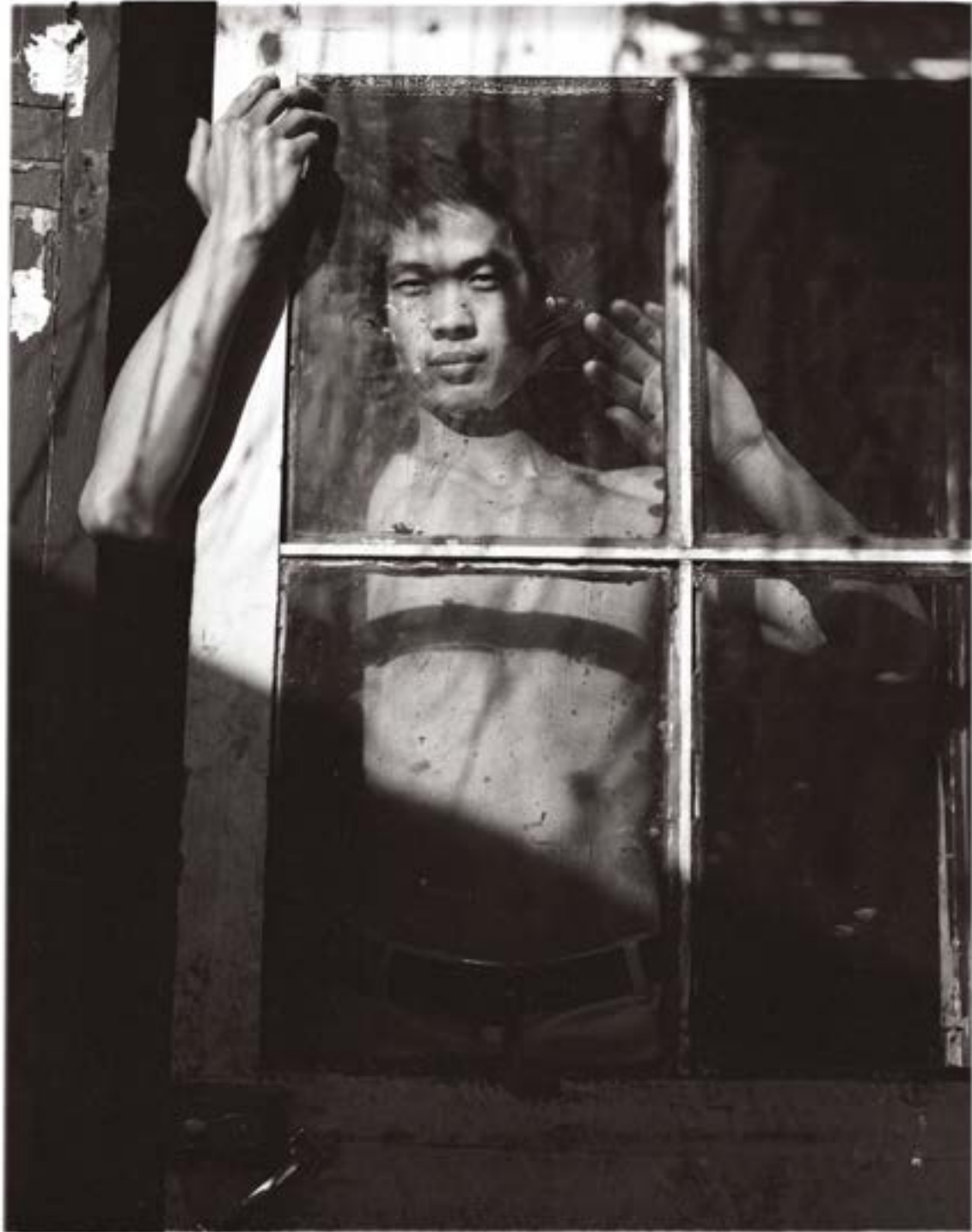
Artists: (arranged according to the number of strokes in their surname)

Ma Liuming, Ma Zhongren, Wang Shihua, Zhu Ming, Cang Xin, Zhang Huan, Zhang Binbin (female), Duan Yingmei (female), Gao Yang

Photographer: Huang Quan

Rules of the performance: At the same time and within a single area, the ten artists select their own spots [to conduct the following performance]. Each male artist digs a hole on the ground and inserts his penis into the hole, facing down and remaining still. Each female artist aligns her vagina with a protrusion on the ground, facing down and remaining still.

These two performances marked the culmination as well as the end of large-scale collaborations between the East Village artists. The reason for the discontinuation is complex and must be analyzed in a more comprehensive study of the East Village community. In terms of Rong Rong's experience the focus of this essay the gradual fragmentation of this community brought about some important changes in his art. Most important, he no longer committed himself entirely to the collective identity and activities of the community, but began to develop independent projects on his own. While continuing to interact with some East Village artists and to photograph their performances, he began to invent a type of "performance photography," featuring female characters and himself amidst ruined buildings. Fascinated by Beijing's drastic transformation, he searched and photographed destroyed images in half-demolished houses the project that further led him to study the "mortality" of photographs. These new works both revealed the strong impact of his experience as an East Village artist and demonstrated his departure from this identity. I have discussed the later photographs elsewhere;³³ the rest of this essay will be devoted to his photographs of six performances from 1995 to 1997 – his final collaborations with other East Village artists.



The Third Contact

So far I have grouped Rong Rong's photographs of experimental performances into a single category, distinguished from his self-portraits and photographs of urban ruins. But if we examine these images more closely, we find that they resulted from two different creative processes. In the first type, he recorded a premeditated, "public" performance and translated it into still images of independent artistic value.³⁴ Although in some cases he did contribute to a performance's conceptualization (a common situation during the formative period of the East Village community), his main role was that of observer and recorder. In the second situation, at least according to his own accounts, he initiated a chain effect artistic creation by suggesting that a fellow artist conduct a spontaneous performance. He then photographed the performance and, through exhibiting and publishing the images, transformed a private artistic communication into images for a public audience. We have seen ample examples of this second kind from his early photographs of Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, and other East Village artists. As time went on, his confidence grew and his "directorial" voice became more definitive. Finally, in photographing *The Third Contact*, he assumed a role comparable to that of a "conductor" or "director."



I was looking through the pictures I have taken so far, and found that the most interesting ones are of Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming. Zhang Huan is bold, tough and masculine. Ma Liuming, on the other hand, is elegant and feminine. With shoulder-length hair and a slim body, he is a man without masculinity. Their performances are also antithetical in every way.

It would be very interesting to bring them together to conduct a single performance. I decided to talk with them about this – to take pictures of them together. I was sure that the photographs would convey very special feelings.

A couple of days later, I set up a meeting with Zhang and Ma and told them my thoughts. I said that I really wanted to take pictures of them together. It didn't matter what they did, anything would be interesting as long as they appeared together. They thought the idea was attractive and intriguing. "Yeah. Why didn't we think of it? The combination of all our differences will definitely produce something different." We began to discuss the plan in more detail.

Finally, we decided to use the bathroom in the fancy apartment of Zhang Huan's girlfriend Xiao Hong.

The next morning, we went to the apartment according to the plan. Ma Liuming had also asked Xing Danwen to come and take some pictures. Xiao Hong helped make a video. It was not a very large bathroom, only about six or seven square meters, but very clean. If the public toilet in the East Village is hell, then this is heaven.

Things evolved slowly and naturally: in the bathroom, Zhang Huan looked at himself dreamily in the mirror, as if the person in the mirror was unfamiliar to him. Ma Liuming was

obsessed with brushing his teeth and repeated the action again and again. Zhang Huan then began to shave. The two of them "purified" themselves in front of the mirror. A little later, Zhang Huan sat on the toilet and started to shave his pubic hair. Ma Liuming moved an electric razor back and forth on Zhang Huan's head, even though his head was already perfectly bald.

Zhang Huan then stepped into the bathtub, followed by Ma Liuming. They started to touch their own bodies. Finally, Zhang Huan dumped a big pile of hair that he had prepared for the occasion into the bathtub. Mixed with the steam rising from the hot water in the tub, a strange smell slowly permeated the bathroom. The smell confused me: it seemed to mix many different kinds of smells – even the stink from the public toilet where Zhang Huan performed a year ago. But the smell today is not as pure as the stink in the East Village toilet and made me feel nauseous.

After a series of dazed actions, Ma Liuming walked to the bedroom as if on drugs. He lay down face up in the bed and covered his body with a sheet. Quiet and motionless, he stayed still, like a little girl sound asleep. Then Zhang Huan walked in and lay down to Ma Liuming's left. A deep silence followed. – This was the last image of them together I saw through my camera's viewfinder. Ah, yes, that was it. It was exactly what I had expected: a world in which people share a bed but dream different dreams.

Xiao Hong and I slowly and quietly walked out of the bedroom.

Later on, Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan decided to name today's performance *The Third Contact*.

Rong Rong's note, March 1995









Metal Case

This group of images provides us with a complex case to think about Rong Rong's relationship with a performance artist, as well as the relationship between his "performance photographs" and a performance itself. Here, the performance he photographed was both premeditated and accidental. Zhang Huan first planned it for a public occasion and prepared the prop: a metal box large enough for him to lie inside. What Rong Rong's photographs show, however, is not this public performance (which was never realized), but a private "preview" Zhang conducted just for him. In a way, therefore, these photographs, now available for public viewing, have realized Zhang Huan's original plan.

Interestingly, Rong Rong's notes record yet another unplanned "performance" of Metal Case that Zhang Huan conducted alone: he accidentally locked himself inside the box and experienced the fear of death. What had been envisioned as an artistic activity suddenly turned into a life-threatening calamity. Rong Rong's narrative, however, only presents one version of the story; Zhang Huan has also recorded his experience in an unpublished manuscript. While these two records confirm each other in many points, their differences are also significant. It is worth noting that Rong Rong's account of Zhang's "accidental rescue" is much more dramatic. We find similar dramatization also in his photographs of the performance, which show Zhang's fragmented facial features through a small opening on the metal box. Here, I cite Rong Rong's account first and then append Zhang Huan's text to it.

I went to see Zhang Huan again yesterday. He had a big rectangular metal box at home, made of very thick and solid iron sheets. He told me that he was preparing for a performance. He would lock himself in the box, and then have the box placed on board a Beijing subway train. For a whole day, from morning to night, he would travel around enclosed in the box. The box had only one small opening, which would allow him to observe the outside world. "I want to experience the process of suffocation," he told me.

I took a closer look at the box. "It's not that big. Are you sure you can fit in?" I asked. Responding to my question, Zhang Huan immediately opened the lid and jumped into the box. He curled his body and lay inside it. I closed the box and took out my camera.

From the small opening, I could only see his nose, mouth, or a bit of an ear...

* * *

That was several days ago. Today, Zhang Huan told me about an accident he just had. He got into the box again, hoping to find a comfortable position for the performance. When he closed the lid, the lock was triggered shut accidentally. He had locked himself inside.

There was no one else in the room, and since it was an apartment, all the doors and windows were tightly shut. Time passed by slowly, and Zhang Huan became increasingly scared. He knew that he couldn't expect a rescuer from outside. So he tried hard to



kick the box and banged the top with his head. But the box was very sturdy and his effort produced no effect. Because he was twisted in the box, some parts of his body started to grow numb. He tried to change his position, but found it impossible in such a tight space. Suddenly he was seized by the fear of death. This was not what he had planned. From the little hole he could see a window, and a telephone next to the window. But, of course, he couldn't reach the telephone. He began to shout hysterically, but all he heard was the echo from his own voice. The world outside was as quiet as death.

After a long time, he felt more and more like a trapped animal. From the hole he stared at the window, which was so near but also so far away.

Then a miracle happened.

He saw a janitor cleaning the corridor outside the window. He shouted with all his might. No reaction. Fortunately, the janitor slowly moved closer to the window. Zhang Huan realized that this was his last chance and yelled at the top of his lungs. The janitor seemed to have heard something, and looked into the room. Zhang Huan continued to shout. The janitor left, but the security guard soon appeared and unlocked the door.

Zhang Huan decided not to undertake the performance. Even so, when I looked at the pictures I took earlier of him in the iron box, I think I understood what he was trying to do.

Rong Rong's diary, June 1995

§

Anecdote

On May 8th, before I conducted the planned performance, I was alone in the room after lunch and thought that I'd like to experience what it would be like inside the metal box. So I curled my body inside it and closed the lid. A few minutes later I felt very hot and stuffy, and found it almost impossible to move my limbs. When I tried to open the lid, however, I found I couldn't because it was accidentally locked from outside. There was no way I could unlock it from inside. I immediately sensed the grave implications of this turn of events. There was no one else in the room, and there was also no one who could possibly know the danger I was facing. Through an opening on one side of the box, 4 cm tall and 15 cm wide, I could see a telephone and my pager, as well as the apartment door that was locked inside.

I tried to stick my hand out from the opening, to unlock or overturn the box. But the hole was too small and the box was too heavy. I forced myself to remain cool, but my fear of death and desire for life increased and began to bewilder me. I tried again,



with all of my might, to bang open the top of the box with my head, but had to give it up finally. Normally I communicate with friends through telephone and pager; but now I could no longer use these methods. In this enclosed fancy apartment building, I had no way to let people know my situation. I became more and more scared and desperate, and shouted through the hole: "Help! Come to save me please . . ."

After yelling nonstop for several minutes, I suddenly heard a response from the neighbor living upstairs. Fortunately, we had forgotten to close a window and so my cry could reach outside. Then I saw a person appear on the monitor's screen and heard the telephone and pager ringing. But I could do nothing other than shout toward the monitor: "Come on! Open the door!" Finally, the maid slowly opened the door and stuck her head into the room. Seeing her nervous and alarmed expression, I wanted both to laugh and cry. She still couldn't see me and had little idea about what had happened. My voice from inside the box must have sounded very strange, so she asked who I was. . .

After I finally walked out of the box, I felt that I understood what freedom & real freedom -- means. Nothing is more precious than being alive. One doesn't have to have money, women or anything like that, but life and freedom are indispensable. I felt that I had experienced the state between life and death. We really should treasure life. We truly need freedom. I felt that everything was nicer than before.

I made phone calls to several close friends, telling them what had just happened. It was really scary, when a person becomes totally helpless. This scary metal box & I will never go near it.

Zhang Huan



Fish Child

Fish is a persistent motif in Ma Liuming's performances. Earlier in this essay I described his first major public performance, *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch* (June 1994), in which he boiled live fish, placed them on a glass table, carefully took the meat off the bone and presented it to the audience, and then put the bones into an aquarium. This sequence of events constituted a narrative thread throughout the performance, intertwined with another sequence of events featuring the transformation of the artist's own body. The price Ma Liuming paid for this experiment was high: he was arrested and imprisoned for the next two months on suspicions of obscenity.

He continued this line of experiment after he was released. *Fen-Ma Liuming and the Fish*, his next major performance conducted on March 18, 1995, took place in Anjialou, the village he had moved to. The performance itself seemed nothing extraordinary. Naked, he set up a gas stove in a narrow alley near his house, heated oil in an iron pan, added a live carp, and fried it until it was totally burnt charcoal. What made the performance a powerful interrogation of his subjectivity was an inherent element of self-sacrifice, and hence agony and pain. His naked body shivered uncontrollably in the cold wind, yet he was frying a live fish (Ma's alter-ego) in burning oil. There was an acute sense of the contradiction and fragility of life, as the art critic Zhang Xiaoling has commented: "Frozen and burning at the same time. A performance that aims to violate the existing social and cultural order must confront the logical consequence of such violation: death."³⁵ Xing Danwen was the only photographer invited to record this performance. Rong Rong saw the burnt fish afterward. A relic left from the symbolic self-sacrifice. He asked the performance artist whether he could photograph him and the fish together. "No problem," Ma Liuming answered. He then lay down in his bed while I put the fish on the pillow next to his face. He moved very close to the fish and stared it for a long time. . . (Rong Rong's memoir, January 18, 2003)

Ma Liuming's next project was *Fish Child*. As the title suggests, here Ma Liuming explicitly identified himself with the fish. But the fish in this performance was given an extended meaning, not only symbolizing the sacrifice of life but also expressing heightened sexual desire that was simultaneously brought to an end (fish is a symbol of sexuality in traditional Chinese culture). Here is Rong Rong's recollection of the circumstances of this performance:

Ma Liuming performed his *Fish Child* in the bathroom in my courtyard at Liulitun. This is how it happened:

One day Ma telephoned me, asking if I could help him find a new place to live. He said that the house he was renting in Anjialou would soon be demolished. Although he had found an apartment and even paid the deposit, he was just informed that his contract had been canceled. I told him that he could move in with me if he needed a place right away. Just a few days ago, several renters of this courtyard compound, who were all working in a clothes factory, had moved out to Tongxian. Now only three people – a photographer named Zhao Liang, my former classmate Wang Lei, and myself – lived here. He could join us to rent the house together.



He was glad and moved in almost immediately. As soon he settled down he carried out this performance. With Zhu Ming's help, he hung ten live carps on plastic fishing threads from the ceiling of the bathroom. The fish were struggling in mid-air, painfully opening and closing their mouths as if crying to be saved. Ma Liuming turned on the shower and stepped into the running water, caressing his body with his hands among the suspended fish. He continued to wash and care for his body until the shower water completely ran out. One after another, the fish also stopped moving.

Rong Rong's memoir, January 15, 2003

Rong Rong took about eighty photographs of this performance from a variety of angles, distances, and places. Among these images, a sub-sequence was taken from outside the bathroom. The time was late at night. The courtyard was pitch black. Behind the dark door and window frames, the bathroom looked like an illuminated aquarium. In making these pictures, Rong Rong kept a clear distance from the performance artist, who is given an independent space and reality. There is strong sense of separation between the spectator and the spectacle. We may thus consider these images a kind of "voyeuristic photo": Ma Liuming appears as a self-absorbed subject unconscious of an external gaze, while the photographer assumes the role of an invisible voyeur.

Other photographs were taken from various positions inside the bathroom. Rong Rong had moved from outside to inside; his camera was in close proximity with the photographic subject; the performance artist and photographer reacted to each other. Most of these photographs explore a triangular relationship between Ma Liuming, the fish, and a mirror hanging on the wall. Some pictures include all three: Ma is taking a shower among the suspended fish, while their images are all reflected in the mirror. Other pictures only show sections of this complete scene: Ma Liuming alone with the fish or the mirror; the fish alone with Ma Liuming or the mirror. The mirror is used as an effective means to mediate Ma Liuming and the fish, suggesting their interchangeability and hence their mutual identity. Sometimes it reflects the naked performance artist; other times it frames the images of the fish. Sometimes Ma Liuming is paired with the mirror that shows the fish in it; other times the pairing is reversed: Ma Liuming is inside the mirror while the fish are outside. Occasionally, the mirror captures a glimpse of the photographer, acknowledging his presence and participation in the performance.







Xu San

It would be wrong to think that all performances by the East Village artists were serious social critiques or soul-searching expressions of psychological depth. Many of their performances, especially of the more casual and spontaneous kinds, were deliberately mundane and even silly; their violation of social norms was light-hearted, like making an inside joke among friends for a good laugh. Heroism was not called for in these situations. On the contrary, being a coward could be natural and humorous. One such occasion was Xu San's "performance" in Fragrant Hill Park northwest of Beijing, which Rong Rong recorded in photographs and a memoir:

We went to the Fragrant Hill Park to ride the cable car. Pretending that we didn't know each other, we each bought tickets individually. I was the first, followed by Xu San, Zhu Ming, and Ma Liuming.

The cable car was quite primitive Ð a chair lift built of simple metal frames. Before I could make myself comfortable, it started to move, shaking back and forth in the air. I turned around: Xu San was behind me. I began to calm down after having passed the first hill, so I took my camera out and got ready. Xu San's seat was about three or four meters away from mine. Sensing that I was ready to shoot, he began unbuttoning his clothes. One, two, he threw all his clothes off. Pants, underwear, they all flew in the wind – Xu San was finally left sitting on his seat completely naked. A couple of cars were moving towards us, heading back to the station. Some people, especially women, turned their heads away: here was the famous Fragrant Hill Park, but there was a guy sitting on a moving car naked!

While Xu San was enjoying sunning himself in the natural environment, I saw some people appearing from the corner of my lens. They were running from the bottom of the mountain toward us, along a winding path. I also heard shouting.

"Oh, no. They're coming to catch us," I yelled. Xu San looked around. "What shall we do?"

What shall we do? I was nervous too. I looked back and saw that we would reach the station in a few minutes. I was sure that they would get us there.

I started to feel scared of what would happen next.

"Rong Rong! What shall we do?" Xu San shouted. Without thinking, I said: "Jump." It seemed the only way we could escape. But we were high in the air and there were a lot of stones and pebbles down below. Xu San was scared but our cars kept moving up.

I spoke loud enough for him to hear, that if there was any place below less rough and with fewer stones, he could escape by jumping.

Our cars passed another hill and the station appeared right in front of us. Xu San

stood up straight and got ready. I looked around and shouted: "Xu San, jump!"

Xu San jumped. I saw him fall and roll on the ground, but then he immediately disappeared into the woods.

My mind went blank. My hands, holding my camera, were sweating profusely. What shall I do now? Do they know that we are together? I put my camera into a bag. As my car moved further up, my heart beat faster and faster.

Before my car stopped completely, a couple of people came over. "Did you see somebody naked? In the second car?" I answered immediately: "Yes, yes! I saw him jump out and run away. What's going on?" I felt much relieved. They didn't know that we were together.

Oh, thank God! I had no desire to enjoy the wonders of nature anymore, and I found myself running down the mountain as fast as a shooting arrow.

After about an hour, we finally found each other. Xu San ran toward us, still with a scared look on his face.

We asked him if he had hurt himself. Exasperated he informed us that he had lost his wallet, and couldn't find his clothes ...

We all started laughing.

Rong Rong's diary, early autumn, 1996







Performances No. 6 and 7

With these two performances, Zhu Ming developed his earlier obsession with bubbles into a later one with balloons. Both projects took place in Dahuangzhuang, after he had moved there from Anjialou: like Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming was forced to leave Anjialou when the village was demolished to make room for new housing developments. Unlike Xu San's impromptu stunt in Fragrant Hill Park, these two performances were serious undertakings. Zhu Ming spent a long time planning and preparing them, and a number of experimental artists, including Rong Rong, were involved in the plan's actual execution. A crowd of Beijing's avant-garde artists and art critics turned up to see the performances. In terms of their individual authorship, group participation and public exposure, therefore, these two events closely resembled some early East Village performances such as Zhang Huan's 65 Kilograms and Ma Liuming's Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch. A major difference, however, was their timing: while the early performances in mid-1994 announced the birth of the East Village community, Zhu Ming's two performances in 1997 and 1998 were among the last group activities initiated by an individual East Village artist. Zhu Ming has written a detailed description of these two events.³⁶ Here is his account of the first performance:

Performance No. 6: August 10, 1997

One day around this year's Spring Festival, by chance I passed a department store and saw people selling balloons in front of the store. The balloons were transparent and multi-colored. I was fascinated by a particular kind, which had a smaller balloon inside a larger one, both sharing a single outlet. It inspired me to imagine a kind of material transformation Ð a transformation from bubble to balloon. These two forms have much in common: both are transparent, fragile, empty, and pliable. I noted down this idea in my project book, but decided not to carry out a performance before I could fully digest the idea.

The most serious challenge in this project was to make a special balloon. I needed a balloon that was transparent and expandable like an ordinary balloon, but large enough to contain my entire body inside. I found a thick Beijing telephone book and took down the phone numbers of all places that were likely to make such balloons, including plastic factories, chemical rubber factories, meteorological bureaus, balloon factories, and others Ð close to a hundred numbers in total. I then called and visited these places. I was first told that China still could not make this type of balloon, or that such a balloon did not exist although it was technically possible. Finally, people in a meteorological bureau told me that their factory could make plastic balloons of this size. I went to the factory, but could not afford the price. By chance I heard from this factory about another balloon factory in Changping county, so I went there the next day with my design. The head of the factory said that they could make a plastic balloon according to my design in a week. The price was 120 RMB. It was still not ideal



RongRong/ East Village, Beijing, 1997, No.26



Ð plastic is not as pliable and expandable as rubber. But between imagination and reality there is always a gap. So I ordered the balloon with some reservations.

After picking up the balloon I began to prepare other equipment. I found a water pipe and a "breathing tube," as well as scotch tape and a razor. I decided to hold the performance in my courtyard, which conveniently has a water faucet next to a wall. I asked Zhao Liang to videotape the performance, while Rong Rong, Ma Liuming, San-mao, Hong Zhi, and Cao Zhongyan would all take photographs. They were also my collaborators in the performance. I spread a large piece of cloth in the yard to prevent the balloon from being damaged. I placed the balloon on top of the cloth, and connected the water pipe to the faucet. After this I entered the balloon naked, brought with me the tape, razor and breathing tube, and also pulled the other end of the water pipe into the balloon. I sealed the balloon from inside and held one end of the breathing tube in my mouth; the other end of the tube remained outside.

Water began to enter the balloon through the water pipe; air entered the balloon through my breath. Time passed (although I did not notice time's existence during the performance). Gradually I felt the chill of Beijing's tap water – it was so cold that I lost my ability to control my movement. I was also under the impact of the changing pressure inside the balloon, which increased when water and air filled the interior. First my ears began to bother me. Then my head seemed swollen and I felt dizzy. People were telling me that I should stop if I could not go on any longer. But I ignored them; I had no idea what I was thinking then. Only after about 90 minutes did I decide to get out. I used my head to stretch the balloon with all my force, but no matter how hard I tried I could not break it open. Finally I had to cut the balloon with the razor and got out.

Exactly at that moment, stormy clouds darkened the sky; then I heard thunder and felt raindrops. My friends joked that my spirit must have moved Heaven. But wrapped in a blanket I could hardly laugh. I heard that Zhao Liang was saying something "really beautiful." I first thought that he was talking about my performance, but then realized that he was praising the video he just took.³⁷



Rong Rong's camera followed Zhu Ming through the process: we see in his photographs the performance artist entering the balloon from a narrow entrance, breathing through a pipe in the balloon, and then wrapped in a blanket. The great majority of these images, however, focus on the balloon that holds Zhu Ming within its transparent wall -- it is clear that Rong Rong finds this the most fascinating subject to photograph, rather than recording each step of the performance mechanically. Soft and shimmering, the balloon looks like a giant egg of some sort of primitive bird, and Zhu Ming seems like an unborn chick in the egg that has just gained consciousness and mobility. With his eyes shut, he slowly rises from the bottom of the balloon and begins to move, touching the shell here and there to find the outlet. The tube in his mouth resembles an umbilical cord, a source of life that also restricts free movement. In addition to these images, Rong Rong also recorded Zhu Ming's performance in writing; his words help us understand the deep sympathy one finds in the photographs:

... Holding a tube in his mouth, Zhu Ming seemed to be struggling inside the sealed balloon. The balloon was gradually filled with more and more water and expanded to its limit. Its taut surface showed the high pressure inside it. Suddenly Zhu Ming stretched his body straight and burst the balloon. He stood there completely wet, while water poured out and flooded the entire yard. Someone said: "The little chick finally broke the egg!" Responding to this comment everyone began to clap. We dried Zhu Ming and wrapped him in a blanket. He continued to shake uncontrollably, and his face was as pale as white paper. I rushed to light a cigarette for him to help him warm up. It is really not that easy to make art.

Rong Rong's memoir, January 15, 2003

Zhu Ming conceived his next project, Performance No. 7, as a continuation of Performance No. 6 and conducted it thirteen months later. Like Performance No. 6, it was an allegorical representation of the awakening and emergence of new life forces. But here Zhu Ming gave himself an extended role: after coming out from an "egg" and assuming independence, he goes on to bring more lives into the world.

The performance had a tripartite structure. The first part -- a short introduction to the performance -- started behind the closed door of an inner chamber (which functioned as backstage for the performance), where Zhu Ming entered a balloon and inflated it. His collaborators then opened the door and helped roll the balloon (with Zhu Ming inside it) into the outer room, where the second and main part of the performance would take place. Zhu Ming had transformed this room into a mysterious jungle: from an opening on the roof, abundant leafy ivy crept into the room and spread along the walls, over the floor, and onto a ladder-like frame set against a wall. Below the frame, a large, flattened balloon was half-filled with water to form a small pool, containing several dozens of small balloons filled with water.

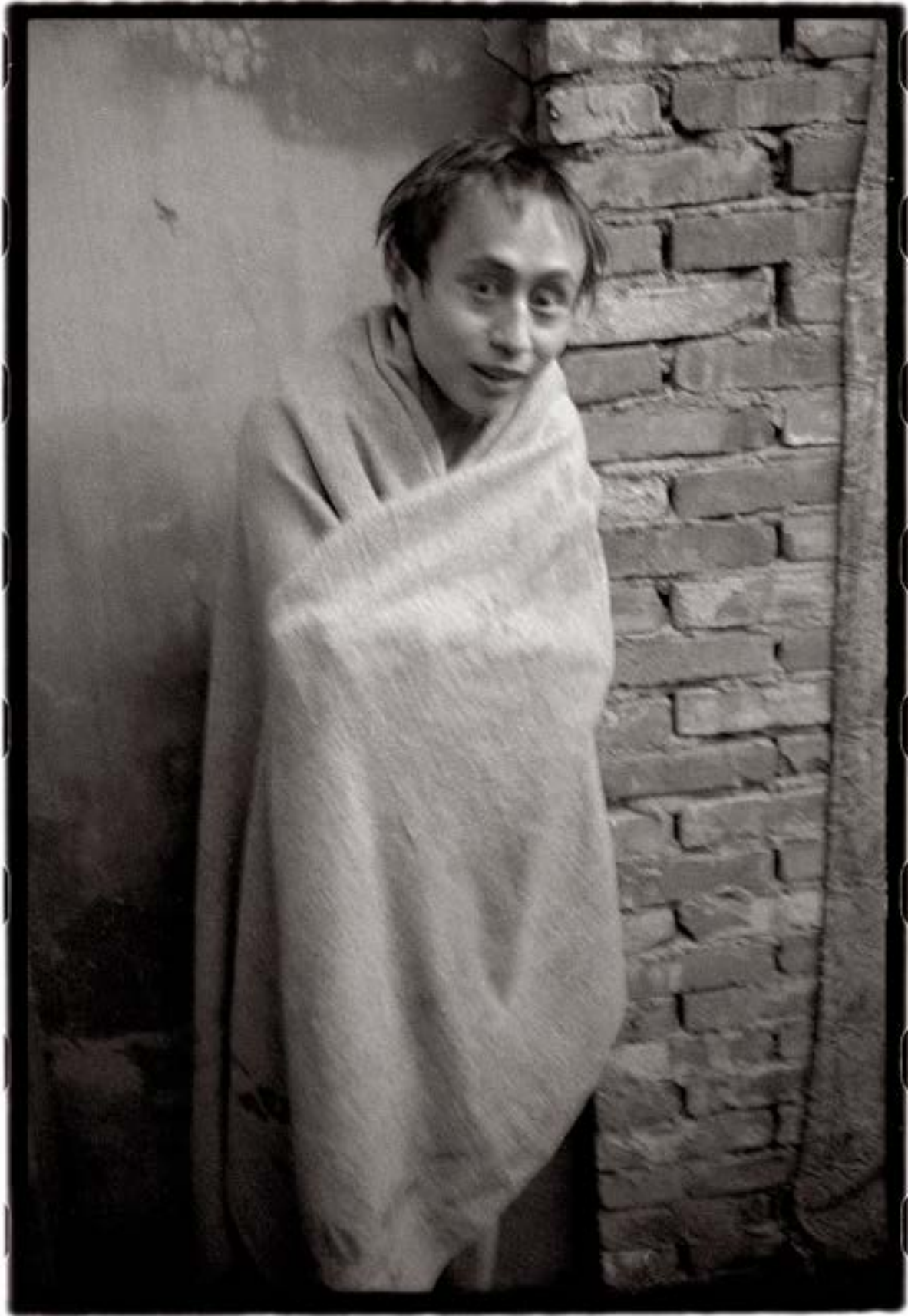
Having emerged from the first balloon, Zhu Ming stepped into the pool and began to take out the small water-filled balloons, hanging them one by one on the wooden frame. Some of them





burst, others stayed intact, but were stretched dangerously by the water inside them. Like a little boy absorbed in a mindless game, Zhu Ming played with these small balloons, making one into several as if helping a cell multiply itself. Finally he retreated into the first balloon and rolled back into the inner room, and thus ended the performance with a closure that echoed the first part.

In photographing this performance, Rong Rong used two cameras for different purposes: a standard 135 camera that allowed him to capture Zhu Ming's momentary acts and expressions, and a large-format 120 camera that enabled him to achieve high-quality images with richer tonal variations. It is interesting to see the striking differences beside picture quality between these two groups of images: the 120 camera produced much more balanced compositions, signifying the photographer's attempt to construct formal, iconic images out of a fluid, continuous performance.



To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond

This was Zhang Huan's last major performance before he left China, and also the last time Rong Rong photographed the performance artist. Significantly, this group of photographs differs markedly from his previous representations of Zhang Huan, which are remarkable for their dramatic visual effect and emotional intensity. Instead, here we find detachment, not self-involvement. The pictures remain quiet and reserved, demonstrating an "objective," documentary style and mentality. The composition is consistently balanced and downplays the importance of movement. There are no close-up, portrait-like images of Zhang Huan, who appears frequently in a group, smiling and negotiating with contract workers. We gain a similar feeling from Rong Rong's account of the performance translated below. Perhaps more than anything, this attitude of detachment signifies the end of a stimulating relationship between the East Village artists, and hence the end of the artistic community.

Beijing's summer is hot and humid. This morning, around 4:30 am, Robyn Beck stopped by my house at Liulitun, picking me up to attend a performance by Zhang Huan. Driving toward the Southern Third Ring Road, we made a U-turn at the Fengzhong Temple exit. Following Zhang's direction we drove another fifteen minutes or so, and finally arrived at a large fishpond in a rural area.

A little later, Zhuang Hui [another experimental artist] arrived with a team of contract workers. Zhang Huan began to tell the workers what they should do: bare their upper torsos and enter the pond with their pants on. Hearing this and looking at the large pond, the workers hesitated, clearly unwilling to take on the assignment. They talked among themselves and also to the contractor, who then came to Zhang Huan to discuss the matter. He told Zhang that these workers ½ half of them worked for a moving company, the other half on a construction project -- had to go to their jobs at 7:30 am. Even if they could be convinced to disregard the low temperature of the water (which was quite cold in the early morning), how could they go to work in wet pants? He was annoyed because no one had told him about Zhang Huan's plan.

Zhang Huan pulled the contractor aside: "Actually what I want is really simple. Your people need only to walk across the pond and let us take some pictures." But the idea of taking pictures made the contractor even more hesitant. Zhang Huan continued: "If your people worry about getting their pants wet, they can go into the pond naked, or in underpants if they feel embarrassed. The whole thing will take no more than ten minutes and will require little effort on your part. Furthermore, I will also enter the pond, even with a little boy on my shoulders." Meanwhile, Zhuang Hui was sweet-talking the workers in Henan dialect -- like them he was from Henan province: "We are fellow-townsmen from the same place. It would be so nice of you if you could help us this time. Please hurry and don't waste more time. Daylight is about to break and you will soon have to go to your jobs!"



Finally Zhuang Hui was able to persuade the workers to collaborate. (Zhang Huan secretly told me that he paid each worker 20 RMB.) He moved swiftly to mobilize them, asking them to wear only underpants, and taking them to one side of the pond to take their positions, each person standing four meters from the other.

Zhang Huan ran back to this side of the pond, speaking nicely to a boy who was the son of the pond's owner, asking whether he would like to enter the pond with him to catch fish.

I watched when Zhang Huan walked away. From afar I could hardly see anything except many heads moving in the water.

I ran to the other side of pond. Far away from me, Zhang Huan held the boy on his shoulders, walking in the middle of a long row of the contract workers ð he had divided them into two groups on either side of him. While they were walking, the water became deeper and deeper, reaching their chests and even higher. Struggling to walk toward the shore, they moved their legs with difficulty.

Finally all people climbed onto the shore. The boy's father took him down from Zhang Huan's shoulders.

When Zhang Huan saw me he immediately asked me whether I had seen fish jumping out of the water. I told him I didn't see any fish. The pond is too big. Once inside it, even the whole team of contract workers appeared small.

Rong Rong's memoir, January 18, 2003

Though vivid, Rong Rong's account only records what he saw there, but sheds little insight into the purpose and symbolism of the performance, which Zhang Huan has stated in a written "project summary" translated below. It is clear that Rong Rong attended the performance as an independent photographer, not a concerned participant, and paid no attention to what the performance artists hoped to achieve.

To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond

Time: 5:00-7:00 am, August 15, 1997

Place: A fishpond at Nanmofang, Chaoyang district, in the east suburbs of Beijing

Process: Rent a fishpond in Beijing's east suburbs as a natural environment for the performance. Hire more than 40 migrant contract workers, including construction workers, employees of a moving company, the staff of the fish farm, and local peasants. The oldest of them is 60; the youngest, 4. I join them to surround the fishpond. Afterwards,

each person walks toward the pond from the place he is standing. [Forming a row in the water] we divide the pond into two halves, and then scatter in a spontaneous manner, stop, and stand still facing a single direction. The purpose of the performance is to increase the water level of the fishpond.³⁸





Coda: End of a History

Zhang Huan emigrated to America in 1998. Duan Yingmei had moved to Germany even earlier, in 1997. Other former East Village artists are now living in different places in China. Xu San returned to Hunan in 1995 and married soon afterward. A performance he carried out that year in Changsha, the capital of Hunan, featured him hanging head down under a bridge. The title of this performance is Reversed Vision. Later he found a job in a bank. Wang Shihua, Gao Yang, Kong Bu, and Ma Zhongren all returned to their old homes in Inner Mongolia. Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, Cang Xin, Curse, and Rong Rong live in Beijing but work independently, connected only by their shared memories of the past.

Eventually the village as a place also disappeared. A visitor to Beijing in 2003 can no longer find Dashanzhuang, which has simply vanished from Beijing's map. This final episode of the East Village is again recorded in Rong Rong's photographs, as well as in a moving account in which he records one of his last trips to the place.

I had never dreamt that the East Village would be turned into part of Chaoyang Park, and that the East Fourth Ring Road would run across it to cut it into two halves.

Without telling anyone I returned to the Village, though I knew I would see nothing and nothing would happen on this trip. The monolith of the Great Wall Hotel still stood aloft. The road leading to the Village – now much wider and lined with more shops – retained the same curve. The same willow trees grew along the narrow road east of Maizidian. But the Village on the right side of the road was now concealed within a long, continuous wall.

I found a gap in the wall and climbed into the enclosed area. Nothing familiar met my eyes – the entire Village had been turned into a vacant lot. I walked and walked on the open ground as if looking for some lost treasure. What I could find were only a few trees from the past, standing in isolation and facing a forest of high rises in the distance.

No, there was nothing left. I wandered around. The earth was new and soft, preventing memories from surfacing.

But I suddenly saw it – I have found it – that shining thing quietly covering the earth. I ran with excitement and grasped it in my hand.

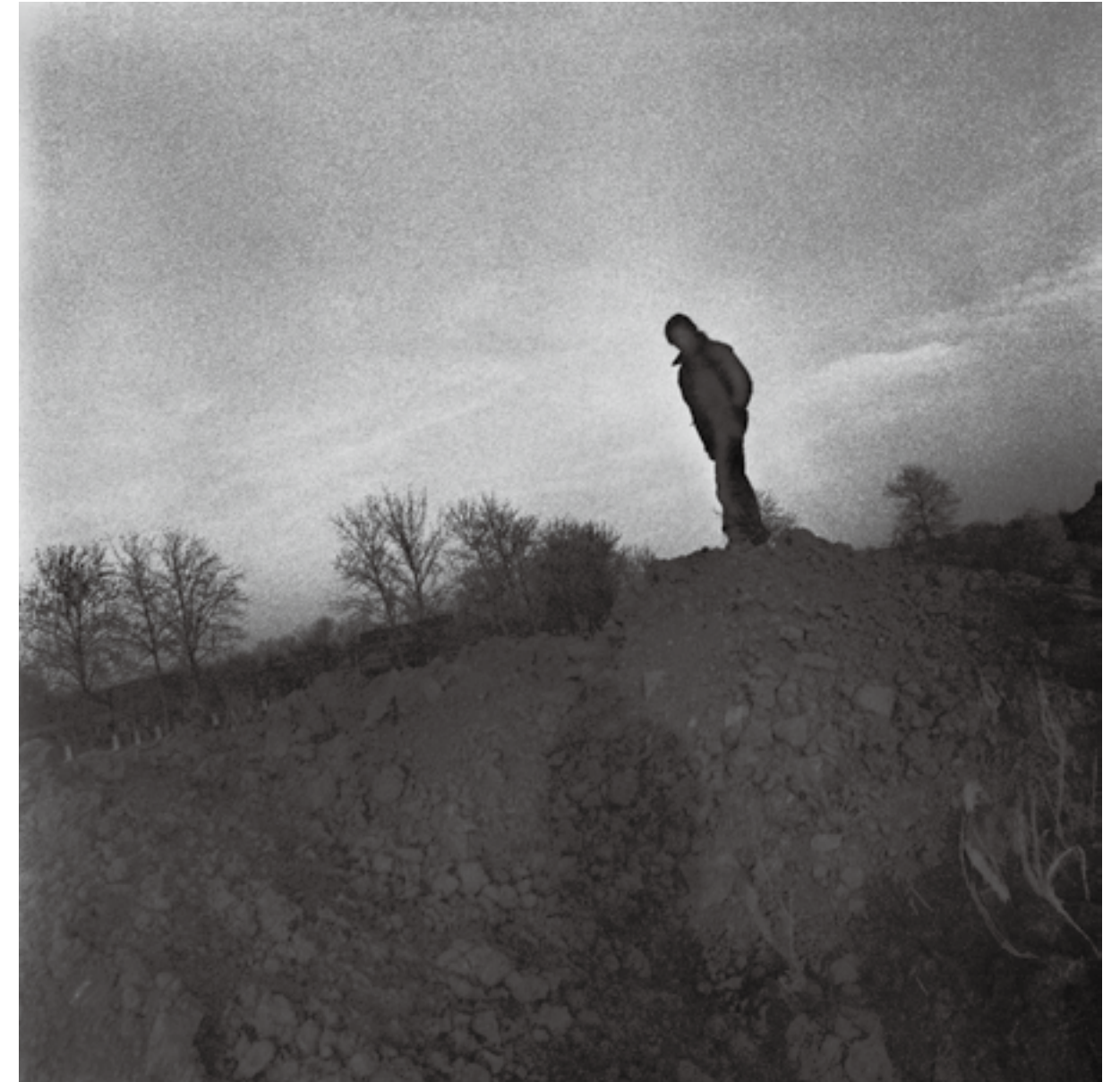
It belongs to me.

Rong Rong's note, December 2002









Notes:

- For the concept of “experimental art” in China, see Wu Hung, “Introduction: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000),” in Wu Hung ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000)*. Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002, 10-19, especially, 11-12.
- For introductions to the development and various aspects of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s, see the essays collected in Wu Hung ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000)*, 10-138, 142-45, 252-55, 396-99.
- For a detailed and lively portrayal of artists in this community, see Wang Jifang, *Zuihou de langman – Beijing ziyou yishujia shenghuo shilu* (The last romantics – a factual record of lives of Beijing’s freelance artists). Harbin: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1999. 16-70.
- This volume was compiled by Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun and Xu Bing, and privately published in Beijing in 1994. Rong Rong’s photograph appears on p. 66.
- For a close analysis of this series, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999. 114-19.
- For an analysis of these later photos, see Wu Hung, “Ruins as Autobiography: Chinese Photographer Rong Rong,” *Persimmon – Asian Literature, Arts, and Culture* vol. II, no. 3 (Winter 2002), 36-47.
- Karen Smith, “Rong Rong – Records of the Observer,” Beijing, 1998. Unpublished manuscript.
- Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 106-7.
- Cited in Wang Jifang, *Zuihou de langman*, 263.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- For an analysis of the relationship between the movement and avant-garde art, see Wu Hung, “Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments,” *Representations* 35 (1991), 84-117.
- Cited in Wang Jifang, *Zuihou de langman*, 257.
- Ibid., 259.
- Cited in *ibid.*, 258. This introduction to Ma Liuming’s experience is largely based on Wang Jifang’s report, *ibid.*, 256 - 59.
- Ibid., 258.
- Ma Liuming, “Notes on Four Topics,” in Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Xu Bing, ed., *Heipi shu* (Book with a black cover). Beijing: private publication, 1994, 35.
- For images of this performance, see Xing Danwen’s photographs in *ibid.*, 34.
- Yuko Hasegawa, “Ma Liuming,” *Flash Art* (October 1997), 109.
- Letter to the author dated December 28, 2002.
- An edited version of his video record of Zhang Huan’s 12 Square Meters was shown in the exhibition, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, curated by this author at the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, in 1999.
- In *Heipi shu*, 71.
- In *ibid.*
- This sequence of events was also captured by Ai Weiwei, who videotaped the performance.
- Interview with Zhang Huan conducted by this author on July 13, 1998. Unpublished record.
- It is widely believed in China that this kind of chicken is especially replenishing and nourishing.
- For a record of this performance, see Zhu Ming, “Wo de bage xingwei yishu zuopin” (Eight performance pieces of mine). *Xianchang* (document), 39-40.

- Cang Xin, “Fennu yu beizhuang de ‘Dongcun’” (The angry and heroic East Village), February 1996. Manuscript.
- Cang Xin, “Notes,” June 15, 1996. Manuscript.
- “An Interview with Cang Xin by Wen Xiuzhen,” Beijing, May 15, 1995. Manuscript provided by the artist.
- Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: China’s New Art* (New York and San Francisco, 1998), pl. 49.
- In actuality, the performance was photographed by Lv Nan and Robyn Beck.
- Wu Hung, “Ruins as Autobiography,” 43-47.
- I put “public” in quotation marks because although such a planned performance is intended to be staged on a public occasion, for various reasons it often has a very small audience.
- Zhang Xiaoling, *Guannian yishu – jiegou yu chongjian de shixue* (Conceptual art – a poetic of deconstruction and reconstruction), 178.
- Zhu Ming, “Wo de liuge xingwei yishu zuopin” (Six performance projects of mine), *Xianchang* (Document), vol. 1, Tianjin, 2001, 38-47.
- Ibid.*, 44-45.
- Cited in *Yesheng* (Wildlife), Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1999. 88.

Notes on Selected Photographes:

- p58. Ai Weiwei and Ai Qing, 1994, Beijing.
- p59. (Above) Ai Weiwei and Lu Qing, 1994, Beijing (These pictures provided by Ai Weiwei). (Middle) Kong Bu, (Below) Kong Bu and Xu San.
- p80. (Middle) Ai Weiwei and Hans van Dijk, 1994, East Village.
(Below) Zhang Binbin and Duan Yingmei.
- P 81. Xu San, Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan, Zhang Binbin, Ma Liuming, Rong Rong, Cang Xin, Duan Yingmei, Zhang Yang and Lu Qing, 1994, East Village, Beijing.
(These pictures provided by Ai Weiwei).
- p84. (Below) “The Last Supper”, 1994, East Village, Beijing (These pictures provided by Ai Weiwei).
- p86. Self Portrait, 1994, East Village, Beijing.
- p87. Self Portrait, 1994, East Village, Beijing.
- p126. Self Portrait, 1995, Beijing.

Rong Rong / Profile

1968 Born in Zhangzhou city, Fujian province. China
1988 Began studying photography and taking photos. Fujian province. China
1992 Entered Central Industrial Art Institute (Beijing), photography department.
1993 Move to Beijing "East Village" in Beijing
1995 Established "New Photo" magazine. Beijing
2000 Start to Collaborate works with Ms. inri

Solo Exhibition

1997
French embassy, cultural section, solo Beijing, China

1998
Galerie H.S. Steinek. Solo photo show Vienna, Austria

2001
"RongRong,Contemporary photography from China" Chambers Fine Art, NewYork

"Rong Rong " Fundacao Oriente, Macau

2002
"Rong Rong - Retrospective" Galerie Loft, Paris
"Ruin Pictures Rong Rong" Chambers Fine Art. Taiwan.

2003
"Rong Rong's East Village", Chambers Fine Art. NewYork

Group Exhibition

1995
"China's New Photos three person show " Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

1996
"Chinese Avant -Garde Art show " Gallery Q, Tokyo, Japan

1997-1998
"Contemporary Chinese Photography " Neuer Berliner Kunstverein,Berlin / Stadtische Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz/
Kunsthalle Darmstadt

1998
"Art Basel" Stand of Galerie Alice Panli, Basel, Swiss
"FIAC" Stand of Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris

1999
"TRANSCIENCE: Chinese Experimental Art at the end of the Twentieth Century" Smart Museum of Art, Chicago
University,USA

"Unveiled Reality Contemporary Photography" Museum of Chulalongkorn University,Thailand./ Art Beauts Gallery, Canada.

"Beijing in London" ICA, London.

"La Biennale d' Issy "Paris.

"Love: Chinese Contemporary Photography & video" Tachikawa Art Festival, Tokyo

2000
"BIG TORINO 2000" biennale of emerging artists, Torino
"From Inside the Body" ISE Foundation Gallery, New York
"Fuck Off" East Link Gallery, Shanghai

2001
"China Art Now!" Singapore Art Museum
"China Contemporary Art Rouges" Galerie Loft, Paris
"China-Naarden Wall-to-Wall" Fotofestival Naarden 2001, Amsterdam
"Promenade in Asia Beijing-Seoul-Taipei-Tokyo" Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo
"Rong Rong. Piafries" The Box Associati, Torino
"CROSS PRESSURES" Oulu City Art Museum, The Finnish Museum of Photograph, Finland (RongRong & inri)
"Chinese Contemporary Photography " Halle Steinek, Austria (RongRong & inri) KUNST, Artist In Residence Program

2002
"Dream 02" Red Mansion Foundation. London, UK
"Beijing Afloat" Beijing-Tokyo Art Project. (RongRong & inri)
"Guang Zhou Triennial" Guang dong Museum of Art. China.
"China Museum de Arte Brasileira", Sao Paulo, Brazil.
"Paris–Pekin" Espace Cardin, Paris

2002-2004
"Chinart" Museum Koppersmuhle Sammlung Grothe. Duisburg, Germany. Museo Arte Contemporanea di Roma, Rome, Italy. (RongRong & inri)

Wu Hung grew up in Beijing and received his B. A. and M. A. in art history from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He went to the United States in 1980 and obtained his Ph. D. in art history and anthropology from Harvard University in 1987. That same year he began to teach art history at Harvard, where he was promoted to full professor in 1994. He then moved to the University of Chicago, where he is now Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor in Chinese Art History at the Department of Art History and the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations. He is also the founder and first director of the Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago, as well as the Consulting Curator at the Smart Museum.

A scholar well-known for his work on traditional Chinese art, Wu Hung has always had an intense interest in contemporary Chinese art and has contributed significantly to the scholarship in this area. In the mid-eighties he organized a series of exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art at Adams House, Harvard University, which featured the American debuts of important artists including Mu Xin, Chen Danqing, Luo Zhongli, Qiu Deshu, and Zhang Hongtu. He has published many books and articles on contemporary Chinese art and visual culture in various journals and has written many exhibition catalogues. In 1999 and 2000 he curated *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* and *Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*. The catalogues he wrote for these two exhibitions provide in-depth analyses of the development of experimental Chinese art. He was the chief curator of the First Guangzhou Triennial entitled *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Art in China (1990-2000)*. Currently he is collaborating with New York's International Center for Photography and Chicago's Smart Museum of Art on a large exhibition of contemporary Chinese photography. Another of his current project is a large exhibition on "beauty" which will open in Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in 2005. His most recent publications include *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West* (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001) and the monumental, bilingual catalogue of the First Guangzhou Triennial (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002).

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By Wu Hung

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