

Living in Untranslatability
Performance Art in China and USA

Thesis

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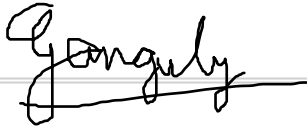
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Abstract:

This thesis embodies discontinuities in performance art and its non-equivalent Chinese term “行为艺术” between language and cultural context into a migrating journey. A comparative analysis on the disciplinary history of performance art studies in the US and China laid a foundation in exploring the dynamics of marginality in two contexts. Extracting from the narrative mechanism and body view of Chinese performance art, I demonstrate how the philosophy of living (生) inspired many artistic creation, which also echoes my research journey. And from our mutual living experience, I pose the concept of constructive untranslatability that applies positionality and situated knowledge to bridge global dialogues.

Keywords:

Untranslatable, Situated Knowledge, Partial knowledge, Performance art, Action art, 行为艺术, Living Experience, Comparative analysis, Migration, Positionality, Liminality, Marginality

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Acknowledgments

This thesis is written for the purpose of graduating from a master's program, *Global Arts and Cultures* at Rhode Island School of Design, but it means more than a thesis to me. Several major shifts occurred during my writing process. When recalling all those memories about my family, my decisions of life, my experiences of living in a foreign land, my struggles with this thesis might also be pulled out, because it's deeply intricate with my life. And it is the overlap between my life and my research in performance art that lets "untranslatable" grow to be a keyword, and find its way into the title.

This *Global Arts and Cultures* program was started with a course called *Critical Globalisms*, in which there are six students from my cohort and another student from the Painting department. Seven students with our professor, who is also my thesis advisor, Avishek, and the majority of this group came with a heritage outside of the US. In one of the first few classes, we talked about migration.

Based on my unfamiliarity with this word in the English language, I only associated it with people who transferred their nationality from one country to another, which used to be an idea pretty far away from me. By that time, I just said farewell to a world where within my life circle, nearly all residents speak the same language, and before I fly to the US, occasionally, friends of mine and my father's couldn't help to probe whether I'll stay in the US, but the answer seems clear enough before I speak, because the farthest migration destinations of our close ones are within Sichuan province. Then almost at a glimpse, seeing people who have similar facial features as I do on the street become occasional, assuming their mother tongue could be impolite, and assuming an asian Chinese speaker's nationality could be offensive.

I left a world that I was familiar with, more specifically speaking, previously familiar things become estranged. Among them, language is definitely a big one. Chinese is less translatable, English is less communicable, context changes radically, meaning of many words are refreshed, relationship and consequences between objects are different, discourses are shifted. “Marginality” became a word holding infinite possibility and power addressed by many groups, instead of always staying at an inferior position; positionality and situated knowledge are being studied, instead of being regarded as inadequate research; states of incomplete and lacking are embraced...Those are gifts I received from postcolonial studies. But this gift vanishes just the way it appears—when bringing it home, it is no longer seen as a gift. That’s why I changed my title from “Positionality of Marginality of Performance Art—A Site-Specific Analysis of Chengdu China and East Coast US” to the present one. As I’m bringing postcolonial discourses to the art field, and to China, where probably “colonial” appears in history class more than anywhere else, a large amount of translation work is waiting for me to be done.

Coming back to the conversation about migration in the *Critical Globalisms* class , it turns out studying abroad also counts as one way of migrating, and Avishek reminded us not to forget the privilege behind this kind of migration. Spending 22 out of 23 years in the same province in south western China, it’s the first time I began to inspect the abstract essence of such a concrete embodied movement.

The movement of migrating started with leaving home, and I have not yet arrived. Between the two sites are numerous messy and overwhelming moments waiting to be revisited and scrutinized. Leaving a place means I can not be present in its changing and becoming. The crack between me and all the conversation that happens there only grows bigger. And by chasing and revisiting its past, its archives, its physical documents, the realization of losing that temporal

and spatial scene bygone only becomes more certain. I indeed left the place where I used to live but I'm not yet on site of the new place where I'm standing now. Physically, my flesh and bones are here but I myself lag behind during the travel, I'm still in a dark time slot full of clammy bumps that simultaneously exist in this second and the next second. If you want to imagine that, you can picture two of me doing a successive movement, with flustered hair and uncontrollable facial expression. But those are two discontinued images, not a slow motion. It's not smooth at all. Maybe that's why I grew interested in the artform with a name that doesn't translate across languages and cultures—it echoes my living status. Maybe that's why I choose the word “untranslatable” to express this state of being—the renowned translator and lexicographers Lu Gusun¹ compared translation to “flying across” and “almost landing”, instead of matching existing equivalents or actually arriving at the destination. And I find resonance not only from my translation practice for UP-ON, but also from my own embodied practice jumping between two geographic destinations-USA and China.

Raising “untranslatability” is not to deny the possibility of communication across languages and cultures, nor to manifest the absolute uniqueness of what's going on in China. An interesting idea came across in a conversation between my guest critic, Professor Zhang and I during the editing process: While I was trying to introduce postcolonial perspectives to performance art in China, and highlight the gap due to insufficient dialogue, Professor Zhang reminded me that local artists in Chengdu might not want to be put in such unique position of “incomprehensible” and “untranslatable”, that we can only coin a new term - “behavior art” - to refer to them. So here I want to claim that my use of the word “untranslatable” refers more to the process than the result. I extract this keyword from my living experience, and find resonance in

¹ Lu Gusun: lexicographer, translator, writer, professor of English at Fudan University, and director of Shanghai Translation Association

many artists' journeys, so it is both personal and general, but it is not specifically targeted at a certain group of artists. Although I use China as a case and focus on Chengdu, by no means I want to represent or define artists or their work in Chengdu. The *Introduction* will dive deeper into the intention of this thesis.

While exhibiting site-specificness seems to respect the culture of our subject of research, and emphasizing indigeneity is often used as a way of supporting. But what also comes from a similar tendency gave birth to othering, exoticizing and fetishizing. While postcolonial theories functioned well in raising voices of vast colonized lands, criticism of eurocentrism still comes mostly from what Chinese people would consider as the “western world”. Hence, if applying postcolonial theories to Chinese phenomenon repeat, or reproduce a new west-centric pattern? And if a positive answer indicates denial of the possibilities of western research on Chinese issues? I try to examine those questions through my embodied practice.

Being able to combine my research interest and my practice in the art field and in my personal life is a true blessing. So here I want to express my gratitude to all who give me support: my father Ma Yuan, my partner, Luo Fangwei, my families and friends who gave me support all the time, and my community in Chengdu, everyone in UP-ON Performance Art Archive, especially Mr Zhou Bin, and people who guided me to contemporary art: I'd like to give special thanks to my guest critic, Professor Zhang Yi, and my master Hu Yanzi, Professor Xin Xu, Professor Yu Yue, Big Fish Community Design Center, LEL studio, CMS Studio in Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Dimensions Art Center; also my new community in the East Coast US: GAC family, especially our Program GPD, Eric Anderson, Namita Vijay Dharia, Lindsay French, Huang Pei who fed me with the best Chinese food, Ruchika Nambiar who always save us with her superwoman ability, and special thanks to Shey Rivera Ríos and Chhavi Jain, and all

members from Performance Art Association, Qingyu Huang, Yifan Liu, Echo Xu, Yanning Sun, and from 706, especially He Chang, Professor Andrew Schrank and Professor Myles Lennon who gave me amazing time auditing at Brown University...and finally, the most important contributor to my thesis: Naimah Pétigny, and Avishek Ganguly, it is my true honor to learn from your characteristics and brilliance, and I appreciate and will miss discussing every idea, every sentence with you.

Introduction

Four months ago, after my internship at Mabou Mines New York, I went back to Chengdu, China to start another intern at UP-ON Performance Art Archive², a NGO founded on its synonymous live art festival since 2008. The co-founder of which, Mr.Zhou Bin, invited me to give a sharing session. The Archive's "Night School" program had 26 volumes, and for vol.27, I was going to talk about my experiences in the US, about my thesis research, my practice to co-found Performance Art Association, a performance art student club, my journey stumbling between the context of performing art and performance art, and about performance studies in US academic institutions. Twenty to thirty people came for the talk, some of whom were senior scholars, curators and artists in performance art, and the others were like me - students or young artists who had just graduated and were curious and passionate about performance art; some of them are local students, while others had went back after studying from Italy, France, and other places. The response from my audiences, however, was surprisingly confrontational.

When I introduced the works I saw at New York University's Performance Studies 2023 graduation symposium, one of my audience, Hu Yanzi, who was my advisor and my leader when

² Its official introduction goes like this: UP-ON Performance Art Archive is an independent non-profit organization focused on the study and promotion of performance art. With an international perspective, it collects and preserves documents and materials related to performance art, and systematically organizes, displays, and studies them. The organization also hosts various events, including lectures, forums, workshops, art festivals, and publications, creating a professional platform for exchange and practice.

I took a gap year, interrupted to check the term of the kind of art they are performing. Then she answered to herself, also reminding other audiences that it's performance art, not 行为艺术(if translate word by word, it is "behavior art", but using "performance art" as its equivalent in English is a consensus in mainland China. While in Taiwan, "action art" is more often adopted). After I had finished my sharing, the harshest criticism was expressed from a woman who was the executor of several UP-ON events: I was unfamiliar with the history of "behavior art" and its international context. One of the things she criticized was the part I told about my lost in translation between performance art in US content and in Chinese content- she felt surprised that I was still discussing the issue of translation between 行为艺术 and performance art, because academically it is already an old topic and consensus had been reached that there is no equivalent in English could refer to this kind of "behavior art" in China. Chinese "behavior art" came from an European tradition that was closer to socially-engaged Action Art. But if my research focus is the word "performance", then it is a totally different thing that could be traced back to ancient Greece, and even today, the use of the term "performance" is still changing, but all of this had little to do with artistic creation in the field of Chinese "behavior art".

I felt ashamed for my insufficient research at that point. But when revisiting that experience over and over again, I realized that I was not proposing the difference or translation between terms as an academic argument, I wanted to introduce this topic because it's an issue bothering me throughout my practice. Even if it was already settled in academic discussion, the issue repeatedly reappears in reality and in conversations across places. It haunted me everytime I wanted to bring a topic from English to a Chinese audience, or vice versa, and made me ponder what kind of practice I should bring to the Performance Art Association, and in what discipline I want to research.

Whereas “performance art” is already the consensus of translation of 行为艺术, and you might see this term in the materials I quote, in part of this thesis, I’ll adopt the translation “behavior art” to refer to Chinese performance art to remind my readers of the unsettled discontinuity between languages and cultures. The goal of doing that is not to propose a new discipline, or manifest the absolute uniqueness of what’s going on in China. But to explore how in the Chinese context, “behavior art” situates itself in a relatively more distinctive position among other performance art, fine arts, rhetoric and theater professions.

Before diving in I want to try to make as clear as possible that me, the author, and you, my readers, are thinking about the “same thing”. One of the most precious things I gain from my thesis journey is to understand that people’s opinion about the “same thing” might vary largely, even contradict hugely. As stated by Kealiinohomoku, the necessity of definition is dialectic: “...without the discipline of attempting to define specific terms we are not sure we do all mean the same thing or that we understand how a term is being used. On the other hand, the tacit agreement about frames of reference can distort the focus of emphasis rather than giving the broadly based objectivity which comes from using a term denotatively.”³ And as what Shanon Jackson built on Kealiinohomoku’s opinion, “... attributions of sameness and difference are variable, contextual, and highly charged...”⁴ I want to share with you how I constructed my partial knowledge. Even if I tend to explore the broadness and ambiguity, the boundary and the opposite of the content under the “same thing”, I wish we agree to let discord be part of our consensus. As I deliberately unfold my story in the form of a personal epistemological journey in *Chapter One: Understanding the Untranslatable*, while reading this piece, you might see the

³ Kealiinohomoku, Joann. "An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance." *Impulse* 20 (1970): 24-33. P38

⁴ Jackson, Shannon. *Professing performance : theatre in the academy*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004. P31

signified of performance art and “behavior art” shift slightly for several times. So I invite you to give some space for the concept to grow itself and find its way in your mind. I condensed and embodied disparate political, economic, and cultural elements in the US and China into my struggles and discovery when trying to construct cross-language conversation as an individual. While performance art in the US stepped on the shoulder of avant-gardes, and took shape with lots of contemporary art movements such as Happenings, Fluxus... Performance art in China made its way in China with a hugely different path. It sprung from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau in the 1960s-1970s, and spread to the mainland after Reform and Opening Up in 1978 without social, ideological or aesthetic foundation. Then was largely influenced by marketization and commercialization in 2003 and the economic crisis in 2008. Aside from macro social environment, local disciplines and institutions also play crucial roles in shaping performance art in different places. So I also drew comparative analysis of the disciplinary history of performance art across the two countries.

Then in *Chapter Two - Five Dimensions of “Living” in “Behavior Art”*: *Untranslatability That Makes Perfect Sense*, I’ll tell how to make sure we are looking at the same thing is not to define it - who am I to define any term or discipline whose age of being studied could outnumber my own age, whose practitioners across the continent and globe probably exceed all the people I know for 24 years of living on the earth, but rather, as Kealiinohomoku pointed, to describe. I’ll focus on what is expressed and yearning for understanding but stagnated and suspended in the gap between languages, cultural contexts, geographic locations, life stages, generations, identities, and positions; between individuals, and between individual and group, institution, the public, society and a world. I’ll describe this untranslatability, in my own experience, in many “behavior artists”’s artistic creation journey,

and in “behavior art”’s using of the human body as medium. And I’ll demonstrate how they could communicate: how the part that stays in untranslatability could also be understood and embraced. Many of the untranslatable ideas in different scenarios could be explained by social issues, human emotions, co-existence, and ongoingness, and all the different points are inherently in relation to each other because they are derivatives of the Chinese character 生 (giving birth, living, grow, producing, conceive...) The untranslatability springs from living in the social reality as a human being, and from the liminality we are stuck in, so is part of the thread of history of how “behavior art” came into being. In this chapter I’ll center questions that concern groups larger than art communities, eg, is it meaningful to respond to violence by creating another unnecessary violence? What violence is necessary? Is resistance in an art piece futile? Is futile enough to negate the value of artwork...

In *Chapter Three - Marginality of “Behavior Art” in Chengdu, China*, I’ll introduce untranslatability’s connection with marginality, and use Chengdu, China, where I first engaged in “behavior art” and co-curated a related art festival, as an example. To hopefully bridge the scattered conversations in and out of Chinese language, especially between Chinese and English. I want to raise the possibility that people can still discuss the same thing together, even if we hold different understandings towards performance art, “behavior art” towards art. So that we don't see being trapped by translation between disciplines and languages as passive, but as a pump for continuous translation. As Emily Apter says, “The Untranslatable emerges as something on the order of an ‘Incredible,’ an Incontournable, an ‘Untouchable,’ (translated as an ‘L’Incorruptible’ in French). There is a quality of militant semiotic intransigence attached to the Untranslatable, making it more than just a garden-variety keyword.” “Behavior art” also holds marginality as a harbor to resist, surrender and depart again and again. Acknowledging the

untranslatable, is letting go of normativity and artificial unity, accepting untranslatability, is starting to be friend with liminality.

Unless otherwise noted, translations of texts unpublished in English are my own. References to the Chinese sources are also added.

Chapter One

Understanding the Untranslatable

An awareness of variation and contingency adds more dimension to the interdisciplinary puzzle. It serves as a warning against assuming the normalcy and naturalness of one's own present-day institutional context, forcing a heightened awareness of epistemological complacency.

–Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance*

1 A Misunderstanding

I know what performance art is, if not accurately, roughly. That is the illusion derived from one year's experience as a co-curator of a performance art festival in Chengdu, China, and as an assistant of a former performance artist. Even from a hindsight now that I realize it is an illusion, I still believe this illusion would have survived perfectly if I stayed in Chengdu. As my surroundings reinforce more than challenge the concept that performance art is the specific type of fine art that conveys concepts and spirits through the artist's body and its poetic interaction with the surrounding environment and the simple material they might choose, which is non-narrative and non-representative, and often seen as underground, experimental, rebellious, anti-commercial, anti-entertaining... just like what the artists practice around me.

While I'm not sure how I extracted those summarizing descriptions as generality from multitudes of radically diversified artworks, I am sure that performance art in Chinese scenarios points to a very specific and clear image, however heterogeneous the art practice might be. And non-narrative is one of the most significant features of "behavior art" in China. Non-narrative doesn't imply that the works I study exclude any element of narration, but that their aims are not to tell a story: neither to act out any literature, nor to unfold a plot from the beginning to the end, but to show a notion and concept, to stress on the artists' own will and real time embodied experiences, to let meanings generate itself from the artists' interaction with the audiences. I highlight non-narrative to show how performance artists in China position themselves and understand the function of their artwork.

Hearing the term of performance art, people tend to form an image that is quite different from theater or any type of fine art. The image is constructed by not only people who conduct

performance arts, but also their audience, and the readers of their audiences, and the audiences of the audiences' readers, and... the information dissemination pattern of the time period when performance art took its root in China, the disciplinary history, or lacking of disciplinary historic of performance art in academic arena, the highlighted eventfulness of performance art practice and its aftermath which still vibrates today, and so many other site-specific stories and contingencies together, constitute the notorious term, "performance art". And by saying "notorious", I'm not being humorous or humble. It is notorious, even negative, and sounds assaulting to someone if they are called a performance artist, which I will elaborate in my last chapter. And with a faint awareness that the connotation of this term might not be universal around the globe, I still thought the content of performance art would not vary much between different continents. As performance art originated from western world, I took it as granted that what "performance art" refers to in English should be pretty much the same as what shaped my concept of "performance art" during my 23 years' sees and hears in China. "Pretty much the same" means this term should be very distinct from traditional performances like singing, dance, theater, martial arts... To put it in a more explicit way, I thought performance art should be the opposite of traditional performances that caters to the public audience's preference and widely accepted standards of aesthetically pleasant. I thought performance art stands on the opposite of, and therefore has almost nothing to do with performance just as it is in China.

One thing contributing to my idea back then might be the Chinese language. In Chinese, "行为艺术" is the word we call this type of art in China, and "行为" means behavior, not "performance", though its most universally adopted translation in English is "performance art". So I seldom thought about it in relation to performance like dance, theater, instrumental performances, puppet shows, etc. Though looking back from now, there are more and more

artists combining those elements in their art work. And from the perspective of discipline, performance art does not situate in the theatrical department, but rather, (if any) in fine arts schools. Based on that, knowing “performance art” is its equivalent in English, I formed this misunderstanding that the P-words of various sorts, including “performing art” and “performance” all refer to the same thing as performance art partly due to my unfamiliarity with the English language, partly due to my ignorance of the disciplinary history of those fields in the US. That’s why after I came to study at RISD, one day on my way walking to school passing Brown University, I had a burst of thrill when I saw their Performing Arts Center. “What’s underground in China has an entire center to present and celebrate in the US!” I exclaimed to myself. I thought the whole art center was to celebrate that kind of marginalized and rebellious performance art I was familiar with.

That was the starting point of my journey in exploring performance art across the Pacific ocean. I went through several stages to figure out that in English, performance art, performing art, and performance are 3 different things. Though in American academic institutions, the study of such fields usually fall under the same category of “Performance Studies”, and the seemingly distinctive features of those fields, and subfields like Black Performance Theory and the study of improvisation, might seem unimportant or uninteresting to many, I will hold on those disparities in order to explain my inner journey of confusing and ponderance. And I will save my argument of their similarities and whether it’s necessary to stress their divisions later in this thesis.

This chapter will focus on how I discover the differences between performance, performance art, and performing arts through an international student's practice in related areas, before dive into academic reading, I jumped into those fields through curating, organizing, and participating in events before I dig into any literature, so unavoidably, I took several routes,

ran into dead ends, and made several detours. Now as I am transforming my experience into literature, I see how my journey shapes my focus on the disciplinary and historical side of the performance world. And I would like to invite my readers to revisit this journey following my approach.

2 Answer as a Maze

If I summarize my first stage as stepping out of my familiarity and discovering a new performance world in a new continent, my second stage would be seeking the exit in the labyrinth of disciplinaries. My misunderstanding might be replaced by subsequent misunderstandings, but I'm continuously figuring out something. So, after stepping into performance scenes, soon I understand how broad "performance" could possibly mean. So partly to my disappointment, the "Performing Arts Center" of Brown University was not exclusively for the tiny branch of performance art I'm familiar with.

I made acquaintances with local performance artists in providence, and co-founded a student club at RISD called Performance Art Association. And the first obvious feature I discovered here was that artists tend to incorporate theater-like producing methods, involving script, rehearsal, teamwork, verbal presentation, light, sound, and multimedia. I gradually realized performance art here is not what I pictured or encountered while I was in China. But my interpretation was not that non-narrative performance art only makes a tiny portion of performance here, I thought performance art in the US was the same as any other performance, or was a branch of theater. At least they are all merged. Thinking about the big names of performance art during the 1960s-2000s, most of them are interdisciplinary. Allan Kaprow with Happenings, Joseph Beuys with Fluxus, Yoko Ono and John Cage with music...⁵ the era performance art was born was accompanied with many other art movements, and performance art was not isolated. However, in China, after the Reforming and Opening Up policy in the 1980s,

⁵ Marina Abramović might be a little different, she focuses more on performance art itself, and has a greater influence on the artworld in China. She was mentioned in my highschool history textbook as the "grandmother of performance art", and her famous piece with Ulay, The Great Wall Walk. 1988/2008, received widely media coverage in China even today. Her acquaintanceship with many Chinese artists also made a great impact on Chinese performance art circles.

when the previous monotonous traditional art world faced up with an enormous amount of protean and revolutionary modern art, imitating became the first thing artists do. But even if we could learn how to create performance art and imitate the form and the concept, we could not rebuild a prosperous western 1960/70s art world. That's why performance art was isolated in China, without the trend of thoughts of activism and socially engaged art, the movement of fluxus, happenings, the thrive of intermedia artistic creation, without the accompanying and support of evolution of music or theater industry. That's why "behavior art" seems to grow out of nowhere, and it is so hard to stand by itself or convince people it is a legitimate art genre instead of "artists who crave fame but can't paint well messing around"⁶.

So back then, I thought there was no equivalent word in English for "behavior art". Performance art is performance. Only Chinese artists set performance art apart from other performances and name it "behavior art".

One of the facts supporting this idea lies in the departmental practices in US academic institutions. In Brown University, the place where performance art is studied is the department of Theater and Performance Studies, and New York University has a MA program of. When I was talking with a Chinese friend who was in the NYU Performance Study program, and tried to translate this program name into "行为艺术研究"(study of "behavior art"), she corrected me, it is not "behavior art". "Then how should I translate?"-"Emmmm, let's leave it in English". How I wish I could leave it in English! How I wish I could conduct my research and practice just about the subject itself, without having to travel across the pacific ocean and fall asleep with my subject of research untranslatable hanging in my mind. Leaving it as a name, a noun is so much

⁶ "Before I set up the UP-ON Performance Art Archive, I was an artist, focusing on my own creative work. I was engaged in oil painting in Beijing up to 1997. I thought performance art was something that people did when they found out they couldn't paint."--Zhou Bin:
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Ar4hpUJ18Vyixyqlq14AoQ>

easier, but the ease would just exist for now, and for us. Once I want to go back and revisit, there is not a consensus of its meaning, context or referring that lets me do so. Once I want to exchange my opinion with other people, to bring it to a broader audience, an untranslatable noun won't let me bring it easily into any conversation, especially in a language that is not my mother tongue.

But putting the translational puzzle aside, I joined my friend with the NYU Department of Performance Studies for the 2023 M.A. Symposium, and started to research performance studies as a discipline in US academics.

The history of Brown University's Theatre Arts & Performance Studies can trace back to the Brown Theatre and other theatrical organizations founded by professors and students since the 19th century. In the 1970s, dance, including modern western dance and dances of the African diaspora, stood out from other practices and research in this institution. In 1973, the program of Theatre Arts separated itself from other programs within the English Department, Speech and Dance was its major field of research. Then in 1979, a new department Theatre, Speech, and Dance came into being.

The relevance between performance and speech was not exclusive in Brown University. Northwest University's Performance Studies, under the School of Communication, also has a department history highly related with elocution and oratory. Beginning with the name of "School of Oratory", Robert McLean Cumnock was its first professor, and the main content of the course was about "gesture, vocal inflection & emphasis, grammar, rhetoric, English literature, poetry and poetics, and Shakespeare"⁷ in 1870s. Then public speech and theater was

⁷ See Northwestern University Performance Studies's department history <https://communication.northwestern.edu/academics/performance-studies/department-history.html>

added to their focus in the 1920s, following a rename of “School of Speech”. After departmentalization, a new name “Department of Interpretation” and a general focusing on understanding of written texts, the performance of text in 1960 brought it closer to the contemporary Department of Performance Studies, which was named in 1991, with a concentration in “study of literature through solo performance; the ensemble adaptation and staging of poetic, narrative, and nonfictional texts; intercultural performance; cultural studies and performance ethnography; performance theory and criticism; and performance art”.⁸

And just like accounted by Jon McKenzie and Shannon Jackson⁹, what stands side by side with the Northwestern tradition is New York University. Richard Schechner and several other forerunners lit the torch, and passed it down to the theater department. In its official website, the history was succinct summarized: NYU Tisch School of the Arts established The Department of Performance Studies in 1980, and its research fields include “experimental and protest theater, feminist and queer theory, dance studies, sound studies, performance curation, and critical race theory”¹⁰

Understanding how institutional research of performance art was deeply intertwined with the discipline of theater and rhetoric, my hope of finding my ally of non-narrative performance art lovers almost faded. Until a conversation flipped my opinion...

⁸See overview in Northwestern University Performance Studies official webpage <https://communication.northwestern.edu/academics/performance-studies/undergraduate-programs/major-performance-studies.html#tab-panel1>

⁹ “In the United States, disciplinary change has clustered around two institutional narratives at New York University and Northwestern University, what Jon McKenzie calls the “Eastern” and “Midwestern” strains of performance studies.7” —P8 Jackson, Shannon. *Professing performance : theatre in the academy*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁰ See introduction on New York University Performance Studies official webpage <https://tisch.nyu.edu/performance-studies>

3 Dealing with discontinuity

Soon after I adjusted my expectation in finding something similar with “behavior art” in the US performance world, I was invited to a talk at 2023 Providence Fringe Festival to chat about performance with other artists, curators, and practitioners. And to introduce performance art to the audience of a theater company, the first thing we discussed was the definition of performance art. Our conversation dug out that there are two similar concepts, performing art and performance art, the latter comes from a French tradition and is not the same thing as performing art. It was not until then, I noticed and realized that performing art and performance art are two different terms. This discovery made so much sense for me. At that moment, I understood that like “behavior art” in China, “Performance Art” is a distinct term. I also found more supporting narrative of this idea in literature: in Richard Schechner’s account, performance art is “A grab-bag, category of works that do not fit neatly into theatre, dance, music, or visual art...Performance art is often the work of an individual using her, his, or their own body, psyche, documents, and experiences.”¹¹ This is so much closer to my concept of performance art that is constructed in China. Hence I understand performance art as a branch of performances, but it is not like other traditional forms of performing arts. This thought pushed me to question the difference between the “behavior art” in China and performance art here. If in the land where “behavior art” comes into being doesn’t distinguish it from the bigger genre of performances, why should we Chinese people do?

¹¹Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2020. P267

Without a minute I realized that is not a question, we didn't deliberately distinguish it, they grow differently. Even though as developing, an increasing amount of performance artists are combining their practice with theater, it is the same as combining with sound, video, or any other field. Theater didn't play a more significant role in performance art's development than any other fields in China since the beginning, nor now. Performance art was practiced within the area of fine art. They fall into the category of fine art in the place where they appear, in the way they are created and function, and the way they are appreciated and treated...Performance art in China never grow a group of audiences similar to theater, music, or any other kind of live art, performance artists seldom get compensated financially based on each "shows" because there is a lack of cultivated tradition of appreciation of it, and accordingly, the financial supporting system is yet to be established. It neither gets recognized as a type of performance, or theater, nor receives enough acknowledgement in the circle of fine art. So the current situation is that there is no such discipline of performance art in any fine art academy, theater school, or comprehensive university beside several courses taught in experimental art or contemporary art classes. However, the blank in educational system and disciplinary research doesn't imply any insufficiency in its artistic practice. "behavior art" festivals across China still thrive every year, and artists who continuously employ "behavior art" as their media solely or partly should by no means be neglected. That generates a question, where is the place for "behavior art"?

Chapter Two

Five Dimensions of “Living” in “Behavior Art”: Untranslatability That Makes Perfect Sense

As the following content studies mainly performance art in China, I'll use “behavior art” to refer, so as to remind my readers the unsettled disparities and gap between languages and contexts. By doing so, I don't mean to isolate or specialize Chinese artists from the international conversation. But I do mean to mildly displease my Chinese readers just as my English readers, as neither academia nor art circle accept the wretched translation of “behavior art”.

When I choose the word “Living” to demonstrate the most eminent feature I find in “behavior art”, I was actually thinking about the Chinese character 生. 生 has a philosophical and linguistic system of meanings, from which derivatives several group of connotations. In a thesis discussing untranslatability, I want to try my best to convey a partial image.

The character 生 alone could indicate 诞生 giving birth, 生育 give birth and raise, 生长 grow up, 生病 get sick, 生殖 reproduction. And its most direct meaning is living creatures and life: 生命 life, 生物 creatures, 生鲜 freshfood, 生态 ecology, 生灵 living creatures. Since the philosophy of “生” builds on relationality 生 could combine with other words indicating living entities to express a natural state of co-existence: 寄生 parasite, 滋生 breed. And on the contrary of bring something to life, 生 could also combine with its autonomy to form words of its opposite meanings: 生还 survive or return alive, 生死 life and death. And as it give birth to living entities, it could also used to create abstract concept: 萌生 conceive, 发生 happen, 产生 generate, 生疑 grow suspesion, 生厌 be tired of. Then closely related to life is the things keep us alive physically, so many economic terms are also related to 生: 生存 subsist, 生意 business, 生计 livelihood, 谋生 make a living, 生产 production. Beside physical existence, 生 could also mean spiritual live: 生气 could mean mad when 生 is used as a verb, it could also indicates the noun of an lively and dynamic entity when 生 is used as a adjective, and 生生不息 refers to continuous living in a sustainable and cyclical ecology. Going back to make a living, 生 derivirate the identity and social role of people: 女生 girl, 男生 boy, 学生 student, 医生 doctor. And in a sociology sense, it depicts an individual’s relation with the society: 人生观 outlook or view of life, 陌生人 stranger, 出生率 birth rate. As the character

has such a large panorama, it was addressed in many traditional Chinese philosophy and religion, and some of its concepts are brought back to social life and daily use, like 众生相, a Buddhist term to depict the appearance and conduct of all human beings. And in 《道德经》 *Dao De Jing*, or *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi, the origin of cosmology has nothing to do with collision or big bang, but the critical concept of Dai that give birth to all the other things: “道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物” “The Dao gave birth to One; One gave birth to Two; Two gave birth to Three; Three gave birth to all things”.

Like Emily Apter's¹² exemplification of the word “force”, there is no equivalent word in English that covers the philosophical concept of “force” in French. While composing this piece, I spent a large amount of time seeking the right word and finding a framing to translate the meaning, and at the same time keep the connections between concepts that are inherent in Chinese. When bringing many concepts from Chinese to English, I need to build new relations to explain, however that relation is not my new contribution, it is carried by the language.

¹² Here I want to quote: “A word like ‘force’, that hardly qualifies as a philosophical concept in the Anglophone context, warrants a substantive entry in French. Grouped with *dunamis*, *energeia*, *entelekheia*, *virtus*, *Kraft*, *Wirkung*, *pouvoir*, and *puissance*, ‘force’ straddles entelechy, physics, bodily substance, conservation, and power.” — Apter, Emily. Untranslatables: A world system.” \ New Literary History 39.3 (2008): 581-598.P588

1 生活现实 Living: Accepting the Reality

I hope you still remember the confrontation I introduced in the Introduction part, because I'll tell you the other part of that story.

After questioning my research on translation of “behavior art”, the young artist recommended a video of a casual interview between several artists, to show me the difference between “behavior art” and performance art. The part she showed on that sharing session was artist Li Haiguang’s oral account of his opinion about Chinese action oriented “behavior art” versus stage oriented performance art he encountered in Germany. But I want to talk about that later, because while I was writing this essay and getting back to that video, I discovered another part of the same video. Due to limited time, that part hadn't been shown on that day but it expressed the same struggles of living in a liminal space between different languages and cultural contexts as I do. He mentioned ghosts, aphasia, absence, and being stuck, all of which are experiences of liminality, but he didn’t mention anything about translation.

I could not imagine that the material the young artist used to object to my presentation in UP-ON actually aligned with my feelings. So she was not opposed to my content, she was just rejecting my language and discourse. This makes me feel this whole thing is a joke of mistranslation.

In that video, one of the interlocutors, Li, talked about his experience of being a ghost between Chinese, English and German art context:

"...in 2021, I already felt like a ghost, because you were aphasic, or absent, in the art in the Chinese context, you lived in Germany, isn't it ridiculous to ask you about China?... You will feel that art in English context is a screen, in Chinese context is a screen, and in German context is a screen..."

—"Three screens (and you) stuck in the middle"

"Stucking in the middle, yes, and then take so much effort squeezing yourself in, and then you are covered in blood, and then you come out again... Anyway, you are like a ghost, and you can't find a spot to stop. But I feel that is something that must be acknowledged."

—"Are there any positive changes now?"

"I think there are some good changes. In the past, I would desperately want to anchor myself at a certain place, or the biggest problem that has troubled me in the past few years is subjectivity, Because you have to speak, you have to express. Subjectivity is like when crossing the river, there is at least one stone that you can step on, even if just briefly, it's okay, then you can continue walking. Now, (I) just feel like accepting this state."¹³

Acknowledging the untranslatable makes Li feel right, just like how my friend from NYU left the term "Performance Study" in English. Acknowledging the untranslatable, is letting go of a "normative" behavior or discourse and accepting the real living state of liminality. Ever since verbal language became one of the most important ways by which humans communicate, we have grown the habit of translating our previous unnamable feelings and intentions into verbal and textual language. Ever since people began to travel between lands that don't share the same

¹³ In 2021, Li Haiguang feels like a ghost, speechless in the Chinese art context. The three languages are like three screens in front of him. Video starts at 10min. 2021 年李海光感觉自己像一个幽灵，在中文艺术语境里失语了，又面临英文、德文艺术环境，三种语言就像是三块屏幕摆在面前。视频开始于 10min
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/7FWgrtiW2knyYw4pi8wVfQ>

language, translating gradually has become a must. If we want to know other people, if we want to make ourselves comprehensible to others, we have to translate. It keeps the door open to making further steps, stepping into unknowing, into the future, into progress and generating. Translating our thoughts into another brain, makes things get done, and makes us feel right. But that is just translating. We don't ask the words if they are willing or able to be translated before dragging it to an unstopping globalization machine to process. So can we say that translating is more about our will and exercising the power to transform the words, than letting the words settle well and be digestible? In the case of Li and my friend from NYU, yes. They discerned something off if they dragged the reluctant content into another context. They reflected and stopped. Then they felt right. It is a courageous conduct of stepping back and giving space. And I want to point out that this move is not passive. Untranslatable leading us to a liminal space, but in many cases, untranslatability itself also can be liminal and temporary. It is not a denial of comprehension, a rejection to conversation, or an end. Instead, it is active. By suspending, and acknowledging the limitation, we have more room to ponder. Interruption of "should be" is upsetting, but it gives us time to adjust, revisit, create, and innovate.

And we could also understand "behavior art" as an artform that explores liminality. Gao Ling's *Investigation Report on Contemporary "Behavior Art" in China*, which was wrote in 1997 and published in 2004,¹⁴ is one of the overarching analysis articles of "behavior art" in early times. He stated in his analysis of Sun Ping's "behavior art" piece "China Game No. 1-Issuance of Stocks"¹⁵ that two dimensional art forms are not enough to reflect how the ethos of society affect individual spiritual consciousness and surviving experience. Thus we are bound to

¹⁴ Gao Ling, *Investigation Report on Contemporary Chinese Performance Art*, 2004 高岭. "中国当代行为艺术考察报告." *大艺术* 2 (2004): 36-43.

¹⁵ Sun Ping, *China Game No. 1, Issuance of Stocks* 孙平 中国游戏 1 号·发行股票

turn to a variety of media and even non-entity action processes and personal behaviors. Looking back at the growth path “behavior art” went through from 1990 to 1997, Gao summarized that “behavior art” reflects an individual's state of living. He analyzed artists using their body as media to explore life and death, to open conversation about identity, to build relationships with the public, to question social environment and to address cultural psychology. The following chapters also discuss how “behavior art” enables the artists to closely examine people’s living state as an individual living in a certain social environment, and how they use their body to exhibit and engage with the public. I’ll demonstrate four aspects of living: 1. Living as a concept that is undergoing and unfinishable. Living entities co-exist in a certain social environment, one event could arouse echoes that continuously reproduce itself, provoke consequent events and engage an increasing amount of people and response. 2. Living experiences of a human being, with emotions and sentiments that make us vulnerable but also powerful at the same time. This section discusses how “behavior art” helps us to bear the weight of living. 3. Living with flesh and bones. Human body is the media of “behavior art”, it is a window to reflect what’s outside of the human body and also a place to see through what’s inside. 4. Living in a society. “behavior art” is socially-engaged and political in its own way, while performance art and experimental theater has its agency to address real world issues and make social changes, “behavior art” reaches a similar goal with a different pattern. I’ll finally explain in this part the temporary conclusion of the argument in the UP-ON sharing session and why artists intend to position their work as action, and differentiate from performance.

2 生生不息 Living: Ongoing and Unfinished

Performance studies – as a practice, a theory, an academic discipline – is dynamic, unfinishable.

Whatever it is, it wasn't exactly that before and it won't be exactly that again.

--Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies-An Introduction*

The first image that comes to my mind when thinking of the “untranslatable” is not a conversation of silence, but one that is loud, messy, uneven, and restless. I imagine there will be people jumping on the table to explain urgently, using their facial and body language to describe, grabbing the object near them to show... All of that is trying to make oneself understandable via various ways other than verbal language, to approach the destination via multiple methods. And I understand “behavior art” in a similar way. In order to reach a certain level of comprehension or inspiration, the artists don't mind taking any method.

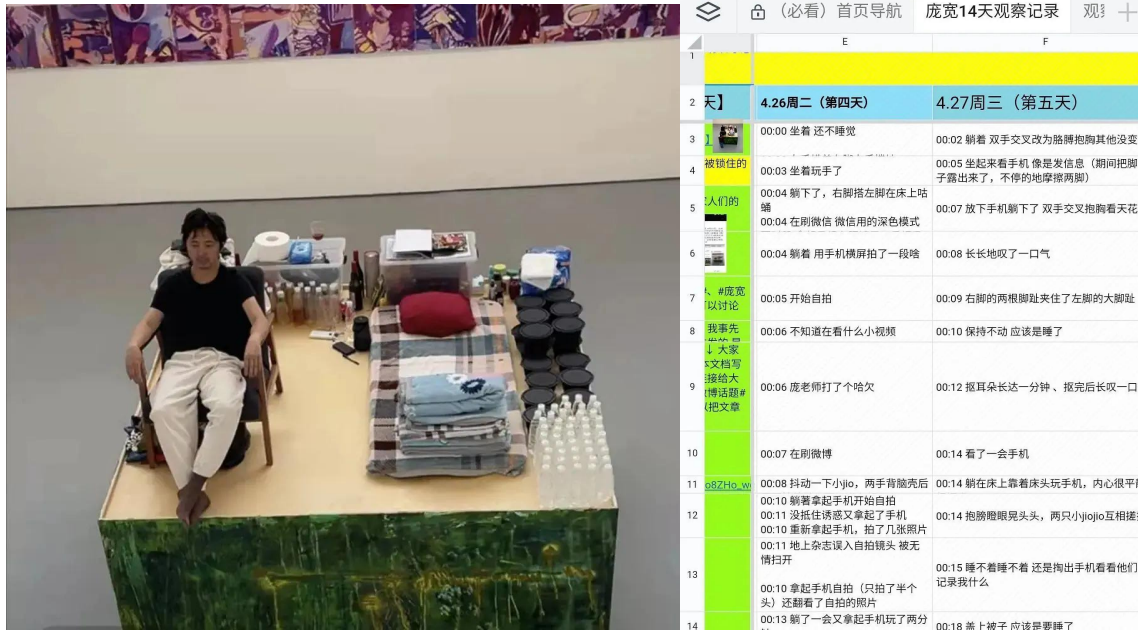
And by saying “any method”, I want to point out that there are at least three layers included, the first two you can also find in performance art, and the third partly made “behavior art” separate from performance art.

The first layer is the art form, painting, sculpture, installation, video, sound, live streaming... You can see every genre of art form in a “behavior art” piece. What could be criticized as “devastating”, “vulgar” and “killing” the aura¹⁶ of art could also be integrated playfully or reused as a strategy in a “behavior art” piece. Artists turn criticism and confrontation into nutrition, into tools, to develop their work. And here I want to introduce a “behavior art” piece that adopted live-streaming into its work.

¹⁶ Benjamin, Walter, and Michael W. Jennings. "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility [first version]." *Grey room* 39 (2010): 11-37.

Starting from Apr 23 2022, Pang Kuan, singer and keyboard player of the pop music band *New Pants* started a 14-day non-stop live stream of him living on a 2.5*2.5 meters platform inside a gallery. There was no shelter, the audience of that live-streaming can see the entire space, and all the things he does. He had water, food, wine, snacks, clothes, a sofa and a toilet. The gallery was not open to the public except on the first day of this piece and after that all the visiting and interaction happened online due to Covid prevention policy. So Pang isolated himself just like any normal 14-day quarantine of the Covid. Though this time, Pang's piece didn't happen on stage and in the spotlight like usual but via live-streaming. The bluntness and the gesture of both submission to and confrontation with the quarantine policy received huge attention.





Pang's work in person and online, and the spreadsheet that record his movement

During this piece, Pang drew a square to mark his territory of activity, and he lived on all the supplies within this territory prepared beforehand - nothing could be added during the performance. In such a case, he **was** going under a potential challenge of body limit. Living under limited supplies **was** the reality of people in quarantine under lockdown. And by adding the element of live-streaming, he **was** both aware and uncontrollable to supervise from possibly anyone online. The anonymous public watched, documented and posted every tiny move he made. Some interacted with him on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform to ask him to get up and go to use the toilet; some kept a record of every song he played and created a list and up to now, more than eighty thousand people heard that playlist; some created and shared **an** online Excel file to document his activity that is precise to every second, and towards the end of the piece, printed and sent to Pang. After receiving that file, Pang posted and expressed his gratitude to all the people who made that file ...

It is because “behavior art” is a live process instead of a ready-made object, the element of processing, ongoing and unfinished, gives the audience a chance to engage themselves into the work. By doing that, many “behavior art” pieces open a space for discussion, intervention, and change-making. And that is the second layer of “all method”: giving up the concept and pursuit of a perfect finished work, accepting the fact that artwork could be a process, and embracing contingency and uncertainty brought by other participants. When artists let the audiences participate and especially co-create a performance art piece, they give out the right of control, and have to deal with unexpectedness. Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (1974) demonstrated the unexpectedness very well. She gave complete autonomy to the audience to do whatever they wanted to her with 72 objects previously provided. And revisiting that experience, Marina said, “the experience I drew from this work was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed”¹⁷. No matter how much control they give their audience, the action of giving becomes significant the second the decision is made. Because after that moment, the artist have to face various levels of passiveness and unknownness

In *Rhythm 0*, one of the audience took a gun and pointed it at the artist, but another audience took that gun away. So the shooting never happened, the piece ended as an art piece, in a gallery in Naples. It is still inside the genre of art. But on the other side of the globe, during another live art piece, a bullet fired from the gun, smashed the boundary between art and reality, and constructed one of the most important elements of “behavior art” that was emphasized by the young artist in the UP-ON sharing session.

¹⁷ Frazer Ward, ‘Marina Abramovic: Approaching Zero’, in Anna Dezeuze (ed.), *The ‘Do-it-Yourself’ Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*, Manchester 2009, pp.132–44.



Xiao Lu, Dialogue (对话^[1]), 1989, documentation of installation and performance, National Art Gallery, Beijing

At around 11:10 am of February 5th, 1989, at the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition, 2 gunshots caused panic between the audience. It was artist Xiao Lu shooting at her installation work she created one year ago of a man and a woman making phone calls in two booths, between which was a mirror, and a phone with a fallen receiver. Soon police came, arrested Xiao's friend Tang Song, who held equal responsibility for the piece, and closed the exhibition. Xiao went away shortly after the gunshot, but later turned herself in to the police. After that, the exhibition was closed for five days until February 14th, on which day the police department of the museum received threatening calls. The museum was threatened that if they opened to the public again, there would be an explosion. The show opened on February 17th and closed on the

19th. Many people associated this shooting with demonstrations for democracy at Tiananmen Square.¹⁸

Though the work Xiao shot was, in her words, out of “personal emotional clash”, its interpretation and outgrowth went far beyond the artwork itself and caused solid social impacts. That is the third layer of “behavior art” adopting “any method” and which separates itself from a “performance”: it both engages and separates it from the social reality by facing the whole society as its audience; it blurs the boundary of art and life by challenging social norms, restrictions and laws, and ethical values.

¹⁸ Goodman, Jonathan. "Xiao Lu: the confluence of Life and Art." *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 8.2 (2009): 25-32.

3 生灵感受 Living: existing as a human-being

Intention and subjectivity is emphasized very often in a “behavior art” piece. A “behavior” artwork is an artwork but also a particular time for the artist living as a human, as the artists themselves. When you see their presence, you see an artist with their living experiences conducting “behavior art”, instead of someone playing a role and telling other people’s story that serves a fictional purpose that might be irrelevant to the artist’s real life. That’s also why in most cases, the idea and strength of “behavior art” work convey through the artists’ willpower, mental state, emotion, temperament, sense of belief, and the level they immerse themselves in the piece... rather than how well they remember the script (if there are any), or if their acting make sense and looks convincing. When an actor doesn’t feel the same way as the role they play, their work ethic usually requires them to force themselves into the role’s emotional state. But when a “behavior artist”’s mental and physical state is not prepared, forcing and acting that they do might be against their artistic ethic. In many cases, a “behavior art” piece originates and serves a real life purpose, but in a poetic or artistic way. It is inseparable from the artists’ real life, otherwise the artwork itself can not stand on its own.

The video performance trilogy “Touching My Father” recorded artist Song Dong’s three attempts to connect with his father in their different life stages in 1997, 2002, and 2011. Song was born in 1966, and he currently teaches at Central Academy of Fine Arts. Song’s father graduated from Peking University and worked in the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In 1970, during the cultural revolution, he was labeled as anti-revolution and was punished. Song seldom saw his father during his childhood.¹⁹ Even after he grew up the patriarchal hierarchy never let his

¹⁹ Interview with Song Dong 我一直在思考代沟的问题，试图用艺术的方式来化解困境 | 专访宋冬
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/mGoE00-jWjcXoIMU2VrvBw>

father show any affection to him or express his love through bodily interaction. Song's connection with his father was concrete but implicit.

“...I knew he loved me so much. While his beard was poking my face, I felt warmth, affection and pain. I seem to still be able to feel all these sensations today. One day in 1973, I saw my father walking towards me from the entrance of the hutong. I did not step forward to welcome him but turned around and ran home instead. I knew it was because of the double effect of happiness and fear. My father was finally home! ”

That's why the simple act of touching his father was impossible in Song's real life. This kind of unspeakable tenderness is not rare in traditional Chinese families, parents are not supposed to be expressive but they love their children deeply. Probably because the love is unspeakable, they bury it deep down in our hearts, so we thought it was solid and heavy; because it's mysterious, untouchable and unmeasurable, we thought it was a lot.

Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art documented Song's account: “I went to Berlin in 1997. I was solitary and homesick in the midst of a strange language and cultural environment. I re-thought the communications I had had with my father. I started to realize that my father had his own reasons for what he did and said, which was, in many aspects, his truth. My respect for him was gradually restored. I wanted to express my love for him. I wanted to touch him many times. I understood this would be very difficult because there was a big gap between us. Finally, I came up with the idea of using video with the image of a hand that is ‘visible but not in a materialistic form’. I projected the

video of my hand touching the air onto my father's body. I used my 'virtual hand' to touch my father. He accepted this 'hand' and I experienced a complex feeling. It was very hard to explain and my father was experiencing a complex feeling as well."

"Touching My Father 1997 While I was touching him with my video projected hand, he was smoking. Unexpectedly, with his eyes on my 'hand', he started to take off his jacket, shirt and the vest until he was half naked, feeling my hand with his bare back..."



Song Dong, *Touching My Father*, 1997

“We did not have any conversations about it. But my ‘virtual hand’ was breaching that invisible gap between us. I truly felt the power of, and am truly grateful for, art.”

"*Touching My Father 2002* In the video, my father was teaching my sister's daughter Zhu Mo how to play a peg top, a game he played during his childhood. This was the last family video before he passed away and it happened to be shot at the Ancestral Temple. Since my father's death, I had always wanted to do this third 'Touching my Father'. But it was 8 years later when I first had the courage to face my father's image. This time, the touching was so hard."²⁰



Song Dong, *Touching My Father*, 2002

²⁰ Quote from exhibition *OutLook*, Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art RMCA
<http://www.rmcart.org/News/detail/id/68.html>



Song Dong, Touching My Father, 2011

Throughout creating this series, Song's sentiments towards his father were condensed and reversed, just like the way he was loved. Song's motivation to create the first piece was that he wanted to express his love, even though during the artwork, no verbal language was used; after the piece they didn't have any conversation about it, this silent process of virtual touching did express his love. The gap between them was breached. The second piece was sealed and never been watched after it's done, the heaviness and implicitness of love passed down from his father to him, and reflected on this piece. The third piece was also short and poetic, but it took Song eight years to digest and put into practice. Eight years' time enabled him to transform the heaviness to lightness, from mortal to eternal, from unspeakable to another form of unspeakable.

4 肉体生存 Living: with flesh, blood and bones

Questioning, exploring, and experimenting with the medium of “behavior art” is another dimension of “living” in “behavior art”. The human body. Generally speaking, there is a tendency in “behavior art” to subtract the storytelling material to an artist’s body. It exemplifies the philosophy of “less is more”, and also advocates the idea of returning to one’s original simplicity. Nudity is an element used very often, and one of the reasons behind this choice is to eliminate all commodities, social conventions and disciplines of civilizations represented by clothes, and resembles a newborn baby-when human are closest to 生 (here I want to indicate born, being, living, life and existence). The body view of “behavior art” is crucial to conceptualizing and executing an artwork, and diversified body views compose different, even contrary attitudes of how to use the medium of the human body.

Throughout the history of “behavior art” in China, the controversial ways of treating the artist or other creatures’ bodies occupy significant and irreplaceable status in the art world. For that irreplaceability, some pieces stepped on the bottom line of humanity and conducted irreversible damage to the artists and their audiences mentally and physically. Is such sacrifices for art’s sake forgivable? Should artists have such autonomy to break the conventions to that extent? Is it meaningful to respond to violence by creating another unnecessary violence? What violence is necessary? Is it meaningful to represent intangible systematic violence via such concrete violence? Is resistance in an art piece futile? Is futile enough to negate the value of artwork? Those are questions concerning groups larger than art communities.

The body view of “behavior art” inextricably relates to the world view, and the whole value system. And different artists approach this topic with diversified ways of exhibiting their

bodies. Among which, there are enduring(Zhou Bin), suffering(Zhang Huan), self-torture(Yang Zhichao, He Yunchang, Cang Xin), and using of dead human and animal body was also common(Zhu Yu, Peng Yu, Yu ji). Using the body as an experience lab, as an alarm bell, as a passive subject with agency, or without agency, all originate from different body views of the artists. And the way those artists use their bodies falls out of a performance or a show. Generally speaking, if an actor in a theater piece bleeds on the stage the audiences know without asking that the blood is fake. Otherwise it would be called an accident, but in “behavior art”, there is no accident, because the audience would expect any accident should be considered and even designed by the artist. And it’s very common when the artists make themselves bleed intentionally. Zhou Bin, the co-founder of UP-ON spent a section in his book to discuss this issue entitled “You Have to Bleed in Real Life”:

“...the body appears in its true state; for instance, if the body is injured, it is genuinely hurt. This is because the body used as a medium in the artwork and the concept it conveys are unified. The authenticity of the body's state is closely linked to the authenticity of the concept the artist wishes to express, as well as their social and personal experiences. This connection is crucial for the accuracy and impact of the artwork's expression.²¹”

And following that, Mr Zhou quoted Taiwan artist and critic Yao Jui-Chung to further demonstrate: “Behavior artists” use physical actions(beating, dieting, self-harming...), internal actions(sleeping, vomiting, subconscious responses...), and emphasizing bodily

²¹ Zhou Bin, Teaching and Learning of Performance art, Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2021 周斌. 行为艺术课. 上海三联书店, 2021.P146

actions(imprisonment, weddings, meditating, blindness, surrendering...) to convey messages; They also use bodily objects (semen, menstrual blood, hair, tears, fart, breath), other living (animals and plants) or non-living items, combined with bodily movements and temporal progressions to strengthen the concepts they want to exhibit. Behavior artists' choices of using spatial and temporal elements develop a set of concepts distinct from "performing arts", such as breaking the proscenium stage and the fourth wall, refusing to tell stories or reenact events, excluding excessive theatrical stage and sound-light effects... and gradually developing an aesthetic view different from performing arts²². While Yao demonstrated how "behavior artists" break the proscenium, and distinguish itself from "performing arts", semioticians Pan Pengcheng and Tang Xiaolin explained how "behavior art" construct a whole new narrative pattern in their collaborated article: all arts have their own narrative pattern, otherwise they couldn't separate themselves from ordinary life, and the audiences couldn't aesthetically comprehend them as artworks. It is the the action of witness that enable "behavior art" to convert everyday life into artwork, and form the consensus of coding what otherwise normal or abnormal behaviors. ²³

²² Yao Jui-Chung, *The Awakening of the Physical Body - Several Historical Processes in the Development of Taiwan's Performance Art*, *Collection of Modern Art*, Issue 150, 2005, 姚瑞中:《肉身觉醒——台湾行为艺术发展的几段历史进程》,《典藏今艺术》2005年第150期,第86-91页

²³ Pan Pengcheng. *Performance Narrative: From Experimental Theatre to Performance Art*. Sichuan University Press, 2021 潘鹏程. *演出叙述: 从实验戏剧到行为艺术*. 四川大学出版社, 2021. P144-146



Left: He Yunchang, *Keeping Promise*, 2003

Right: He Yunchang, *The Rock Tours Around Great Britain*, 2006/2007

What seen as “abnormal” by the public usually contain elements of violence, futility, awkwardness, inaccessibility...And one of its representative, also one of the most hardcore and faithful “behavior artists” He Yunchang is good at addressing abstract concepts from literature and life through physical suffering in a violent but poetic manner. He dipped into his blood, tore his flesh and inscribed on his bones to represent allegory, tale and religion. In *Keeping Promise*(2003), he reinterpreted the tale from Daoism classic *Zhuangzi*. The story tells about Weisheng and a girl made a promise under a construction to meet, but the girl didn’t come, then a flood came, Weisheng stayed at the same place and hold tight to the pillar until he drowned. (尾生与女期于梁下，女子不来，水至不去，抱梁柱而死-《庄子》卷十四). One October 24, 2003, He casted an arm in a pillar of cement for twenty four hours without being able to move.

In *Casting* (2004), he sealed himself inside a hollow cement pillar for twenty four hours. Cement was one of He's favorite materials other than his body, one of the infrequent artificial elements in his work. The process of cement solidification on the human body imposes huge pressure on flesh. In *Rock Tours Around Great Britain* (2006-2007), He picked a random rock on the seashore of Britain and carried it to walk along the perimeter of rough Britain land. He walked 3500 kilometers for 112 days to put the rock in its exact same place. In *One Rib* (2008), he spent three years persuading a doctor to take off part of his ribs, then installed the rib on a gold necklace and invited five of his lovers to put on and took photos with each of them. In *One Meter of Democracy* (2010), he invited 25 of his friends to vote anonymously about whether or not to cut a one-meter long and one centimeter deep wound on his body without anesthesia. Twelve agreed, ten against, and three abstained, and the surgeon was conducted.



He Yunchang, *Casting*, 2004



He Yunchang, *One-meter Democracy*, 2010

Meiqin Wang, professor of Art History, California State University Northridge systematically introduces how Yunchang is succinct but difficult, ritual but cruel methodology came into existence: when talking about He's thread of thought of *Appointment with Tomorrow* 预约明天(1998), he introduced how a social event intrigued his contemplation: a laid-off engineer wanted to buy a small piece of meat to feed his child with the limited money he could afford, but that piece was too small that the butcher was not willing to sell. However, after listening to the engineer's difficulty, the butcher gave him some for free, which was interpreted with humiliation by the butcher. Then after conversing with his wife, he added poison to his family's meal and ended their miserable lives. The threshold of will between struggling to live and termination made him ponder about endurance of flesh and power of spirits.²⁴

²⁴ Wang, Meiqin. "The primitive and unproductive body: He Yunchang and his performance art." *Yishu J Contemp Chin Art* 13.4 (2014): 6-25.

In “behavior art”, and perhaps all conceptual art, how to present a message matters more than what to present. Yunchang’s storytelling pattern is Sisyphus futile but faithful, his poetic interpretation of literature and life brings out infinite meaning that might lose its aura if expressed by words. I sometimes feel poems are a good way to explain “behavior art”. Poems are also the most difficult to translate among other literature genres. Even within Chinese, from classical Chinese to simplified Chinese, the minimalism, the beauty in form, the melody and nuances are lost. Each language has its irreplaceable character.

But on the other hand, interpretation could add different highlights in the new language. And how to eliminate the loss, or embody it from a whole new dimension, is the essence of conceptual art creation. For “behavior art”, its use of the language of the human body is not to show skills or exhibit beauty, but to concretize and embody willpower and spirit. The training of “behavior art” is not to form a bodily skill via repeated training, but to explore how the artists could carry their message in the way they want to reach the exact effect. In *Teaching and Learning of Performance Art*, Zhou used nudity to exemplify: if a choice of nudity is made, then what should be considered next is any other choices related to nudity. Like being naked before entering the scene or after? If after, then at which place, facing which audience, clothes first or shoes first, fold all the clothes or throw them on the ground casually, and at what speed?²⁵ Each detailed choice could affect the disposition of an artwork, and might lead to different interpretations, and the audiences might not even notice. That is where the unspeakable and untranslatable are embodied and conveyed.

²⁵ Zhou Bin, *Teaching and Learning of Performance art*, Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2021 周斌. 行为艺术课. 上海三联书店, 2021.P139

5 社会生活 Living in Society

While performance art often falls into the same category as theater in the US, experimental theater tends to depend less on script and representation, but more on onsite elements like the actors, multimedia, props and lighting to tell a story.²⁶ And “behavior art” made a further step by eliminating stage, directing, choreography, orchestra, or lighting, and using only simple props and prompts to compose an artwork. Another feature of many “behavior art” pieces is that its audiences seldom sit in spectator seats in order, instead, they gather randomly and form a circle around the artists, or step into the scene and engage with the artists. The prosceniums in theaters don’t always exist in “behavior art” pieces. Many “behavior art” pieces do not sell tickets, and they do not happen indoors but under the sky, and the audience of “behavior art” is not only people who enter the live scene, but the whole society. Here I want to introduce two “behavior art” pieces that talk to the whole society, instead of audiences who are fond of a particular type of literature or theater category.

The title of artist Ge Yulu’s²⁷ Master’s thesis at the CAFA (Central Academy of Fine Arts) in Beijing was synonyms for his name, “Ge Yu Lu”. However it was not the name of himself as a person, but a name of a road in Beijing that was previously unnamed. Because the last character of his name, “lu”, is the Chinese character “路”, which means road. Hence “Ge Yulu” could mean “Ge Yu Road”. And he did name an unnamed road “Ge Yu Road”. He didn’t go through any administrative progress or get the permission of the government authority. He just found a road that’s not marked or named, and exercised his humor and creativity--made a

²⁶ Lehmann, Hans-Thies, and Karen Jürs-Munby. *Postdramatic theatre*. Routledge, 2006.

²⁷ An interesting sidenote: Ge is Song Dong’s student in Central Academy of Fine Arts

road sign that looked like the formal one and put it on the road. This piece was done after quite a few times with foam road signs on different unnamed roads in 2013, but most of which were damaged by natural forces. However, in 2014, a friend of Ge told him that there was a specific one adopted by Gaode Map, a digital map company, so anyone could find this road by searching his name. That's how he decided to fake a road sign that looks exactly like the official one.



Ge Yulu, Ge Yulu, 2013-2017

“Ge Yu Road” was used by residents and taxi drivers, and shaped the image of that place. It brought convenience to local people and orientated them in space. In 2015, “Ge Yu Road” entered the official system: it was used on the serial number of traffic lights. Then in 2017, after this whole thing was posted on the Internet, and went viral, it was soon torn down and replaced by the government. Not long after, multiple news media uncovered that Ge received a demerit penalty for violating the order of school education and teaching, life order and public place management order. While the netizens started to relate the penalty with Ge’s road-naming action

and blaming CAFA, Ge and workers from the academy clarified the punishment was for other reasons, and artistic exploration such as the road-naming project would not incur penalty.²⁸ In a finance media *The Economic Observer*, Ge stated that the department he was in-Department of Experimental Art-encourages students to conduct socially-engaged art pieces.²⁹

中央美术学院文件

央美学纪（2017）5号

关于给予葛宇路记过处分的决定

葛宇路（学号 12140105006），男，实验艺术学院 2014 级硕士研究生。

该生严重影响学校教育教学秩序、生活秩序及公共场所管理秩序。根据《中央美术学院学生违纪处分条例》第十六条，经学校研究，决定给予葛宇路记过处分。

2017 年 7 月 5 日

The Central Academy of Fine Arts's punishment on Ge

²⁸ "Why was Ge Yulu punished?" The Central Academy of Fine Arts publicly stated the reason"

《葛宇路为何被处分？中央美院公开声明释缘由》

<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/GUbfu1N9dsN9yjlLymWDSA>

²⁹ "According to Ge Yulu himself, the Department of Experimental Art he was in is now a college, which has always been an art category that advocates the integration of sociology. Teachers also advocate students to be a man of character and create works that are valuable to society. The "Ge Yu Road" street sign is such a work. --Is CAFA's punishment of Ge Yulu also an 'artistic work'?"

"据葛宇路本人介绍，其所在的是实验艺术系，现在成立了学院，一直是提倡和社会学结合的这么一个艺术门类。老师也都提倡说要成为一个有质量的人，要做对社会有价值的作品。“葛宇路”路牌就是这么一个作品。”--《央美处分葛宇路也是一个“艺术作品”吗》

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fHzGalCHAsA6iDiS_3Z_aw

While this action received both praise and criticism from the public about whether an artist has the right to engage with the public landscape in this way, it brought concrete change to local toponymic governance. Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Resources announced that 1,006 unnamed roads in Beijing were named from November 2017 to June 2018.³⁰

Artists see “behavior art” as an agency to interact with, challenge, and provoke the public and authority, and bring reflections and changes to society. That is where the significance of their work lies. While theater and performances could discuss the same topic and reach the same result of intervening in social or political scenes, like the methodology introduced by Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed*, what “behavior artists” adopt is a different path. And positioning the “behavior art” as an action instead of a performance is significant for the artists to take action, address conversation, and request response with the public media, institutions, government, or any individual.

I think this is why I was questioned in my UP-ON sharing session. My “behavior artists” audience refuse to blur their socially-engaged action with stage-oriented performance. I have heard “action art” as synonymous for “behavior art” multiple times - when I ask the origin of the name “behavior art”; when the young artist in UP-ON explained why the translation of “performance” is unworthy of further discussion; when my senior and boss during gap year Hu Yanzi explains why she shifted her focus from “behavior art” to socially- engaged art and community building work. Hu addresses *7000 Oaks* by Joseph Beuys very often to demonstrate artists’ agency in interacting with government, public, impacting from bottom up, and unfolding

³⁰ Xu, Weilin. "Can one artist name an unnamed road after himself?." *cultural geographies* 29.2 (2022): 309-315.

from macro and micro level. Action art originated from Europe and was introduced to mainland China through Taiwan. Jürgen Schilling's *Action Art: Identity of Art and Life? (Aktionskunst: Identität von Kunst und Leben?)* was addressed very often in Chinese "behavior art" studies. Compared to performance art, action art speaks to society in the way that it aims to cause direct and indirect impact on individuals, social relations, institutions, systems, media. And it depends on the whole society and unpredictable contingency to come into shape and grow.

Theater critic Hans-Thies Lehmann³¹ related the element of action with avant-garde movements:

"...those avant-garde movements that wrote onto their banners the destruction of any coherence, the privileging of nonsense and action in the here and now (Dada), thus giving up theatre as a 'work' and meaningful concept in favour of an aggressive impulse, an event that implicated the audience in its actions (Futurism), or sacrificed the narrative causal nexus in favour of other representational rhythms, especially of dream logic (Surrealism)."

Though Lehmann was not talking about action art, his analysis of "acts and actions" tells the truth of the mechanism of actions: it cut down on narratives, let go of the pursuit of completing a meaningful work. Instead, action art increased engagement with the public in the form of an event, sometimes even a social event that jumps out of the category of art. And growing from action art, "behavior art" also gave up traditional narrative patterns and kept its fluidity between art projects and social action so as to play a unique role in any targeted power dynamics.

³¹ Lehmann, Hans-Thies, and Karen Jürs-Munby. *Postdramatic theatre*. Routledge, 2006. P61

Chapter Three

Marginality of “Behavior Art” in Chengdu, China

“This survey of the literature reveals an amazing divergence of opinions. We are able to read that the origin of dance was in play and that it was not in play, that it was for magical and religious purposes, and that it was not for those things; that it was for courtship and that it was not for courtship; that it was the first form of communication and that communication did not enter into dance until it became an “art.” In addition we can read that it was serious and purposeful and that at the same time it was an outgrowth of exuberance, was totally spontaneous, and originated in the spirit of fun. Moreover, we can read that it was only a group activity for tribal solidarity and that it was strictly for the pleasure and self-expression of the one dancing.”

– Kealiinohomoku, Joann

An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance

1 On Periphery—the Destiny

During the development of “behavior art” in China since the 1970s, the interaction between the “behavior artists”, their work, their live audiences, the mediated audience, and the general public together constructed the content of “behavior art”. But under the same term of “behavior art”, there are two opposite meanings. The first meaning is the original one, referring to a live art form, and the second one was derived from the criticism of the former, referring to people’s daily conducts of stupidity or insanity, mocking that any play of nonsense could be put on the label of “art”. Or, in Gao’s words, the contingency and highly personal element incurs the comment of “emotional expression of anarchism”³². The first meaning is used most often by people who produce “behavior art”, and the second mostly by the general public who might never have been on the site to witness the live art. One doesn't need to know a single “behavior art” piece to adopt the second usage of the term. And “behavior art” artists, curators, critics...pay no attention to the prank of mockeries that happen very frequently in quotidian life and on the internet. Which is an epitome of how the public are unable to appreciate this kind of modern art and how “behavior art” is inaccessible from the public.

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital explains why fine art is inaccessible to many in certain classes without quotidian addressing of the symbolic elements. But for the case of “behavior art”, an extra layer was added: the lack of institutional education and promotion of “behavior art” culture. As the majority of the audience and lovers of “behavior art” did not gain the knowledge, tastes, skills, convention and habit of appreciating this new form of art (yes, it is still new to many of my interlocutors even with decades of history) from their parents, from

³² Gao Ling." Investigation Report on Chinese Contemporary Performance Art." Grand Art 高岭. "中国当代行为艺术考察报告." 大艺术 2 (2004): 36-43.

school, or any institution. And as “behavior art” emphasizes on breaking existing language and patterns, and holds critical attitudes towards political authority, education conventions, and commercial operation, the case in China is that the place most of the public to learn “behavior art” is from news reports fed with the most controversial “behavior” pieces. Entering the live scene and witnessing the artwork by oneself is crucial to forming people’s opinions about this artform. Thus for the majority of people who could not participate, their idea of “behavior art” could only be shaped by mediated information.

Scholars and art critics Lu Hong and Sun ZhenHua addressed this tension between "behavior artists" and the public in their book *Alienated Body: Performance Art in China* as a dilemma: just like many other post-modern art genres, the marginality of "behavior art" makes it hard to engage with the majority of society, which became one of the goals of contemporary Chinese art creation. So, in order to gain attention, many performance pieces brought radical elements in their work to push the boundary of ethics and question social conventions and history, challenging the audience's sympathy and causing overwhelming and unbearable feelings which in many cases only pulls the public further away. The book and its argument were made in 2006, almost two decades have passed, though it is still one of the most classical books in the field of Chinese "behavior art", many things have changed. Now marginality plays multiple roles in "behavior artists" engagement with the public.

2 Marginality as a harbor

The word “marginality” has been addressed quite often in texts about "behavior art", not only by audience and critics, (see Lu 2006, Zhou 2001), but also by "behavior art" curators and artists. But one thing I find interesting about the connotation of “marginality” is that in the Chinese world, it still relates very closely to a rebellious attitude and very much identifies itself in the interrelation and comparative position with “the center”.

The center is haunting the margins even when it's not on site, or present, or visible. Tuff Contemporary Art Museum in Chengdu is one of the most supportive organizations of local “behavior art” but it is small in scale. Its 2022 annual summary was titled “Wandering on the Edge of the System”³³, and it compared itself with other prominent museums to claim its own identity and growth path: “Tuff Contemporary Art Museum is not like the official art museum beloved by its biological parents, nor similar to the real estate art museum from a well-off family. We can only try to find a possibility of growth in the cracked state of reality.” The official art museums usually refer to the government owned ones, and the real estate art museum is A4 Art Museum³⁴ mentioned beforehand in that essay. Being on the edge, growing from the crack, people's understanding and attitude about marginality sometimes aligns with the discourse that periphery communities could use marginality as a site of resistance, as Bell Hooks outlines in her writings on marginality.³⁵ But people seldom see marginality itself as a fountain of power. It doesn't aim at “winning the center for itself”, but it also doesn't see marginality as “irreducible” as Spivak does. By comparing, I don't mean to judge either side, but I want to point out more

³³ Cui Fuli, 2022 Summary: Wandering on the Edge of the System 崔付利, 2022 年度总结:游荡在系统的边缘 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8x8SdmpIFr6X1xU8ggEZgA>

³⁴ A4 Art Museum <http://www.a4am.cn/website/guide>
https://www.instagram.com/a4artmuseum_official/

³⁵ Hooks, Bell. "Marginality as a site of resistance." *Out there: Marginalization and contemporary cultures* 4 (1990): 341-343.

possibilities we can see and harness marginality. In many narratives, marginality has been seen as a stance, but seldom an agency, even though in reality it functions as such in multiple cases.

For instance, “behavior artists” are cautious in choosing props. Though “behavior art” may include materials other than the human body during the performance, and that item might be used for exhibition afterwards, “behavior art” does not aim at the object that can be presented in galleries and collections, therefore it seldom fits into the current commercial system like other traditional forms of art. That means it might not be able to have a certain group of audience, and it might not be able to develop or spread at the same pace with the commercialized society. However, none of the above qualities necessarily be seen as deficient, on the contrary, it preserves the conceptual feature of it, and it matches the rebellious and resistant positions of some of the artists. In many scenarios, contemporary artists play the role of the bold critic to earn space for free artistic expression and possibility for experimentation. Hence their targeted audience is not always the main public. Marginality in these scenarios are actually protective. One of the examples is The UP-ON Performance Art Archive in Chengdu, which doesn't present all of its documents to the public, so as to preserve a space for people inside this community to have a larger freedom of speech.

3 Taking Place and Taking Space

The history

"behavior art" in China sprung from individuals and associations in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau in the 1960s-1970s. Tehching Hsieh's piece "Jump" in Taiwan in 1973 is considered as one of the most representative early performance works. After Reform and Opening Up in 1978, contemporary art concepts and techniques from western world were introduced in China, leading to the heat of learning and imitating, and consequently, rebellion of traditions. Some of the most controversial pieces were created under this context between 1980s-1990s. Around 2000, several pieces of violence on the "behavior artists" themselves, on others, on animal and dead bodies aroused huge controversy, from the public, the art circle, the academia, and the government³⁶, what follows are multiple seriously criticizing articles and reports, even stigmatization. After that, "behavior art" became a sensitive and negative term. And it had been marginalized by the whole society, even art circle. After 2003, marketization and commercialization of art further squeezed the space for "behavior art" to grow. But accordingly, "behavior art" gained nourishment from reflection of this tough period of time. After the economic crisis across the globe and speed down of development of the art market around 2008, "behavior art" gradually received approval from museums, galleries, academia, and more.

Chengdu, unlike other metropolitan cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, is situated inland and is surrounded by mountains. So what is usually interpreted from that and goes into introduction, is that the relatively close geographic situation formed an authentic and unique

³⁶See BBC's report: China crackdown on 'violent' art
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1322993.stm>

culture that is not affected by outer influences as much as other plain cities did, and the long legendary irrigation system nurtured the agriculture, and bred a culture of abundance, relaxing and optimism. With a long history of domestic migration, Hu-Guang tian Sichuan(湖广填四川), throughout the Yuan dynasty to Qing dynasty, Chengdu is open and diversified. All that city image is also introduced to demonstrate the characteristic of its art: authentic, diversified, and close to the public. So unlike other cities where "behavior art" and the public are constantly in tension, Chengdu citizens are open to all kinds of strangeness and creativity.



Newspaper report about Sichuan Eight Oddities

On the street, with the public

The character of the city nurtures its art. It is because Chengdu is far away from the political center, Beijing, and the commercial center, Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, the art holds its independence, and from the periphery, it has more space than the crowded center

to grow itself. "Behavior art" in Chengdu is not bound to certain topics, and focuses on various themes, on nature, on life... And because the public ethos is open and diversified, "behavior art" in Chengdu has a very close relationship with the public since its day of birth. It looks at ordinary people's daily life, and speaks to the public, and the public speaks back.

Among the early pieces, "Keepers of the waters" was a major collaborative work between artists and activism from the US, Chengdu and Lhasa, Tibet, and had a long and international influence. It was considered as activism, public art, and "behavior art". The artists conducted a series of art creations including "Black and White", "Long Abandoned Water Standards", and "Washing River"... The creation lasted for years and drew the public's attention to the water pollution in local rivers, and achieved great results. The public, media and government engaged actively, and aroused both physical and educational urban construction.³⁷



Documentary Fragment: Keepers of the Waters, Chengdu, China, 1995 ³⁸

One of the most famous performance artists He Liping had many pieces that are daily, light, and humorous, among which "As Long as There's Sand in Your Heart, You're Always in the Maldives"³⁹ won heat and praise from the public, media, art circle and academia. In this work,

³⁷ Comprehensive introduction was made in Asia Art Archive: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/betsy-damon-archive-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu-and-lhasa-1995-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu/sort/title-asc>

³⁸ Watch the whole video from Asia Art Archive <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/betsy-damon-archive-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu-and-lhasa-1995-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu/object/documentary-fragment-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu-china-1995/sort/title-asc>

³⁹ See White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection <https://explore.dangrove.org/objects/3071>

He wore swimming trunks and a towel, walked on the street with sand on his shoulders, then dumped the sand on the intersection, and started enjoying the sun on the beach with a drink in his hand amid crowds on their commute. And after the piece went viral on the internet, a tourist agency sponsored him a real ticket to Maldives.



He Liping, As Long as There's Sand in Your Heart, You're Always in the Maldives!, 2015⁴⁰

Though Chengdu is peripheral in geography, and the artist community in Chengdu is marginal, from a different angle, it leaves large space for the "behavior art" to grow, at its own pace, towards its own direction, and thus, its connection with the public was built. Its marginality supported it to grow out of the margin.

⁴⁰ Screenshot from video in Hotel Asia Project 2016 http://www.hotelasia.cc/2016/artist/He_2016.html

4 Growing out of the Margin?

When Mr Zhou firstly taught “behavior art” class in Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, it was first of its kind in the fine art academy and drew huge and long-lasting attention from media and the public. It was not only a course, but a compulsory course that every student needed to take. And even in art school, voices to question "behavior art" still exist. A girl once told the professor that she didn't want to tell her parents that the school has this class, which might arouse negative feedback and even worries about her. Zhou Bin was the professor of that class, and in his book *Teaching and Learning of Performance Art*, he documented his thoughts and experience: one of the reasons why "behavior art" has been stigmatized is that the public doesn't have a way to have conversation or even learn about "behavior art".

Indeed, the refusal of commercialization in some sense closed a door for "behavior art"'s spread, generally speaking, nobody buys a "behavior" artwork, and it is unlike other performing arts which can be watched in theater or TV. And no institution works to promote it or narrate it to the public. The academia and art circle are separated from the public. Therefore, most of the information about "behavior art" was media that wanted to use the marginality of "behavior art" to attract attention and make a topic. Hence, Mr. Zhou believes that to include "behavior art" in the teaching system and academic discussion was a very positive practice for the future of "behavior art", and its relationship with the public. So along with the 4 years of teaching, official and commercial media made tons of reports about the course, and Mr Zhou adopted a collaborative attitude to respond to them. However, the course was started with a new leadership, after that leader was adjusted to another position, the course was also ended. After that, Mr Zhou only had short-term teaching sessions in other universities and hosted workshops from time to time.



“behavior art” practice in Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 2014

Beforehand, “street and avant-garde” is a word to summarize "behavior art" in Chengdu that is posed by renowned critic, curator, and scholar Gao Minglu⁴¹, and quoted many times in later conversations. Street is the place where the most famous pieces take place, it is also a word that reflects how Chengdu contemporary art grew its characteristic without an art academy inside this city at an early time. “Street” means it is on site and interacts with the public unavoidably, and vice versa, the public are willing to let it happen on the street. That’s why a "behavior art" work can be reported by the official press and TV show, that’s also why the first "behavior art" class was held in the southwest. But gaining approval from the official and adding itself into teaching is a step closer to the mainstream, it is also a step further away from the marginality it holds.

Since marginality bred so many possibilities, should we put a question mark to the phenomenon of “growing out of margin”? Actually many art critics have questioned it way earlier than I do. A4 art museum is one of the most prominent contemporary art museums in

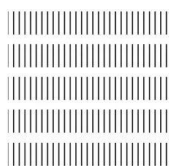
⁴¹ Gao Minglu. "Street and Avant-Garde" and Chengdu Narrative 高名潞.“街头前卫”与成都叙事[J].大艺术,2007(02):62.

Chengdu that has abundant financial support, wide influence, and high reputation, and is very supportive of "behavior art". It often hosts "behavior art" workshops and events, and also several exhibitions. In the end of 2019, it hosted a main exhibition "From Streets to Methodology, Performance Art in Southwest Area of China Since 2008", "Southwest" is a geographic location that usually refer to Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Chongqing, sometimes also include larger surrounding areas, and it is also a term used very often in academic writing. And 2008 is the year of the global financial crisis, and the May 12 Earthquake which occurred in Sichuan and deeply affected the politics, economy, and culture in this area and beyond. Back then, the local "behavior art" circle had already grown from "Sichuan Eight Oddities" to hundreds of people of at least two generations. In a media's critic of this exhibition, Wang Jiabei questioned the phenomenon of artists becoming leaders in academia and introducing "behavior art" into teaching. They noted that making contact with the mainstream world might harm the dynamic and wildness of "behavior art", and assimilate it into pure construction of language.

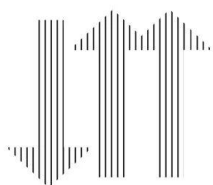
从街頭到語焉 2008年以来的西南行为艺术

FROM STREETS
TO METHODOLOGY

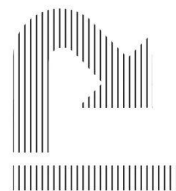
Performance Art in
Southwest Area of China
Since 2008



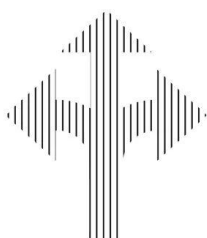
何利军
He Lijun



何晋斌
He Jabin



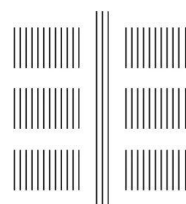
胡佳艺
Hu Jiayi



童文斌
Tong Wenbin

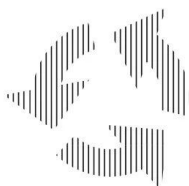


王彦鑫
Wu Yanxin



邢鑫
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周斌
Zhou Bin

艺术总监/孙莉
Artistic Director/ Sunny Sun

策展人/蓝庆伟
Curator/ Lan Qingwei

开幕:2019年11月23日(周六) 15:00
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主办:麓湖 A4美术馆
Organizer: LUXELAKES A4 Art Museum
地点:麓湖 A4美术馆一楼展厅
Venue: Exhibition hall of first floor, LUXELAKES A4 Art Museum

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The poster of the exhibition *From Streets To Methodology*

Another article quoted “Keepers of the waters” to point out that “behavior art” in Chengdu is close to the government and public when compared with Beijing’s, which earned it domestic approval, but consequently, it didn’t have the tension to reach international level. Stepping out of Sichuan is always the thing Sichuan people love to discuss but hesitate to practice. The abundant resources and pleasant lifestyle makes Sichuan people unwilling to leave their hometown, and as the “behavior art” circle is already constructed and has gained quite a lot

of achievement, many critics are warning the young generation of "behavior artists" not to be satisfied and refuse to progress.

But is expanding influence and gaining national, even international reputation the ultimate right answer? Is language construction completely contrary to artistic creation? Just because interacting with the mainstream is unavoidable during the development of "behavior art", should we then see it as a comprehensive and ever-changing existence, instead of labeling it as beneficial or harmful? More centrally, how might we balance growing out of marginality and preserving the vitality of marginality? Marginality is a fluid state, to navigate the fluidity of it is also a course for us to immerse ourselves within

Conclusion

Without the history of avant-gardes, Fluxus or Happenings, “behavior art” in China took the path of action/event and pointed to immediate social realities. Standing between live performance and fine art, “behavior art” shouldered the responsibility of playing the most rebellious role in contemporary art in China with its own narrative mechanism and body view. Which derives its marginality that has hugely different positionality with the marginality of narrative and stage-oriented performance art in the US. It’s hard for “behavior art” to grow without constructing its discipline and institution, during which process, it’s also hard to balance between sacrificing or keeping the marginality from which it was born. Keeping distance from the local and central political regime pushes art workers to international alliance, hence global research is crucial to finding a way out. However, there is no way “out” after globalization. Knowledge is situated. So this thesis is an attempt to find inspiration from situatedness.

A large part of this thesis comes from my inspiration of my most quotidian life. I was impressed by how an artform could relate and talk to so many facets of my everyday life, and willfully addressed my personal sentiments and reflections into this academic outgrowth. I am aware that part of my audience might not want to learn so much about my personal story and want to jump to theory or analysis. But I still insisted on my way, with half faith and half inconfidence. Because I wish we have a space to share and acknowledge our previous paths and living experiences. I believe that our own paths and stories shape our positionalities and approaches to a large extent, which might not be comprehensible at the similar level to all the

audiences, who do not come from the same place. And that is where untranslatability comes into being. But just as I stated throughout this thesis, I see untranslatability as constructive.

Untranslatability is constructive because we come from different places from which untranslatability is constructed. And the willingness to learn about other people's journey might be helpful to any cross-discipline/cross-media/cross-language comprehension. We understand our limitations and partiality better from our interactions with others. I only figured out gradually during my time outside of China, about what position China sits in, and how Chinese knowledge and discourses are situated. It is the same with myself. The process of learning about others is also a self-discovery journey. I understand myself better from things I see on others. Raising untranslatability gives me a chance to catch what usually passes by or ignored; learning about the untranslatable familiarizes me with what previously seems unreasonable, unacceptable, or non-negotiable; and scrutinizing untranslatables pushes me back to revisit my previous ideas and thoughts, and see how my history, my community, and my stands could seem incomprehensible to others.

This thesis connected artistic practice, art theory, and living experiences, and inspected "behavior art" in China from the lens of performance studies in the US, and extracted the term "untranslatability" from the intricate journey. My use of "untranslatability" is about art criticism and living experiences as much as it is about language and discourse. I am aware that untranslatability has its own theory that's not about performance art or everyday life, which I'm still learning about. And I hope this thesis could offer a new entrance, a possible aspect into the study of untranslatability, or a cross section to examine untranslatable study from other disciplines. If so, it will be my true honor. If not, I still feel content with this thesis its own. Because it offered me a place to speak out about the untranslatability I encounter in my

migrating experience, artistic creation, and academic exploration. And I believe that in my writing, people who had lived across cultures, languages and disciplines could find resonance; people who come from one discipline and are curious or interested in another could gain a fresh perspective.

One of the bonuses of combining my research with my personal life is that my research could carry on organically even after a project or a task is finished. And I believe it needs to be so. As in this writing, I haven't got down to the "USA" part in my title to the extent that reaches my standard. My group of terms, languages and perspectives are from the education I received in the East Coast US, but while I wanted to talk about the artworks, institutions, and more concrete stuff here, and start a comparative analysis, I found myself drowning into a swamp of discontinuity, therefore I turned to focus on untranslatability. I have only lived on this land for one and a half years and don't want to rush to write about things that I haven't known thoroughly. That's also why I didn't write about my internship in Mabou Mines. Though it is indeed helpful. I hope as my time of living on this land increases, and after I grow deeper connections and insights, I could be able to catch the ethos of this new world, and talk about performance art from this melting pot.

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