

Cao Yu: In the Name of the Body

Interview conducted between Tan Ying (London) and Cao Yu (Beijing) in November, 2017

TY= Tan Ying

CY= Cao Yu

TY: You've included two intervention-based works in this exhibition, *Perplexing Romance* and *The Flesh Flavour*. What was your intention in wanting to physically interact with your audience, rather than just visually?

CY: As a medium for exchanging creative intent and emotion between artist and audience, the visual aesthetic of the artwork normally conveys artist's thoughts and emotions to the audience. These two works discard the visual interaction and navigation mechanisms to bring the audience into direct participation. From this perspective, it can seem as if the artist is hiding on the sidelines watching the audience's reactions and perceptions.

TY: Are you, then, as the artist, another participant within the work?

CY: Once I "made preparations" for the audience, I no longer see myself as a participant in the artwork.

TY: What is interesting in these two works is that they interact with people but also each other: one artwork predisposes people to experience the other work in a sequential way, leaving them with a certain degree of unease. Is this the feeling you would like people to experience for the rest of the exhibition?

CY: A certain relationship actually does take shape between these two works, but not necessarily one of calculated conspiracy against the audience. There is nothing devious about the overarching relationship that forms between them, and so there is no reason to shy from this connection.

TY: The performance work *The Artist is Here* seems to be a slight play on words with Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010), where she invited viewers to maintain eye contact with the artist. Is this an intentional choice for the title? Is there a connection or a common thread with Abramović's performance piece?

CY: The original title for this artwork was "*I am Here*." At the opening ceremony, I stood inside a ring that I drew on the floor, and couldn't leave. I consciously isolated myself behind an intangible barrier, maintaining "independence" from the bustle of the opening ceremony. This is what interests me. Now that you ask, it does call to mind Abramović's famous work. Her art releases her emotions and emphasizes her interactions with the audience. These are things I place extreme restrictions on. In *The Artist is Here*, the artist stood in a circle less than one square meter in size, which, in this large exhibition space, is more like "absence."

TY: So this interaction with the audience also has a degree of subtraction involved? You wishing to remove yourself from the opening as a way of disrupting the interaction with the audience?

CY: Compared to the artworks discussed above, this is indeed a restriction of interaction, but it is very hard to "remove" oneself. For the few audience members who actually came up and talked to me, I didn't make a conscious effort to remain silent, but in general, I was in a position of isolation, of being on view, just like the other artworks in the exhibition space. What this artwork subtracted was me as the "star" of the exhibition opening. It turned me into one of many artworks. The artist was at the exhibition scene, but the artist had also disappeared from the scene.

TY: With *The Artist is Here*, did you want to inhibit your actions and interact with your audience with this work, or was the work in itself a self-protection mechanism for you?

CY: It was about self-restriction. At the opening, people could come up and talk to me, but I could not leave, much less wander around the exhibition space. I restricted myself to a non-free state.

TY: You use a variety of bodily fluids—urine, breast milk—as mediums. Can you talk a little about the

importance of highlighting and including these bodily processes into your work?

CY: I am interested in the expression of the body, but I do not like self-harm or exhibitionist methods, so I approach it from the body's connections and byproducts, focusing on the body as a "role" with social properties and gender qualities, rather than undifferentiated flesh. Though I expose my breasts in *Fountain*, I intentionally place my own face outside of the frame to avoid pornographic or sexual associations in the audience, so that they can experience things beyond that.

TY: In the work, *The Labourer*, the title gives reference to modes of production. The work also features the use of flour. Where do you see the role of the artist within the roles of labour production?

CY: The picture in the video *The Labourer* mainly consists of three elements: flour, my feet and urine. I am that laborer. My body (feet) and its byproduct (urine) come together with the object of labor (flour) to create this scene of labor together. The flour makes it look like the labor of a housewife. Using urine as the liquid for dough makes the act of kneading absurd and useless. Standing while urinating blurs the gender divide, turning the entire action into a gender-transcending act.

TY: Do you see different kinds of labour as gendered or having a gender?

CY: I have a very competitive personality, and I don't like admitting defeat. I can do anything a man can do, and I will definitely do it well. I have to admit, though, that the gender divisions of labor in society are not entirely without reason.

TY: There's a strong sculptural element to your 2D work, *Canvas*, as well as in your performative work, *Fountain*. There is a meditative element as well. How do you see the relationship of the different practices influencing each other?

CY: Inspiration and fermentation between an artist's works in different materials is inevitable, but the sculptural feel to such works as *Canvas* and *Fountain* is more because of my background studying sculpture, which leads me to unconsciously adopt a sculptural perspective and way of thinking.

TY: In the video work *I Have* you speak of different attributes of a person's life as if to provoke a response in the audience. Is this something you wish to do? To do that there is an assumption that there is value in the affirmations you've written. What made you choose these specific statements?

CY: I'm not necessarily trying to "provoke" them, but I do at least want to touch their senses and emotions. Two years ago, a famous TV documentary program wanted to do a film on me. I decided to back out halfway through filming, because the director wanted me to "act out" the hardship he felt artists "should all face" so that he could attract viewers, gain sympathy and raise ratings. He said he and the audience agreed that showing success would just breed resentment. People like to see others worse off than themselves to make themselves better and feel "pity" and empathy. In these phrases drawn from the widespread values of the general public, such as "I have Beijing residence," I hope that beyond envy, viewers can get a sense of the things they themselves have through the things the artist has. It is more about a shared "I have" that establishes a connection with the audience.

TY: Within this shared, collective "having," do you hope to reach a collective relief or a collective empathy?

CY: It is first a form of self-consolation. Many viewers really like this artwork. I can't tell if this "resonance" stems from the audience's "prosperity," or whether it stems from an "overabundance of confidence" among them.