

## On He Yunchang's project "One Rib"

By Nataline Colonnello

"The stage can be as big as one's heart, the yearning of humanity's innermost being more bountiful than reality."  
He Yunchang, Beijing, June 4, 2009

It is 08.08.2008. He Yunchang is in the operating room of the Kunming Adam Hospital, Yunnan Province. A surgeon, an anesthesiologist, and a half-dozen nurses and paramedics assist him. In the same room, a photographer and a cameraman are ready to record what is going to happen. In full possession of his mental faculties and after three years of explanations and negotiations with the private hospital, He Yunchang has succeeded in persuading the medical center to perform a medically unnecessary operation in order to have a rib removed from his body. He Yunchang's wish is to have a 30-35 cm long rib extracted. For safety reasons, the surgeon suggests selecting the eighth rib from the bottom of He's left side (by chance, in Chinese culture the number 8 symbolizes good luck and prosperity). The full bone is about 30 cm long, but only a 25 cm medial section can be excised in order to avoid damaging the sternum and the spinal nerve and to avert any surgical and postoperative complications. The surgery was initially set to take place on August 6. On August 5, He Yunchang underwent a thorough health examination, proving him to be in perfect physical condition. However, the final date of the operation was rescheduled to August 8—coincidentally, the opening day of the Olympic Games.

After two hours in surgery, leading Chinese contemporary performance artist He Yunchang (\*1967, Liang He County, Kunming) actualises the first part of "One Rib" (2008-2009), a challenging and multi-faceted project that, conceived in 2003, consists of a variegated body of interlinked works that includes performance, sculpture, photography, video and painting: "These are not to be considered as separated works," the artist explains, "but different parts of one single entity, different forms of documentation and interpretation of the same concept." <sup>1</sup>

For the first time in his artistic practice, He Yunchang has experienced his own performance from behind closed doors, under a pharmaceutically induced state of unconsciousness for most of the surgery. By deliberately rendering himself incapable of actively controlling the action while it is carried out, He Yunchang subverts one of the key elements of his previous works, in which the artist's psychological and physical stamina both play a crucial role in the success of the performance. It is the case, for example, of "Dialogue with Water" (1999), a 90-minute long performance in which He Yunchang tried to cut a river into two halves with a knife while hanging upside down from a crane; "Wrestling: One and One Hundred" (2001), where He Yunchang spent 66 minutes persistently wrestling with one hundred people in a row; and "Casting" (2004), a work in which the artist sealed himself inside a concrete block for 24 hours.

Since "Appointment with Tomorrow" (1998), one of the first performances by He Yunchang, in which he covered his body with mud and dialed random telephone numbers on a disconnected telephone for 75 minutes, the artist has purposely staged apparently ineffective or helpless acts as metaphors for his own approach to reality, where the sense of impossibility to bring an action to fruition is not a deterrent. With wrong-footed lucidity, once the plan for a new performance is complete and every single element has been premeditated in minute detail, He Yunchang is ready for a new experience that, although as excessive or incomprehensible as it may appear to the public, reflects, on the one hand, the existential reassertion of the artist's will and his intellectual independence; on the other, a reaction against any form of power, whether commonly accepted moral codes or socio-political impositions. Therefore, it does not matter, for instance, in his "Wrestling: One and One Hundred" whether He Yunchang suffered as many as 82 defeats versus only 18 wins; or if, after the performance, he needed approximately three months to recover. Prior to starting the matches, perfectly aware of the impossibility of beating all those opponents, the artist promised the

participants a fee in exchange for their genuine commitment to the hand-to-hand combat. The battle He Yunchang really won is not the fight against his opponents, but the struggle with his own mental and corporeal exhaustion in order to bring his work to completion, despite any defeat. "We do not only have a physical self, but also an inner self", the artist reflects. "Of course, the human body is very valuable—we depend on it for the practical realisation of any thought or action, but the inner self is incredibly mighty. It can freely get its way with almost no restraints. Body and life are both very important, but there also are many other things that are more meaningful to me. I can pay out; I have already paid out for forty-two years. If I suffer some injuries it is not a problem." <sup>2</sup>

If suffering is a *file rouge* that knits together all the performances of He Yunchang, it is not intended as the target of his works, but rather as the natural price that the artist willingly pays for the achievement of what he believes.

Asked in 2002 to write a short essay about his own works, He Yunchang composed "A Fairytale for Grown-ups", one of the most touching and elucidating texts embodying the perfect parable of his attitude toward art and life. In the first part of this illuminating text, set in Kunming in 1997, He Yunchang narrates the true story of a laid-off engineer who was given much more meat than he could afford as a present from a sympathetic butcher to whom he previously recounted his sorrows. Incapable of tolerating the humiliations that he suffered at the hands of society, the young man eventually resolved to prepare, in concordance with his wife, a poisoned last supper for himself and his family, so as to put an end to the daily trials of their lives. In opposition to the engineer's decision, in his text, He Yunchang points to the endurance of those innumerable people, who, like the artist himself, keep living, despite all the difficulties that may affect their existence: "The sharp blade of reality can only pierce their limbs; it cannot wound their wills. The persistence and tenacious spirits of these disadvantaged groups inspire me." <sup>3</sup>

Saturated with even more intimate, existential and cathartic connotations than the artist's earlier works, the "One Rib" project is undoubtedly a powerful, crazy and at the same time highly poetic masterwork in which the extraction of the rib represents not only the end of the performing act itself, but also the starting point for the other works originating from it. Unlike He Yunchang's previous performances, this one is accompanied by an object—the rib—constituting what He describes as "the most important document of the project". <sup>4</sup> Imbued with a strong symbolism, the rib has been turned into a necklace that takes on pivotal conceptual implications in a subsequent series of 5 photographic works, and also appears in the video that records different stages of the whole project.

The necklace, entitled "Night Light" (2009), is a piece of jewelry made out of the artist's rib and more than 400 grams of gold. The artist's choice to combine a rough, firm and livid-hued material (the artist's own unprocessed rib) with a precious, malleable and warm-coloured one (gold) questions the common values we generally tend to confer onto things. Serving as the support for the rib, the satinated golden structure of the necklace is modeled in the shape of a double-headed mythological animal, with the two heads positioned at the opposite extremities of its elongated, serpent-like body. Stylistically inspired by ornaments dating back to the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), each of the dragon's heads holds one of the two opposite ends of the rib in its open mouth.

In Chinese culture, the dragon is traditionally seen as a positive, vital and auspicious creature, having a *yang* nature and symbolising the power of the elements expressed in the forces of thunder, rain and wind.

Emblematic of the imperial power, the dragon was believed to have the ability to herald and control rain and floods, as well as to metamorphose, becoming visible or invisible, gigantic or minute.

The transformative power connected with the dragon can also be found in Western mythology, but in this case the archetypal animal, usually conceived as the epitome of evil and the cosmic forces of darkness, is often condemned to perish at the hand of a hero, and the monster's death serves the purpose of demonstrating the vanquisher's moral integrity, strength, and the development of his self-consciousness. In the analytic psychology of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), the struggle with the "inner dragon" figuratively represents the individual's conflict with his/her own "shadow", a projection of the conscious mind of undesirable, concealed or repressed aspects of one's own personality. Once a person succeeds in dominating and assimilating the

shadow, his/her Self is able to triumph over the regressive forces of the unconscious mind, which will eventually result in the ability to maturely face and overcome the troubles and changes of life. By means of his performances, He Yunchang carries out a personal journey of self-discovery from which he returns psychologically transformed, as well exemplified by his work "The Rock Tours Round Great Britain" (September 24, 2006 – January 14, 2007), a pilgrimage extending over 112 days in which the artist picked a rock up in Boulmer, on the northeast coast of England, and returned it to the original location after having walked 3,500 kilometers counterclockwise along the border of Great Britain. "Sometimes the art making process has a very strong metamorphic character, as it makes one's potential (latent energy) and shades emerge", the artist explains. "At the same time, one's brave, resolute side is also undoubtedly revealed." <sup>5</sup>

The dragon of He Yunchang's necklace is just one of the various references to myths, legends and philosophical theories detectable in many of the artist's works. In the performance "Keeping Promise" (2003), for instance, the artist had his hand cemented inside a concrete pillar for 24 hours—a contemporary transposition and personal interpretation of a story by Chinese Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (ca. 369 to 286 B.C.). In the tale, a young man waits for his love under a bridge despite the heavy storm. Confronted by the rising waters of the river, he holds onto a column until he eventually drowns, though the girl never arrives for their appointment. With its one day duration suggesting the cycle of life, He Yunchang's performance is a stern warning to all those who do not honour their pledges. <sup>6</sup>

Besides the references to Chinese culture, in the "One Rib" project He Yunchang also draws from elements of the Christian tradition, taking inspiration from the Holy Bible, in particular from chapters 2.21-2.23 of Genesis, in which Eve was created from Adam's rib. What interests He Yunchang about this myth of creation is not its present-day enactment by means of an artistic transposition, but the symbolic value of the rib that here becomes the emblem of the eternal union between man and woman.

This bond is further sealed through "One Rib", a series of photographs in which He Yunchang poses individually with five women, each of whom he once had or still has a very close relationship; among them his mother, his current wife and his ex-wife. In a sort of consecrating ritual, each woman is portrayed wearing a provisional version of the necklace, initially used to keep the rib in shape by means of an unadorned metal support, and not the final golden one. The artist's decision to utilize a rough model of the necklace is perhaps meant to emphasize the necessity for a clearer form of expression and signification, one that is not already loaded with the references that will enrich the necklace once it reaches its definitive status of independent artwork.

The five photographs (159.8 x 126 cm each), although shot at different places and times, share similar frontal compositions in which subjects are sitting next to one another and at a similar distance from the camera, along with analogous backgrounds and identical oval outlines reminiscent in shape—but not in their vivid colours and contemporary clothing—of old family pictures. Not lacking in the partially veiled self-irony with which He Yunchang approaches his works to varying degrees, the photographs are characterised by the contrast between their gaudy backdrops, made from a board fully covered with withered flowers sprayed with an artificially hued finish that is different in each of the pictures, and the complexity of the expressions, stances and details through which the subjects' emotional domains and bonds become perceivable—even when those bonds are a thing of the past. "Even if you proceed according to your personal aspirations, there is a big distance between reality and imagination", the artist expounds. "Due to my desires, sometimes I can produce, in a faithful and substantial way, some impossible things, fantasies or some feelings belonging to the past. There is some kind of humour in the effort itself, a sort of idealism, an attitude of clinging obstinately on my course." <sup>7</sup> In "One Rib" (No. 1), the portrait in which the artist poses with his mother, the spontaneous and profound affection that parent and son share is clearly evinced, both from the relaxed countenance of both of the subjects, and from the mother's gesture of holding He Yunchang's hand while he embraces her, as well as from the well-matched, subtle nuances of the light, clothes and background. In the picture taken with his ex-wife, entitled "One Rib" (No. 3), on the contrary, a certain feeling of uneasiness is immediately detectable in the rigid posture, the sealed lips and the glassy stares of the subjects, a tension clashing with the multi-coloured—but also very fake looking—flowers behind them.

Like many earlier paintings by the artist, the realistic oil canvasses He Yunchang realised on the occasion of the “One Rib” project are based on source documentary photographs strictly related to the performance. If they can be considered as a different and maybe more accessible channel for the public to understand his performances, they are as well an important means of knowledge for the artist himself, who can observe and revive the performance from another perspective through these works.

When He Yunchang accomplished his previous performances, he would close a chapter of his life in order to start a new one. This time the rib will remain a tangible memento of his personal “fairytale for grown-ups”: “There are so many absurdities in life, and we all like to uphold unimportant things. I feel that this is another way to approach reality. If something is very important to yourself, it does not matter how you do it, it will never be excessive in your eyes. After a performance work is over, I always think that every second in life is more valuable than gold.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from an interview with He Yunchang in his Beijing studio, June 4, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> He Yunchang (2002). A Fairy Tale for Grown Ups. In: Sigg, U., Szeemann, H. (2002). Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews – Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998-2002. Beijing, China: Timezone 8 Ltd. p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from an interview with He Yunchang in his Beijing studio, June 4, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Zhuangzi, Vol. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Excerpt from an interview with He Yunchang in his Beijing studio, June 4, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.