

Cao Yu: Portrait of the Artist with an Hourglass Waist

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We go to galleries and exhibitions to look at art, and, if it's any good, we hope to be touched, to feel something. Cao Yu realizes our hopes, and exceeds them. The first work in her solo exhibition *I Have An Hourglass Waist* at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing confronts the viewer on their way into the gallery. Reaching to open the door, your hand is covered with a gooey layer of Vaseline (*Perplexing Romance*, 2017). The viewer is jolted into participation, literally touched by the artwork. Now an active participant in the work, you can't help but feel something: the slime covering your hand, surprise, revulsion, curiosity, engagement. Handed a tissue by a uniformed attendant, you enact the participatory performance of the work.

The polite distance we have been trained to maintain between viewer and artwork has been shattered before we even step into the gallery, and is broken again as we proceed to wash the Vaseline off our hands. Entering the gallery's bathroom, we again find ourselves involuntarily assaulted by an artwork. Sound is perhaps the most tactile of media. "Ears have no eyelids...Sound rushes in. It violates."¹ The sound installation *The Flesh Flavour* (2017) exemplifies the physicality of sound. Divorced from any image, normal physical noises of the body are obscenely magnified by our imaginations. Hands clapping could equally be spanking or beating; the disembodiment of these bodily sounds ironically makes them that much more tactile.

But the work for which Cao Yu is perhaps best known, so far, her graduation piece from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Art Masters Exhibition, *Fountain* (2015), is silent. This video work, also shown in this exhibition, was nearly banned from the CAFA show for obscenity, but ultimately caused a sensation. For over ten minutes, two breasts are repeatedly squeezed, with milk squirting out of them like the eponymous fountain. Shot soon after the artist gave birth, it is striking in its candor. It is a self-portrait of the most intimate kind, highlighting the paradox of motherhood: preconceptions of beauty and love are reduced to the pure physicality of her bodily transformation. Her response to the painful changes motherhood wrought upon her own body was to turn herself into the material of her art. Yet this self-portrait is an oddly amputated image of two breasts and two hands; the rest of her body, and the sounds that it makes, remain missing, enacting the disembodied silence of a deconstructed body.

Cao Yu maintains that her *Fountain* is a dialogue with Bruce Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966-67),² portraying the male power of spurting bodily fluids. Yet in turning herself inside-out to use her

¹ The quote continues: "Sound ignores skin, does not know what a limit is; it is neither internal nor external... Hearing is not like seeing...it is impossible to protect oneself from it." Pascal Quinard, *The Hatred of Music* (Yale University Press, New Haven, Trans. Matthew Amos & Fredrik Rönnbäck, 2016, p.71. Reprint of *La baine de la musique*, 1996 Editions Calmann-Lévy).

² In this color photograph, Bruce Nauman 'depicts himself shirtless, with raised arms and open palms, spewing an arc of water out of his pursed lips, in imitation of the nude statues customarily found in decorative fountains. Thus the artist and the work of art become one and the same... *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* also pays homage to Marcel Duchamp's notorious *Fountain*

own fluids as an artistic medium, she should not neglect the pervasive power of the feminine. Lactation is at the heart of Western art history, with countless images of the Madonna and child informing our conceptions of beauty. Yet taking lactation beyond motherhood and nurture into the basic materiality of using breast milk as an artistic medium remains a taboo rarely broken, even in our contemporary aesthetic prone to pushing all limits of bodily representation.³ In an earlier work not featured in this exhibition, *Artist Manufacturing* (2016), Cao Yu condensed 18 liters of her own breast milk into a clay-like putty out of which she made organic forms, retaining the impressions of her hands; this tactility exacerbated by the smell of mother's milk.⁴ This extrusion of her own bodily fluids, an inversion of herself from inside to outside, signed with her own fingerprints, is yet another example of her particular self-portraiture. Taking her body at its most vulnerable, she turns it into the material of her art.

Not only her breast milk, but also her urine, her hair, her ID card, her life accomplishments, and her very presence are the materials of her artworks. Cao Yu's is a fractured self-portrait; she dismembers herself. From disembodied breasts squirting a fountain of milk, to amputated legs leaking urine: in her video *The Labourer* (2017), Cao Yu again subverts preconceptions of femininity, her disembodied legs kneading flour into dough, moistened by a stream of her own urine. Her massively magnified ID photo, *The Female Artist* (2017), is a self-portrait pared down to its most basic facts. While its counterpart, the video work *I Have* (2017), animates the same head and shoulders to expand those facts, shamelessly reciting a litany of autobiographical accomplishments and intentions. This too is a subversion of the kind of femininity which is expected to be demure, humble, silent; yet she voices genuine accomplishments to be proud of, unlike the shallow consumerist fantasies people seem addicted to publicizing.

We only see the artist as a whole when she is cut off from us by a chalk circle on the floor, and further embedded in a TV monitor in the video performance *The Artist Is Here* (2017). Having deconstructed herself in her other works, here her totality is more an act of self-confinement than of exposure. Quite unlike Marina Abramovic's similarly titled performance *The Artist Is Present* (2010) in which she seeks a mystical connection with her audience,⁵ Cao Yu hides herself in plain view, barricading herself behind the

(1917)—a readymade porcelain urinal that Duchamp provocatively exhibited as a sculpture. Like *Fountain*, Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* subverts conventional definitions of what constitutes a work of art." [Whitney Museum of American Art Collection, Object Label: <http://collection.whitney.org/object/5714>]

³ Artists who have used bodily fluids and functions as media in their work, to name but a few of the better known examples: have given birth in their artworks (Kira Perov in Bill Viola's *The Passing*, 1991, and Joanna Rajkowska, 2012), used their blood (Hermann Nitsch, since 1962), feces (Piero Manzoni, 1961), urine (Andres Serrano, 1987), semen (Marcel Duchamp, 1946, and Vito Acconci, 1972), and menstrual blood (Portia Munson, 1993). Yet despite activist groups such as M.A.M.A. (Mother Artists Making Art, 1990's), very few artists have subverted the sanctity of motherhood to use their own breast milk in their work.

⁴ Like sound, odor is equally invasive. Breaking the barrier between inside and outside, it is tactile; another sense through which to feel the work.

⁵ "In 2010 at MoMA, Abramović engaged in an extended performance called, *The Artist Is Present*. The work was inspired by her belief that stretching the length of a performance beyond expectations serves to alter our perception of time and foster a deeper engagement in the experience. Seated silently at a wooden table across from an empty chair, she waited as people took

virtual boundary of a chalk circle so as to observe instead of engage. Watching her audience watching her, Cao Yu is both viewer and artwork.

The exhibition *I Have An Hourglass Waist* brings together three distinct strands in Cao Yu's practice: self-portrait, the body, and materiality; all intertwined through vulnerability. Cao Yu uses her own body as material, deconstructing herself into her component parts. Her other materials become embodied by means of their vulnerabilities; canvas, bras, leather, wood, marble, cement; these she disrupts with tears, holes, invaginations; she tramples them underfoot; pierces them with metal rods; embeds them with broken glass; or delicately binds them with single strands of her long hair. The vulnerability of these materials is tactile. The Vaseline on our hands was an indication of things to come: 'the eye is epidermic; it is a skin; sight becomes a sense of touch.'⁶ We feel Cao Yu's work, as much as we see it.

Vulnerability is the human condition, and this is ultimately what Cao Yu is so good at conveying to us. Her sculptural installation *Living, Nothing to Explain* (2017) is composed of a pair of leather boots impaled onto a concrete slab by vicious metal rods. The boots could be male or female; the pain of both mobility and its forcible negation are a universal condition. The title says it all. This negation of mobility is coupled with the negation of fertility in her sculpture *The End* (2017); another perfect visual image to denote the human condition. Two large egg-like forms, equally female and male, are suspended beside one another, cast in concrete and embedded with broken glass. *Undead* (2017) is a monumental sculpture composed of the timeless material of marble, with a slab of all too temporal meat wedged into a crack in the stone. This too is the human condition; fragile flesh trapped between the cold hard timelessness of not having been and no longer being. Like the aftermath of a bloody battle, a predator's lair, a brutal sacrifice to some ancient god, or simply an image of what we are all reduced to in the end; it taps into our darkest fears.

Cao Yu uses marble once more in her sculpture *The World is Like This for Now* (2017), composed of a single nearly invisible strand of the artist's hair delicately binding together two large blocks of rough marble. Again using a bodily material, her hair inscribes the artist into the work, leaving the tiniest of human imprints on a landscape of stone. Redolent of the vulnerability of the human condition, this too is a kind of self-portrait, as is *The World Has Nothing to Do with Me* (2017), an installation in which a single strand of the artist's hair is tied in a loop through two small holes in a solid wall. An ultimately minimalist work, this fits Cao Yu's description of her own work as 'a hybrid of surreal and abstract'.

An apt description of the entirety of Cao Yu's practice, this phrase was originally applied to the series *Canvas* (2013-17), in which the artist traces in pen each individual thread of which the canvas is composed. The delicate lines highlight the materiality of the canvas by accentuating its component parts.

turns sitting in the chair and locking eyes with her. Over the course of nearly three months, for eight hours a day, she met the gaze of 1,000 strangers, many of whom were moved to tears." [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010]

⁶ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 202.

As Cao Yu states, “The painting becomes the oft-overlooked canvas, the canvas becomes the center of attention, and the act of depiction itself becomes the perception and pursuit of material.”⁷ This same tactile materiality, and the vulnerability of material, are foregrounded in the series *Detail* (2017), in which individual threads have been torn out of a blank canvas, embodying the material by marking it with wounds and scars. This subtler version of Lucio Fontana’s slashed canvases⁸ has a predecessor in Cao Yu’s practice: her 2016 series *Mother*, not included in this exhibition. In these works, the artist again turns basic material into body. Beginning with a blank canvas, she turns it inside out, perforating it with a hole which extrudes a tunnel made out of its own entrails, connecting the inside with the outside. At once a vagina, an umbilical cord, and a torn and stitched canvas, Cao Yu calls this ‘a minimalist sculpture’, ‘a grand portrait of motherhood.’⁹ So too is the series *Venus* (2012-16) in which a basic pedestal for the display of art is itself turned into an artwork through the perforation of a suggestive hole polished into its corner. By foregrounding the vulnerability of its materiality, this invagination turns a simple material for art into a female body.

This suggestive inversion of material and body, so reminiscent of the work of Louise Bourgeois and Annette Messager, persists in Cao Yu’s new works, *The Colorful Clouds* (2017) and *90 °C* (2017). *The Colorful Clouds* is a series of wall and floor installations forming soft, black, dimpled surfaces. Neither colorful nor clouds, these objects are made up of black bras stitched together into abstract amorphous masses. Multiplied and repurposed, the lingerie acquires an unsettling materiality, leached of any sensuality. Far more erotically charged is Cao Yu’s sculpture *90 °C*, composed of an anatomically correct male marble sculpture, suggestively severed below the torso and above the knee. Woven through his genitalia, between his buttocks, and tied tightly in a knot over his amputated waist, is a pair of silk stockings. This somewhat sadomasochistic image comingles the promise of pleasure and pain; interlacing the solidity of the cool shiny marble with the fragility of silk. This is a woman’s answer to Hans Bellmer’s trussed dolls. This too is a perfect image of the human condition.

For an artist born in 1988, Cao Yu’s work suggests a much older sensibility, engaging in a stimulating dialogue with the great figures of art history, while never losing her own unique voice. Looking at the diversity of work Cao Yu has already produced at such a young age—conceptual, minimalist, subtly feminist, slightly surreal, sculpture stretching its own limits, deconstructed autobiography—we can only anticipate how much more she will accomplish in the future. Think back to the words of Cao Yu’s video *I Have*: “I have innate artistic talent...I have noteworthy achievements...I have an endless supply of amazing

⁷ From the artist’s portfolio, work description for *Canvas 170210-170601*, *Canvas 171006-171013*, *Canvas 171022-171029*, *Canvas 171014-171021*.

⁸ Fontana’s *Spatial Concept* series, made in Milan between 1958 and 1968, consist of canvases that have been cut either once or multiple times, and are collectively known as the *Tagli* ('cuts').

⁹ From the artist’s portfolio, work description for *Mother No.1* & *No.2*.

creative ideas...I will have everything an artist has or could ever want.” She says it all. And this artist, only in her late twenties, plans to keep surprising us.

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