



Performance Art at Tian'anmen

Conducting performance art at Tian'anmen Square in Beijing is highly controversial and usually not allowed by officials. Despite constrictions, some Chinese and Hongkongnese artists have managed to conduct performances that reflect the role of Tian'anmen as a local memory site for both national and private identity. The understanding of these artworks and how they resonate with this specific space as site-dependent art, depend primarily on Mao's triple-presence in the Square (in visual, metaphorical and physical terms), and on the four major elements of performance art: the usage of artist's body/self, the site of the performance, the audience, and the materials used for a performance.

By Minna Valjakka

In this article, my aim is to clarify the complex socio-cultural factors that interact with the creation and interpretation of performance art occurring at Tian'anmen Square, the most important public space in Beijing, in the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ I will in particular discuss national/personal identity, and how it resonates with social/personal memories in a specific site, in order to construct the theoretical approach to this study. Building theoretically on Rudy Koshar, Paul Connerton and Lucy Lippard (Koshar 1998, Connerton 1989, Lippard 1997), I will first explain how both private and collective memories interrelate with specific sites and as a result become an essential part of national and personal identity. Drawing from this approach, I conclude that Tian'anmen can be understood as a complex and multilayered space where public and private notions overlap: in other words, how it becomes the local memory site for both national and private identity. Consequently, this site has become a relevant theme for contemporary Chinese artists.

Besides understanding how these artworks resonate in the specific space as site-dependent art, it is equally important to acknowledge other crucial elements that have impact on further interpretation, such as Mao's triple-presence in visual, metaphorical and physical terms, as well as the defining factors of performance art in China. After explaining these features, I go on to provide an in-depth analysis of four performances conducted at Tian'anmen by Young Hay (b. 1963), Han Bing (韩冰, b. 1974), Ma Yanling (马彦玲, b. 1966) and

Zheng Lianjie (郑连杰, b. 1962) as an illuminative case studies. Through them I aim to demonstrate, how art taking place at Tian'anmen is not only avant-garde art demystifying the political space through creating "counter images", as Wu Hung has indicated (Wu 2005, 165-233), but also that these performances reflect personal memories and private identities.

The local memory site for both national and private identity

Tian'anmen (天安门), the Gate of Heavenly Peace,² has become the primary symbol of the Chinese nation. Its status is interdependent with Tian'anmen Square (*Tian'anmen guangchang*, 天安门广场), the largest public square in the world. Together these two architectural entities constitute the most important site in the reconstruction of national identity³ in China, based on a deliberate visualization of its official history. As Anthony D. Smith has argued, instead of the nation being "imagined", as Benedict Anderson (1983) originally suggested, the nation is constructed with deliberate narration (Smith 1993, Smith 1999). Developing Smith's percep-

² Literally the name refers to the architectural structure through which people can today enter the Imperial City. In Chinese *men* means 'a gate'. However, in English it is accustomed to refer as Tian'anmen Gate. The usage of the concept *Tian'anmen* has become bifurcated. It is not always clear if it is used to denote the Gate, the Square or both of them. In this article *Tian'anmen* will be used to refer the whole area, the Square and the Gate together.

³ My understanding of 'national identity' derives from Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim. They have defined national identity as an ongoing, flux process, "the characteristic collective behavior of the national system as a whole, in interaction with other subnational, national, and international systems, flowing from the totality of shared attributes and symbols of a solidarity political group known as a 'nation-state'." (Dittmer & Kim 1993b, 240)

¹ This is based on a chapter in my forthcoming PhD dissertation, *Many Faces of Mao Zedong*, in which I research contemporary Chinese art relating to Chairman Mao during the years 1976-2006. In the chapter "Tian'anmen, Mao and Contemporary Art" I provide a more detailed analysis of this issue, including artworks that are depicting the Square, not merely happening on it. See Valjakka 2011.



tion further, Rudy Koshar has demonstrated how constructing the nation and national identity is closely related to spatially and historically specific spaces and objects, such as buildings and monuments. Furthermore, memory is not only used to legitimize the historical past, but also the future of the nation. In other words: "national identity is seen as a product of contest and negotiation involving the alignment of past, present and future in some meaningful relationship" (Koshar 1998: 9). This meticulously designed narration of the nation reflecting both past and present political ideology is clearly visible also at Tian'anmen today.

The historical significance of the Gate was deliberately utilized as well as redefined with the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949, when Mao gave a declaration speech at the balcony of the Gate. The meaning of the vast open space in front of the Gate, known today as Tian'anmen Square, has been gradually transformed to symbolize the new government. Transformations of space, public transportation and cultural meanings in Beijing started already at the beginning of the twentieth century with the Republican government (see i.e., Dong 2003), but the major transformation of Tian'anmen did not start until the Communist era with its significant architectural modification in the 1950s. The site was constructed to reinforce the power of the Party with a careful planning of surrounding institutions and the historical monuments situated on the Square (Steinhardt 1990: 179-184; Wu 1991; Wu 2005: 15-50, 56-81).

At Tian'anmen the political (re-)construction of social memory is still an obvious aim of the government. It is the place where, to borrow Paul Connerton's words about social memory, "the images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order" (Connerton 1989: 3). Tian'anmen is a primary example of Connerton's suggestion of how personal memories are situated within mental spaces, dependent on material space and provided by a particular group. Therefore, images of social spaces give an illusion of an unchanging society and a "rediscovering of the past in the present" (Connerton 1989: 37). This personal and social continuity is strongly emphasized at Tian'anmen where the notion of imperial times also still lingers.

In the same way for Lucy Lippard, the concept of the "local" as a physical place is intertwined with personal memories. For her, "local" is a place which is based on the interconnection of culture, history, ideology and nature, and experienced and understood from the inside. It is the result of the space, where culture is lived, and therefore the sense of identity is primarily bound to

the places and the histories they embody (Lippard 1997: 7-11). In other words, what we are and how we experience ourselves is closely connected to specific, physical sites that we consider important in our personal history. Although the presence of nature can be questioned in the context of Tian'anmen as an urban space, in other ways Tian'anmen fulfills Lippard's notion of the "local" as a lived space where history, culture and ideology are experienced from the inside. Building on these discussions, I argue that at Tian'anmen, a personal, collective, as well as national past, present and future are intertwined with each other to construct both national and personal identity. As a result, Tian'anmen has become the local memory site for both national and personal identity, which is used also to legitimize and negotiate the future.

Site-dependent art at/of Tian'anmen

Wu Hung's (2005: 165-233) preliminary theoretical framework focusing on the relations of art, identity and memories at Tian'anmen, is particularly useful. Wu indicates that because official art has mystified the space, the aim of contemporary artists has thus been to demystify it through creating "counter images". This iconoclastic movement has turned Tian'anmen from subject to site, a combat zone for art and hence a "space of avant-garde". Wu suggest that artists have used three basic strategies: "1. to rationalize or objectify Mao and Tiananmen; 2. to reframe Mao and Tiananmen with contemporary references and /or the artist's personal experience; and 3. to 'empty' Mao and Tian'anmen for perpetuity." (Wu 2005: 190) Nevertheless, he also emphasizes that the scope of works is far more varied than these three strategies.

Wu's illuminating observations are a valuable starting point. However, while Wu also discusses the importance of memories, both private and social, he sees Tian'anmen primarily as a *political* space which is both "an architectonic embodiment of political ideology" and "an architectural site activating political action and expression", which therefore "provides the locus of coalescence for political expression, collective memory, identity and history" (Wu 2005: 9, 16). Yet while Tian'anmen is above all a political space, it is also significant for people as a local memory site where everyday history and culture are lived. Not all the memories there are political. Some are private memories, and thus Tian'anmen is also interrelated to private narratives. Consequently, it has various meanings to people on the personal level Wu's notion of "counter image" does include artworks that reveal personal experiences too.



Although it seems that for Wu, these artworks are nonetheless primarily political statements.

However, due to non-political personal memories and meanings, the level of political intentions or connotations in the artworks varies greatly, depending on the format, structure, material, composition, and the main subject-theme of the works. It is also important to remember that a social statement is not necessarily a political statement, even in the visual arts. Because Tian'anmen is a political space, it is perhaps not possible to create a non-political artwork relating to Tian'anmen, although some artists emphasize that their art is not intended as a political statement. However, to regard *all* the art relating to Tian'anmen as representative of an avant-garde that aims to debase Mao and Tian'anmen would be an oversimplification. The artists are not only deconstructing, but also *negotiating* the official narrative interrelated to this site, by articulating various private and social issues. For some, the significance of Tian'anmen as a site of national and personal identity is explored in relation to the sentiment of belonging to somewhere. As Lippard has suggested, a sense of place is "the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation" in postmodern society (Lippard 1997: 7). This complex question of belonging and alienation is also visible in the artworks.

In addition, although a growing number of artists have conducted performance art at the Square; contemporary Chinese art is still more often *depicting* the Square than *happening* on it. The situation is based on political realities: it is not at all so easy to conduct performance art on a tightly supervised Square. In reality, the Square is *not* a site for public actions by private persons: its role as a *public space* is highly restricted. Domination of the public space can be varied among popular, mass, high, official and corporal cultures, depending on the structure and location of the space (Lippard 1997: 248). Tian'anmen is obviously a governmental structure and it is therefore dominated by official culture, which also restricts, although does not completely deny, the existence of popular or mass culture at the site.⁴ However,

⁴ The need or notion of an open public space in China has been different from European city planning. Many scholars note the lack of a public open space, although Xu Yinong (2000) provocatively argues that the phenomenon of a public square is a European one, thereby posing the issue of whether its non appearance in imperial China is in fact relevant. Xu 2000, 192-94. Interestingly, however, a notion of a public political space did develop to some degree in the twentieth century. In the PRC the concept of a square (*guangchang*) was very political, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, and they were em-

ployed with many political activities usually organized by the government (see i.e., Wu 2005: 22).

the level of restrictions and supervision also vary according to important celebration days or other (political) happenings in Beijing. The role of Tian'anmen is in constant flux, but due to its strict limitations, to denote it as a space of the avant-garde is as yet still too optimistic.

Performance art can be site-specific,⁵ when the meaning of the work is clearly based on the interaction between the artist and the physical site (Kaye 2000: 1; Kwon 2004[2002]: 11). Conducting a performance on Tian'anmen Square always has a specific meaning itself, as will be shown with detailed analysis of following works. The concept of "site" in site-specific art has also been broadened from denoting a *physical* location, which is grounded and fixed, to an ungrounded, fluid and virtual, *discursive* vector (Kwon 2004 [2002]: 29-30). This redefinition does not exclude the physical location as a site, but shows how a site can be for example a theoretical concept or social cause. With this broadened concept of site-specific art, artworks depicting Tian'anmen, not just happening on it, such as manipulated photographs and paintings, can also be regarded as site-specific. Consequently, I argue that artworks relating to Tian'anmen are not only site-referential or site-specific, but represent *site-dependent* art on two levels. Firstly, the meaning of performance at Tian'anmen Square derives directly from the environmental context, the *physical* site. Besides being dependent on the actual location, performance art also operates concurrently on the second level of the concept of a "site", a discursive immaterial level that constitutes the dialogue between contemporary art and Tian'anmen.

Although both levels are highly interesting, I here concentrate on works that are *happening* at the Square: that is, the performances. Among the many I have found, I choose four works, which provide interesting differences in detailed analysis, due to their variety concerning nationality, gender, and the equipment they use. Young Hay is an artist from Hong Kong and Zheng Lianjie has worked in New York since the 1990s, while Ma Yanling and Han Bing, both work and live in Beijing. The scarcity of women Chinese artists compared with the male Chinese artists, especially in international

ployed with many political activities usually organized by the government (see i.e., Wu 2005: 22).

⁵ According to Nick Kaye "a 'site-specific work' might articulate and define itself through properties, qualities or meaning produces in specific relationships between an 'object' or 'event' and a position it occupies." (Kaye 2000: 1). Kwon has also discussed this form of site-specific art based on an actual location (Kwon 2004[2002]: 11).



exhibitions, is a known fact. I did not choose Ma Yanling merely due to her gender, but also because her work is daring. In addition, I aimed to bring forward artists who have not been included in previous studies concerning art at Tian'anmen or for which I have found new interesting information. Besides using relevant literature, I have personally conducted interviews in person, via phone, or through email with all these four artists, in order to include their own opinions in my research.

In order to understand performance art taking place at the Tian'anmen, it is also essential to be aware, in addition to the abovementioned socio-cultural context, of some relevant material factors that influence the interpretation of the works. Before analysing the artworks, I will address these material factors, namely the triple-presence of Mao, as well as the interrelation of body/self, site, audience and materials used in a performance act.

Mao's triple-presence

The interrelation of Chairman Mao and Tian'anmen Gate became unquestionable during Mao's lifetime (Wu 2005: 56). Mao's physical presence during his short visits to Tian'anmen Gate since 1949 changed its value. It has been suggested that places where Mao even visited, including Tian'anmen, were regarded as "holy" places that strengthened strong emotions to Mao (Zuo 1991: 103). Regardless that the main idea of the Party was to liberate the people from the feudalistic past, Mao Zedong himself cleverly utilized imperial traditions and legitimized his own power with a site previously reserved for imperial edicts. The solid relationship of Tian'anmen Gate and Chairman Mao was initially established with the placement there of a large facial portrait of Mao. Consequently, as Wu has analysed, "the two together constitute an image that has become the authoritative symbol of the state", a "composite image" (Wu 2005: 53).

The importance of Tian'anmen today is still interdependent on Chairman Mao's *triple-presence* as visual, metaphorical and physical. Besides his "living" portrait at the Gate and a "deceased" embalmed body in the mausoleum, Mao's calligraphic writing is present on the surface of the Monument of the People's Heroes. Even more importantly, they are all situated on the historical, north-south axis, which runs through the city

and the Square.⁶ Today, the presence of a portrait, which depicts Mao as "alive", is more easily visible than his body sheltered in the mausoleum, or his calligraphic writing. Mao's portrait at the Gate appears as an incessant feature.

However, whether Mao's portrait has been permanently displayed or not is an intriguing question. Contrary to Wu's claim that the portrait has been displayed most of the year since 1949 (Wu 2005, 70-78), Daniel Leese (2006: 23) suggests that before the Cultural Revolution, Mao's portrait was hung at the Gate only for May 1 (Workers Day) and October 1 (National Day) celebrations. The placement of the portrait seems to be a more complex issue that either of these previous studies reveals. At least according to original news photographs, Mao's portrait was at the Gate in July 1950 but not in June 1955.⁷ It is possible that the absence of the portrait was due to yearly cleaning, but it might also be that the display of Mao's image was not yet a stable presence in the 1950s. Nevertheless, today the portrait seems so interconnected with the Gate that even to imagine it absent is bewildering. In practice, the memory of Mao is inseparable from the memory of the Gate. Consequently, the portrait itself is one essential object through which the construction of the nation and national identity has been made. It has also become interrelated with personal memories: Mao's official portrait is without a doubt the most popular background setting for private photographs taken by the millions of visitors, foreigners and Chinese alike, at the Square. It is also the most common background setting for performance art. Besides the fact that the portrait represents Mao, the CCP and the nation, it is also a significant monument in which an alignment of past, present and future is clearly present.

⁶ This cardinal axiality is a defining factor of Beijing deriving from imperial times. According to ancient norms guiding the construction of a city in China, the north-south axis is the central point for city planning. The north-south axis was also the most important road running through the imperial city and the palace. Only the emperor could travel through the whole length of the road and on the middle part of it. The north-south axis was the so-called way of power. For further analysis of the sacred significance involved in city planning see Meyer 1991: 34-47; Wu 2005, 19: 25.

⁷ See news photographs in a series entitled "Memories of 60 years of the Tian'anmen Square" (天安门广场 60 年记忆) published by Sohu.com <<http://pic.news.sohu.com/group-185598.shtml#m=b&g=185598&p=1518656>>.



Defining factors of performance art at Tian'anmen

In China, performance art (行为艺术 *xingwei yishu*) has vigorously developed in a very specific socio-cultural context since its emergence in the 1980s (Berghuis 2006). With performance art, I denote an artistic activity which is usually dependent on the interaction of four defining features: the usage of artist's body/self, the site of the performance, the audience, and the materials used for a performance.⁸ As Amelia Jones (1998: 12-13, 41) has suggested, the body is the locus of a dispersed self and in body art the body/self is both the object and the subject.⁹ In a Chinese context, I consider the interrelatedness of self and body as an essential feature. As it is commonly suggested, and discussed in detail by Berghuis, the Cartesian separation of body and mind is not applicable in the Chinese cultural context. Berghuis has suggested a concept of "the role of a mediated subject of acting body in art", which offers "a discourse on performance that incorporates phenomenological perspectives on how the body *inhabits* the space, and discusses artists who carry on the process of art practice through action" (Berghuis 2006: 18).¹⁰ In the limited context of performance art at Tian'anmen, the employment of one's own body cannot be done in the same way as in performances happening in galleries or art spaces: it is not possible to conduct a performance involving nudity, damaging the body, or using body fluids at the Square. However, I consider the concept of body/self to be an essential part in the performances at Tian'anmen, because it emphasizes its mediated intersubjectivity.

The importance of the second feature, the site of a performance, usually lies in its relevance to the meaning of the display (Kaye 2000). The performance can be inter-

⁸ As derived from discussions that emphasize the interrelation of the artist's body and self in a performance art, I understand the concept body/self to indicate this inseparable interrelation. I am aware that the concept of performance art is contested and there are various interpretations how it can or cannot be defined (For illuminating discussions see Carlsson 1996; Carlsson 2004; Goldberg 1998; Jones 1998).

⁹ In her well-known study of body art, Amelia Jones indicates that performance art is one category of "body art". The concept of body/self is therefore also applicable to performance art (Jones 1998: 12-13, 41).

¹⁰ To differentiate the varying forms of the usage of body Berghuis has suggested the concept of body/flesh to clarify the recent practices in which artists use their body as a primary medium. For him, "flesh art" would be a more appropriate concept for "real time" performance art, in which artists use their own bodies (Berghuis 2006: 122-127).

preted very differently if it is conducted in a private flat, public bus, or semi-public art space. In addition, in China, the place strongly influences the issue of censorship. If performances are conducted in remote art areas, like in an artistic village Songzhuang, restrictions by officials are less likely. However, exceptions have occurred and despite the remote location of a performance, it can also be interrupted by officials (Berghuis 2006: 19, 177-178, 199-200). In the context of Tian'anmen, both the meaning of the work and the possible censorship it faces are interdependent of the site and its socio-political importance.

Besides the body/self and the site, the presence of an audience in a performance art event is usually considered highly relevant. According to Marvin Carlson (1996: 198-199), it is essential that performance is experienced by an individual in a group which enables the involvement of the viewer. However, restrictions on performance art have provoked Chinese performance artists to conduct their acts in privacy and then distribute documentation to audiences, although the presence of the audience is still preferred. With the secondary reproductions, the possible audience is multiplied when the documentation is later displayed in an exhibition. It is important to acknowledge that to look at documentation of a performance is different from viewing the performance act itself *in situ*. As Meiling Cheng (2001: xxvi) suggests, a prosthetic performance, based on documentation, circulates information of the source performance, but it cannot restore or supplant the original act. The crucial difference lies in the presence/absence of the audience and in the connection/disruption of the relation between artist/body, time and space. Some information is always lost in the documentation of a performance due to the limited perspective and format. However, documentation can also be used to emphasize some specific moments and aspects. Furthermore, in the context of Tian'anmen documentation is the only way to attract audience and circulate information about the act. The question of the presence of the audience for a performance act at Tian'anmen is a double-edged issue: to draw wide attention to a performance would bring high risks to the performance artist(s) and the possible assistant(s) documenting the performance.



Performances at the Square



Young Hay, *Bonjour, Young Hay (After Courbet)* (copyright by the artist)

Rather than using only his body, Young Hay (b. 1963) from Hong Kong, decided to employ an object in his performance at the Square. The performance *Bonjour, Young Hay (After Courbet)*, is consisted of four parts performed in different cities: in Hong Kong in 1995, in New York and in Berlin in 1998, and finally in Beijing in 2000. In this series of performances, Young Hay is carrying a large, empty canvas on his back and walking on the streets, thus creating "a visual dialogue with people, architectural spaces, history and political taboos." The walks were planned but sometimes he also improvised in response to circumstances, political constraints and the social environment (Young Hay, email to author, 24 May 2009). Improvisation became crucial in the context of Tian'anmen Square, where Young encountered difficulties while conducting the performance: both guards and police with civilian clothing tried to hinder Young entering the Square. Although Young told them that he was a painter with a canvas and a paint box, just like Gustav Courbet, the police were nervous. Several police officers searched his paint box repeatedly and they claimed that the canvas Young was carrying was too big. "They finally decided I should leave. And I left quietly" (Young Hay, email to author, 24 May 2009).

The sensitivity of the police was also due to the annual meeting of the party in the People's Assembly Hall that same day. To guard the Square was therefore especially careful and Young was not allowed to go close to the Gate. Young also explained that his biggest regret was that he could not perform under Mao's portrait, as he had planned and rehearsed. His ultimate aim was to replace Mao's portrait with his white canvas and get this documented with photographs. In addition, Young usually had one photographer to document the performance, but in Beijing, he had an additional one, who

could document the act while the primary photographer was blocked by the police. However, Young Hay managed to stay at the Square for about twenty minutes, while "luckily, the assistant was following me and took some [of the most] precious shots I have ever made" (Young Hay, email to author, 24 May 2009).

According to David Clarke, Young's performance was "a direct testing of the vulnerability of Tian'anmen Square", although the blank canvas "was completely lacking in any literal content and so could hardly be described as politically subversive in the ordinary sense" (Clarke 2001: 206-208). Young Hay clarified that he chose to perform at the Square with an empty canvas, because instead of adding more marks to the place, which is "filled with passion, pride, joy, tears, blood, and the curse of the ghosts echo in the sky," his canvas "created a subtraction, a VOID." The aim was to provoke people to use their imagination, but "I found that imaginary was a taboo in the Square" (Young Hay, email to author, 24 May 2009). The lack of a clear meaning demands interaction from the viewer to read the work in a close relation to the social and historical context of the location. In the question of Tian'anmen Square, the emptiness of the canvas provokes the viewer, depending on his/her background, to ponder various issues. It can remind us, for example, about the erasure of visual and literal references to the incident in 1989. The empty void is clearly a sensitive issue in this context. The emptiness of the canvas can be also seen to reflect the highly complex personal relationship to this specific historical space. Especially for an older generation, Tian'anmen is intertwined with positive and negative memories and the personal meaning of the Tian'anmen is a complicated issue. As Young Hay himself said, it represents an unresolved Oedipus complex and he has deliberately tried to distance himself from this place since the 1989 incident (Young Hay, email to author, 24 May 2009).



Han Bing, *Walking the Cabbage* (copyright by the artist)

In the same year, 2000, a Chinese contemporary artist, Han Bing (韩冰 b. 1974) started his series of performances, *Walking the Cabbage* (*Liu Baicai* 溜白菜) in Beijing. Han has been walking a Chinese cabbage on a leash on the daily basis for months in several places around Beijing, across the nation and even abroad, for example, in Japan. He has performed in a large variety of public social contexts continuing until 2006. The performance is well known also outside art circles and it has provoked heated discussion about art (see Berghuis 2006: 271). The photograph Han has chosen to be distributed depicts Han standing in the axis of Tiananmen facing the viewer. Han's posture is rather relaxed and a Chinese cabbage is on his right side on the ground. The leash is not tight and there is no notion of movement as in some other photographs documenting Han's performances with a cabbage. The portrait of Mao is not visible in this photograph, because it is obscured by a passer-by. Han Bing clarified that for him the visibility of the portrait was not a relevant issue. He chose the one he liked best among the many to be distributed (Han Bing, interview 6 June 2009). Nevertheless, this image reveals one of the problems of documenting the performance: it always limits the perception. If a viewer had been on the Square, the visibility of Mao's portrait behind Han Bing would firstly depend on a viewer's position.

The defining factor in this performance at the Square is that Han is consciously standing on the central axis, which refers to power in this specific space. The meaning of the work derives from larger oeuvre of Han's art.

He has employed various media to explore the issues of modernization in China today. Because Han was born in the mid-1970s, he does not have personal experiences from the Cultural Revolution era, but instead he has grown up during the years of very rapid social change. With *Walking the Cabbage*, Han can be seen questioning the changing social values and the ever-growing difference between the urban and rural populations. After all, Chinese cabbage has been – and still is – commonly used as basic food, especially for ordinary rural people. With his performances conducted in public spaces where contemporary art is not usually visible, Han has engaged ordinary rural and urban people who do not have any contact with the contemporary art to participate into the performances. As a result, Han has provoked people to question the relation of everyday life and art in China.



Ma Yanling, *Gun* (copyright by the artist)

A very different set of images have been created by a female artist, Ma Yanling (马彦玲, b. 1966) with her series of performances entitled *Gun* (*Qiang* 枪), which started in 2003 and are still ongoing. The *Gun* series consists of numerous performances on public settings in Beijing, Shanghai and in Tokyo. In the performances, Ma aims at her own head with a fake gun initiating a suicide. Shu Yang has analyzed that Ma in this performance explores the relation of suicide and the concept of dignity to a despairing individual (*Ma Yanling*. s.a., 25). Some of the images, however, show Ma Yanling smiling, so the notion of a desperate person becomes questionable. Although the intention of killing herself is obvious, a further analysis can be based on the different settings where Ma is performing. The meaning of killing oneself is different according to the context of a bus, supermarket or Tian'anmen Square under the official portrait of Mao.¹¹

¹¹ Ma Yanling has created a vast variety of images within the *Gun* series. The majority of the works are quickly performed



Ma knows that conducting this kind of performance, especially on Tian'anmen Square, could be dangerous for her and the photographer, but so far she has not encountered any serious trouble with her performances (Ma Yanling, interview 17 June 2008). The obvious reference to violence with a gun, although a fake one, is aggravating in China where guns and violent criminality are still very rare. Even more provocative, the performance is on the Square with its status and historical references. Ma clarified that the photographs are very quickly shot, and at least once, the fact that the photographer was a westerner prevented the guard on the Square to demand the photographs to be erased. Some of the photographs have also been exhibited in galleries in mainland China. Ma Yanling emphasized that for her the performance is *not* at all a political statement. For her, the primary idea of the performance is more like a game, to show people that she could do something that was considered impossible. The second idea in the performance is to play with the idea of the suicide, to show that it can actually be a joyful act, not filled with agony. For her it is also interesting to explore the reactions of people, who do not usually realize that the gun is a fake (Ma Yanling, interview 17 June 2008).

A performance made by a woman emphasizes the shift of women artists from the passive subject of inner space, which has usually been related to women, to become visible agents of the active public space – a space usually controlled by men. Although for Ma herself the performance is not a political act, the meaning of the work derives nevertheless from the context of the place. As a result, the series of images from these repeated performances on the Square can be seen to question the historical era and the status of women in it. The images can also be seen to represent the confusion of a Chinese woman living in contemporary society with mixed aims for the future, even as its Maoist history is fading to the background. In these works, the main issue is the notion of self-identity: what she was taught to be and what she is facing in the historically changing socio-political context.

such as the ones at the Square. Some are, however, more carefully staged to depict Ma dead on the ground with clothing and hair deliberately set around her.



Zheng Lianjie, *Time/Line-2000* (copyright by the artist)

A highly personal item, a family photograph, was chosen by Zheng Lianjie (郑连杰, b. 1962) for his performance at the Tian'anmen in 2000. In the performance, *Time/Line-2000* (*Jiazhu Suiyue*, 家族岁月), Zheng held a studio photo taken from Zheng's family in 1957 with his own son in front of the Gate.¹² According to Zheng, Tian'anmen is a very specific symbol (*fu hao tebie de zhong* 符号特别的重) for him personally, and had a special impact on him during his childhood. Due to a bad family background, Zheng was not allowed to participate with his schoolmates in the festivities arranged at Tian'anmen. When his father passed away in 2000, Zheng decided to create this performance to honour his father's memory. The family photograph Zheng Lianjie chose is taken before he was born and because Zheng himself is not depicted in the old family photo, it has a very important meaning to Zheng. It expresses the history before Zheng and therefore, he decided to include himself and his son with this old photograph by taking a new photo. For Zheng, this old photograph reveals how the historical continuum has been artificially cut (Zheng Lianjie, phone interview 21 May 2009). Social changes after 1957, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, changed everything and many families were separated. Children were encouraged to be primarily loyal to the Party, not to their parents. The turbulent years were filled for many with negative experiences, and can be seen as an interruption to the peaceful, historical continuum. Zheng further clarified that as well as this interruption, personal voices were also omitted. For Zheng, contemporary art should ex-

¹² Image reproduced by Wu (2005, 12) differs from the image reproduced Li et al. 2007, figure 44 and at the Goedhuis Gallery webpage. Also the title differs and Wu uses *Family History*, while in Li et al. and the gallery webpage the work is entitled as *Timeline*. I have chosen to use the title which was used by Zheng Lianjie himself in his email. Zheng email to author 25 April 2009.



press the personal sufferings of individuals during recent history: personal voices are the most important ones. In addition, Zheng felt that the work was still unfinished. He thus returned to Tian'anmen in 2004 with his family members to create new images for this work (Zheng Lianjie, phone interview 21 May 2009).

What makes this image intriguing is that the background in the family photo is a painted prop depicting the Gate *without* Mao's portrait. Background images and other items to set up an acquired setting in a studio were often used, and they usually depict the popular places of the period in question. It is not unusual that Mao's portrait is absent from the images taken in the 1950s. However, in this performance the emptiness of the Gate in the family photograph creates an interesting comparison between the past, the present and the future, something represented by Zheng's son. According to Wu, the performance indicated "the shared political experiences of the family" (Wu 2005, 12). However, I suggest that in the light of Zheng's personal account of the work's background, it can be seen representing the rebuilding of self-identity through family history, and especially through the patriarchal lineage. Nevertheless, it also touches upon broader social issues in relation to self-expression, raising a question about the meaning of Tian'anmen at a personal level. It is also possible to consider that this image provokes a contemplation of the incessant presence of Mao's portrait at Tian'anmen Gate.

Conclusions

Mao's portrait at the Gate has become a touchstone of national identity and collective memory. It has been sanctioned as the only stable thing in the radically changing society. Performances at the Square are usually, if not always, made in relation to it. The significance of Mao's portrait is clearly revealed by works that might be suggesting the erasure or replacement of the portrait. Dittmer and Kim (1993a: 29) indicate that crises in the national self-definition are likely to occur if the "the consensually agreed-upon national developmental trajectory is thrown open to fundamental question". The removal of Mao's portrait would cause this kind of crisis in self-definition in China, because it would question the historical basis of the nation-state.

As I have discussed, although Mao's portrait is obviously a defining factor at Tian'anmen, the overall importance and meaning of the specific site is very complex. Without a doubt, it is a local memory site for both national and private identity, and which means that the site-dependent art there causes various issues to be

thrown up for negotiation. The meaning of performance art at Tian'anmen does indeed primarily derive from the site, but is interdependent with the usage of the body/self and the materials chosen by the artists. Consequently, the levels of political meanings vary accordingly. To perform with a gun, albeit a fake one, is far more provocative and might cause terror, whereas to walk a Chinese cabbage on a lead, primarily would invite bafflement, even amusement on the part of a possible audience. The site-dependence was further investigated in the way three of these artists conducted a series of performances. To perform in a different location, in a different city, or even in a different country, would alter the readings of these performances. Like Young Hay's white canvas, performances above all reflect the socio-cultural meaning derived from each specific site.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict 1991[1983]. *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. London & New York: Verso.
- Berghuis, J. Thomas. 2006. *Performance Art in China*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited.
- Carlsson, Marvin. 1996. *Performance: a Critical Introduction*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Clarke, David. 2002[2001]. *Hong Kong Art. Culture and Decolonization*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cheng, Meiling. 2001. *In Other Los Angeles: Multicentric Performance Art*. Ewing, NJ: University of California Press.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dittmer, Lowell & Kim, Samuel S. 1993a. "In Search of a Theory of National Identity." In *China's Quest for National Identity* ed. Lowell Dittmer & Samuel S. Kim, pp. 1-31. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Dittmer, Lowell & Kim, Samuel S. 1993b. "Whither China's Quest for National Identity" In *China's Quest for National Identity* ed. Lowell Dittmer & Samuel S. Kim, pp. 237-290. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.



Dong, Madeleine Yue. 2003. *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories*. Ewing, NJ: University of California Press.

Goldberg, RoseLee. 1998. *Performance: Live Art since 1960*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Ed. and trans. Lewis Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jones, Amelia. 1998. *Body Art. Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.

Kaye, Nick. 2000. *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation*. London & New York: Routledge.

Koshar, Ruby. 1998. *Germany's Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Kwon, Miwon. 2004 [2002]. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge (Mass.) & London: MIT Press.

Leese, Daniel. 2006. *Performative Politics and Petrified Image – The Mao Cult during China's Cultural Revolution*. Ph.D. thesis. School of Humanities and Social Sciences, International University Bremen.

Li, Lillian M., Alison J. Dray-Novey, & Haili Kong. 2007. *Beijing. From Imperial Capital to Olympic City*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lippard, Lucy. 1997. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of the Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press.

Ma Yanling. s.a. Artist's catalogue. Beijing: Front Line Contemporary.

Meyer, Jeffrey F. 1991. *The Dragons of Tiananmen. Beijing as a Sacred City*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Smith, Anthony, D. 1993. "The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?" in *Reimagining the Nation*, ed. By Marjorie Ringrose & Adam J. Lerner, pp. 7-28. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Smith, Anthony, D. 1999. *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Steinhardt, Nancy Shatzman. 1990. *Chinese Imperial City Planning*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Valjakka, Minna. Forthcoming [2011]. *Many Faces of Mao Zedong*. PhD dissertation. University of Helsinki. Finland.

Wu, Hung, 1991. "Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments." In *Representations*. No. 35, Special Issue: Monumental Histories. 84-117. University of California Press.

Wu, Hung. 2005. *Remaking Beijing*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Xu Yinong. 2000. *The Chinese City in Space and Time. The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou*. University of Hawai'i Press. Honolulu.

Zuo, Jiping. 1991. "Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China." *Sociological Analysis*. Vol. 52 No. 1. 99-110.

Interviews

Han Bing. Artist. Beijing. 6 June 2009.

Ma Yanling. Artist. Beijing. 17 June 2008.

Zheng Lianjie. Artist. New York. 21 May 2009. Phone interview.

Email messages

Young Hay. Artist. Hong Kong. Two email messages to author. 24 May 2009.

Zheng Lianjie. Artist. New York. Email message to author. 24 April 2009.

Internet sources:

Sohu.com. "Memories of 60 years of the Tian'anmen Square" (天安门广场 60 年记忆)

<<http://pic.news.sohu.com/group-185598.shtml#m=b&g=185598&p=1518656>>. Last accessed 8 December 2010.