

London Evening Standard

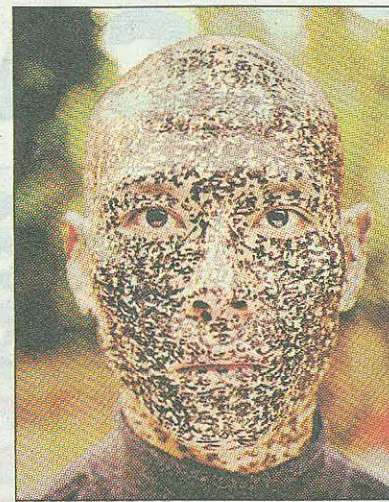
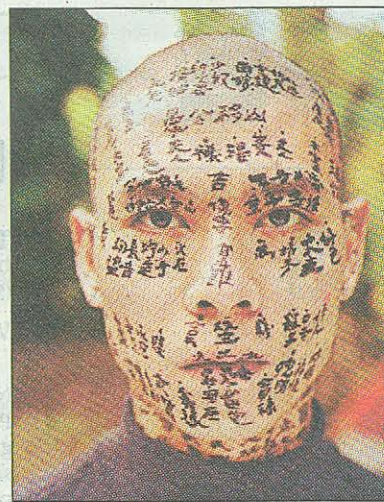
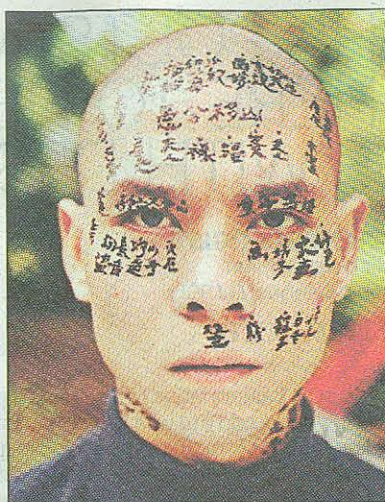
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THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2009 EVENING STANDARD

London Life Visual Art



Characterful: the first three of Family Tree, part of a performance piece in New York in 2000

WHAT A PERFORMANCE

The genius of Chinese artist Zhang Huan is better represented by a fascinating new book than by the two live pigs in his new show

WHAT little I have so far seen of contemporary Chinese art compels me to condemn almost all of it as bathetic mimicry of Western trends and artists known only indirectly from reports in magazines. Mao's Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 and the cultural impoverishment that was its immediate consequence are now sufficiently distant to have been almost forgotten, but it must be argued that with so much destruction of visual arts that were the ancestral Chinese inheritance – a thousand regional cultures developed over several thousand years – it was inevitable that any new manifestation of painting and sculpture would be grafted onto the lively and profitable roots well-established in the West. When the Saatchi Gallery showed us Chinese echoes of Peter Doig, Ron Mueck, Chuck Close, Walt Disney and their ilk, it was to reveal plain plagiarism and the further enfeebling of the feeble by a hundred artists hardly worth a second glance.

There was, however, one exception – Zhang Huan, an artist widely known by the Serota Tendency as the Chinese Damien Hirst and by its American equivalent as the Chinese Andy Warhol, though I think him a better, wiser and more contemplative artist than either of these Western models and far closer to being the Chinese Joseph Beuys. Beuys was the most thoughtful, sincere, innovative, innocent and visionary of the three most influential Western artists of the 20th century but all these qualities were lost in the work of innumerable hack imitators – until now, two decades or so after his death, Zhang Huan emerges as his only honest heir.

Beuys, who did not set out to provoke, was nevertheless proud to be provocative. His intention was to restore what he thought to be the role of shaman to the artist, generating in himself and his audiences energies that were instinctive and constructive, though as impossible to define or harness as the physical works were impossible to analyse and fully comprehend. In his implausible mysticism he was as

Brian Sewell



EXHIBITION OF THE WEEK

ZHANG HUAN
White Cube, SW1

mad as William Blake and as remarkable in the symbolical force of his work. Now, with Zhang, we have a third mystical madman to make a great triumvirate of the beneficently bonkers.

Zhang Huan was born in 1965 (the same year as Damien Hirst) in Anyang, some 300 miles south of Beijing, and could never have encountered Beuys himself, but at some point in the years 1984-88 when he was studying painting and art history in nearby Kaifeng, he learned of him, and when he moved to New York in 1998, his first major works there were physically, intellectually and wholly in the spirit of Beuys. I understand that he is grudging in acknowledging this debt, but references to his predecessor are too obvious to deny.

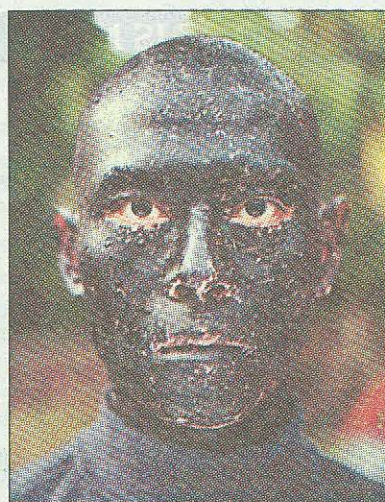
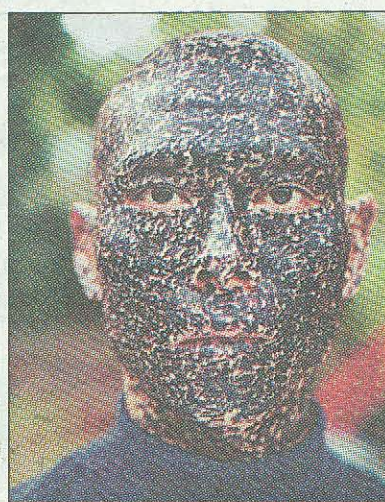
Damien Hirst, too, has been a reference for Zhang. When in 1994, naked, smeared with honey and fish oil to attract flies to feed on his body, he performed his 12m² sitting in an open stall in a Beijing public lavatory while passers-by came in to empty bowels and bladders (the obscure title is the building's ground-plan measurement), Zhang must have been aware of Hirst's fly-breeding contraption, A Thousand Years, constructed four years earlier. The significant difference was that Hirst's was performance art by proxy (the flies the cast) contained within a glass case that defined it instead as a

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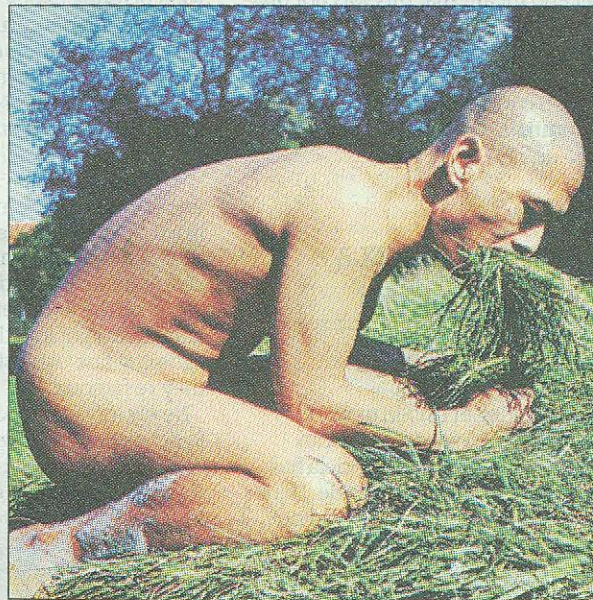
work of art that could be sold, bought and displayed, a thing to be multiplied and modified to suit any number of collectors willing to repeat the cycle of death with the occasional replacement of the cow's head and a handful of maggots; Zhang's work, on the other hand, with its not unrelated message, was performed by the man himself in a theatre that no collector or museum could acquire, and of which the only relics are photographs.

There is about his frequent employment of his own and others' nakedness a wearying familiarity. Nakedness in orderly ranks, the bare bum in a landscape, the unnaturally static nude – all these seem to so denature and unsex in any sensual sense the human body that it becomes nothing but an object uncomfortably out of place, a theme already exploited in the West by too many Western artists of the Abject School. And the trouble with all performance art is that it depends on photography for permanence; but the photograph, whether or not we accept photography as a form of art, must itself be influenced by the alien sensibility of the photographer and cannot truly represent the performer's intellectual-cum-aesthetic view of the event. To appreciate performance art to the full, the audience must not only be present but close enough to be cathartically affected by it. The audience must see blood run, hear blue-bottles buzz, feel the chill of the mountain and the warmth of his neighbour's flesh, be in the fishpond with the fish and naked in sexual positions with a compliant donkey.

It is not enough to see a photograph of skinny Zhang Huan in a jump-suit tailored from raw and bloody slabs of beef, doubling his weight and bulk to that of muscle man or Sumo wrestler – one must be there empathically, sensing the smell and the feel of it against the live nakedness within. A photograph does not communicate the physical sensations of a naked man contained in a steel mesh sphere swinging in the same wide parabolas as the great thrubler of St James in Compostella; nor does it communicate the objective of the jape that seemed, if not quite blasphemous, then certainly risking offence. As for

Visual Art **London Life**

Black art: above, the end of the Family Tree sequence. Right, Flowers, 2000 – Zhang in one of his frequent nude appearances



homage to a pig that survived the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, rescued after burial for 49 days and now a pet in Zhang's studio; this is art conceived, adulterated and executed entirely by email.

The gallery has been fenced to contain a farmyard in which two adolescent sows – pretty little things in caramel coats smudged with grey – will do everything that is habitual for pigs. With two instead of one, sows replacing a boar, their age and breed so different, living with garden plants worthy of the Chelsea show and a shed more stoutly built than the housing of a hundred million Chinese peasants, the lives of these pigs are improbably distant from the survival conditions of the Sichuan boar. Visitors are invited to lean on the fence and, like Lord Emsworth in the PG Wodehouse novels and Jay Jopling's father (once Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), admire these little Blandings beauties and contemplate. But contemplate what? The leap from the amusing comforts of the urban farm to the tragedy of Sichuan is far too great for me to see in it pathetic fallacy. This folly will, no doubt, bring in the punters – though neither the concept nor its realisation can be bought – for folly it is, and so benign, so fairytale, so far from its declared point as to be pointless, it diminishes Zhang. It may, however, open our eyes to more important

problems of farm animal welfare, for the pig that is presented as a pretty work of art is a fiction far, far from the truth of the bacon on our breakfast plates.

Downstairs there is one small-scale sculpture of 11 skulls on a plank, four paintings of single human skulls, a vast panorama of skulls in a place or space left to our imaginations, haunted by Anselm Kiefer, and nine portraits of Zhang's rescued pig. For all these the chosen material is the ash of burnt incense, the relic and embodiment of prayer, bonded in a medium that lends it both bulk and clay-like malleability so that it can be modelled by hand, or that fixes it to canvas without losing its innate fugitive fragility – a conservator's nightmare.

Ranging in colour from dull black to shabby white, these *grisailles* recall the paintings made more than two decades ago by Anthony Zych with black vitrified earth suspended in polyurethane. Zhang's curious and emphatically intrusive surfaces – some not far short of pebble-dash – make judgment of these pictures quite impossible; as with the comedian who can fart Rossini's Overture to William Tell, the sane man is diverted by the doing rather than delighted by the artistry.

White Cube offers a souvenir booklet – a chunky pocket thing with a pig's snout jutting from the spine, the text more a defence against accusations of cruelty than a helpful exegesis of Zhang's work and philosophical intentions. For these, the serious enquirer must turn to a new book from Phaidon – Zhang Huan (£24.95), in which Zhang emerges as the unpredictable shaman who does not know what he will do next – for there is nothing in the exhibition to make us think of Beuys. Whatever next he does, it must be intellectually tougher than White Cube's damp squib – though even one that is damp is better than no squib at all.

■ Zhang Huan is at White Cube, 25-26 Mason's Yard, SW1 (020 7930 5373, www.whitecube.com) until 3 October. Tue-Sat 10am-6pm. Admission free.

Rare beef: Zhang Huan dons a suit of raw meat as an American muscle man in *My New York*, 2002

Zhang full length, buttocks up, on a bed of ice in Central Park surrounded by New Yorkers' puzzled dogs, or Zhang suspended by chains at lofty ceiling height, an open vein dripping blood onto a hotplate... these are the stuff of Christian martyrdoms.

Between his graduation from Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1993 and his moving to New York in 1998, Zhang took part in six exhibitions. In 1999 there were 15, not only in the US but in Europe and the far away antipo-

des, and before the end of 2008 there were a further 125 worldwide. With an artist so evidently esteemed I must ask Tate Modern – whose Turbine Hall is ideally suited to a large interior performance piece – why this extravagant and lazy institution has shown us nothing of the man but has left him to Charles Saatchi and two dealers, the Haunch of Venison and now White Cube?

That Zhang has produced so much is not a mystery. He is the genius behind

a hundred assistants who contribute to and carry out the work, no matter what demand he makes of them – hence the perceived kinships with Warhol and Hirst; thus no notion is frustrated by technical difficulty and he has, in scale at least, reached far beyond his mentor, Beuys. But not so at White Cube. Visitors in expectation of sizzling blood or copulation with a donkey will be disappointed – Zhang is not here to take part in or even install this month-long installation paying

This little piggy had a hard time: left, a portrait in incense ash by Zhang of the original rescued pig of Sichuan. Right, one of the two live pigs in the exhibition at the White Cube

