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Critical Reception of His First Exhibition in Spain

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Introduction

Lorsque je suis arrivé en France en 1986, je suis tournée cette fois, sur une réflexion profonde de la culture chinoise et sur les effets de la société de consommation occidentale. Je deviens en fait un homme hybride, un amphibie pourquoi pas. [When I arrived in France in 1986, I turned at this time, following deep reflection on Chinese culture and the effects of Western consumerist society. I actually became a hybrid man, an amphibian, even!].¹

Chen Zhen (Shanghai, 1955 – Paris, 2000) was part of the first generation of artists who began to experiment with avant-garde art in China after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In 1986, he emigrated to Paris, where he continued to study art and to develop his artistic career. He coined the word ‘transexperience’ (*rongchao jingyan*) to refer to new ways of thinking and the transcendental feelings related to the ephemeral nature of existence as well as to the experiences of those who emigrate and learn to establish bridges between different cultural traditions. Chen Zhen explains how, from these experiences, he became a hybrid man, a kind of amphibian, and it is from this singular perspective that he analyses the points of contact and misalliances between ancestral Chinese customs and present-day consumerist society, exploring the space ‘in-between’, understood as a cross-cultural dialogue.

The work of Chen Zhen has been exhibited at various international venues, such as the ICA (Boston, 2002), MoMA PS1 (New York, 2003), the Tokyo Palace (Paris, 2003), the Kunsthalle (Vienna, 2007),

¹ Interview, ‘Chen Zhen par Jérôme Sans’, *Art chinois 1990: Chine demain pour hier*, Editions Carte Segrete, Paris, 1990. [All translations from French to English are the author’s.]

the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (2008), the Musée Guimet (Paris, 2010), the Faurschou Foundation (Beijing, 2012) and the Blueproject Foundation (Barcelona, 2014–2015).² This article analyses the reception of the exhibition 'Chen Zhen: In-Between' (22 November 2014–22 February 2015), the first show by the artist in Spain. The exhibition, organised by the Blueproject Foundation and the gallery Continua (San Gimignano, Italy), was commissioned by Chen Zhen's widow, Xu Min, and drew on five projects that had been conceived the year of the artist's death after a long illness. These installations explore the body and its organs, conflict management, suffering, healing and self-care. Ultimately, these artworks are concerned with vital cycles and the fragility of existence.

With regard to the critical reception of the exhibition one can observe the recurrence of certain ideas in the local and national media. The concepts reiterated by art critics, articles and newspapers allude to the relationship between East and West, the various ways of understanding medical practice in different cultural frameworks and the individual–alterity relationship. This article examines the reception of the artist in the local and national context, from the discourse of his first exhibition in Spain to the impact of this show in the media. It considers whether exhibition clichés of international Chinese artists that perpetrate certain post-orientalist political and cultural dynamics which stress the 'Chineseness' of the artist are either reproduced or transcended.

Transexperience; an 'Amphibian Man'

'Transexperience' does not mean the outward signs of an individual who has travelled all over the world and has thereby become extremely experienced and knowledgeable; rather, 'transexperience' indicates a type of internal 'loneliness of spirituality and the overlapping of life experiences', a type of 'cultural homelessness': you do not belong to anybody, yet you are in possession of everything. This type of experience itself constitutes a world of its own.³

Chen Zhen coins the term 'transexperience' in relation to his own transnational experience as an immigrant who makes contact with his host – French – society and develops an international artistic career. The prefix 'trans' alludes to the experience of being in transit, understood as a continuous state of metamorphosis that Chen Zhen relates to a nomadic lifestyle: it 'summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experience of leaving one's native place and going from one place to another in one's life'.⁴ Chen Zhen notes his hybrid condition and calls himself an amphibian man; in so doing, he stresses the dynamic aspect of the notion of 'transexperience', which encapsulates past and present as well as distinct cultural spaces. He relates the concept of 'transexperience' to three ideas: residence, resonance and resistance. The artist explains that when one travels one has to immerse oneself in a context to understand local culture (residence). From within this enclave, the subject has to synchronise with that particular cultural environment (resonance) and also combat and resist the influence of Western culture (resistance).⁵ The artist explores the interactions that are generated in the different ways he engages with a host society and his country of origin, locating

2 Chen Zhen, Biography, <https://www.galleriacontinua.com/artists/chen-zhen-83/biography>, accessed 2 September 2021

3 Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences – A Conversation between Chen Zhen and Xian Zhu*, Korinsha Press, Kyoto, Japan, 1998, no page numbers

4 Ibid

5 Chen Zhen, *Invocation of Washing Fire*, Gli Ori Edizioni, Prato-Siena, 2003, p. 278

himself in the 'in-between', that is, as an observer and a partaker who is situated between spaces [*espace entre*] where two cultures converge and are transformed into a virgin territory that opens up to the possibility of new connections.⁶ In artworks such as *Round Table* (1995) and *Round Table – Side by Side* (1997), in particular, he examines the challenges and difficulties posited by transcultural dialogues. *Round Table* (1995) was shown at the 'Dialogues of Peace' exhibition to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations. The installation consists of a round table, which symbolises a point of encounter, surrounded by twenty-nine chairs of different eras, societies and cultures. The chairs come from the five continents and refer to the different social strata of humankind. This work deals with the relationships between individuals and focuses on the role of the institutions' political power. Round tables are common in Chinese restaurants and their circular shape is considered an impediment to any diner adopting a dominant position, which is key to encouraging dialogue. The engraving at the centre of the table is an excerpt from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Chinese. Lorenzo Fiaschi, the co-founder of the Galleria Continua, stresses that Chen Zhen wanted to create a meeting point for all cultures and he posits that the position of the chairs – elevated from the floor – refer to spirituality and the bringing of levity to problems, thereby facilitating processes of understanding between cultures.⁷ However, can negotiation and dialogue take place around such a table? The artist noted that the table became a symbol of power and that the relations suggested by this installation are ambiguous, given the fact that while the round table harks back to harmony, dialogue and the festive nature of a Chinese meal, it is also evocative of meetings at international conferences, where political negotiations and power conflicts take place.⁸ Despite the fact that the installation proposes the ideal of a universal democracy based on dialogue, this is a paradoxical work of art. The chairs are suspended; they are not connected to the floor and one of them is placed with its back to the table, showcasing a carved Christian cross on its splat. This symbol evokes the role of religion in dialogue between cultures, from the ideological colonisation of the missionaries to its hand in the mediation of conflicts. Moreover, the chairs appear to be an integral part of the table, preventing the public from sitting on them. In so doing, the piece highlights injustices and inequalities, the difficulties of communicating, and of 'eternal misunderstandings'. As the artist pointed out himself:

However, the chairs were all level with the table and attached to it. None could be used. This turned the utopian scene of harmony between nations, the ideal of the UN as a kind of international government, into an ironic symbol of its impossibility. One has to accept the fact of 'eternal misunderstanding', and negotiate within limitations.⁹

This installation is linked to *Round Table – Side by Side* (1997), which is composed of two joined tables with chairs (associated with different cultures), where the public cannot take a seat. This work also engages with the impossibilities of intercultural dialogue, 'eternal misunderstandings' and the desire to interact, despite cultural and ideological differ-

6 Chen Zhen's own term, see Mors d'ief, <http://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=40>, accessed 20 August 2020

7 Lorenzo Fiaschi, 'Chen Zhen. Fragments d'éternité', video, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqLNlxqX730&cc=3s>, accessed 2 September 2021

8 Chen explains: 'Rather, it is the "guanxi" (relationships) between the table and the chairs. The crux of the problem lies in how to arrange all the chairs and the table in a "normal manner", but to create a kind of "abnormal relationships". When the chairs were embedded in the table top, the meanings emerged.' Chen Zhen, *Transsexperiences*, op cit.

9 Hou Hanru, 'Transsexperiences of a Spiritual Runaway. Notes on Chen Zhen's work', *Chen Zhen*, Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1996, p. 51

ences. *Round table – Side by Side* (1997) draws on the aforementioned concept of resonance between cultures – as noted by the artist: ‘how the desire to interact is frequently faced with the impossibility of truly reaching across differences in cultures and ideologies’.¹⁰ The cultural intersection-space is narrower, and the chairs, which come from distinct places and are of different sizes (adults and children), no longer share the same space. Instead, in the later installation, one table is arranged with Western chairs and the other with Chinese ones. Indeed, there is far less interaction in *Round Table – Side by Side*: the chairs cannot be used and, again, one of them is placed with its back to the table. As Hou Hanru notes, the table becomes ‘an ironic symbol of the impossibility of dialogue’ and an acknowledgement of the ‘eternal misunderstanding’.¹¹ Having said this, the artist focuses on the links between utopia and dystopia by encouraging the spectator to reflect on the need to establish collaborative dialogue. Needless to say, Chen Zhen’s proposal is absolutely in line with the current geopolitical scenario. These nomadic experiences alongside those emerging from inhabiting distinctly different contexts (such as the Cultural Revolution, the period of reform in China and the years he lived outside his motherland), have determined his artistic path:

The first table was based on the sense of the ‘around’: a meeting, a dialogue, a negotiation, perhaps even a transaction. The second table will be based on the concept of the ‘side by side’: a metaphor of the eternal misunderstanding which is born out of how the desire to interact is frequently faced with the impossibility of truly reaching across differences in cultures and ideologies. The third table will be tied to the idea of ‘face to face’: the insinuation of opposing elements, the arguments, the political and cultural conflicts around the world, and the confrontation between wealth and poverty, etc. This project will be realized in South America. This project of these three tables is my metaphorical vision of the world seen through my personal experiences, which have been very nomadic and decontextualized for almost 30 years: 10 years during the Cultural Revolution, 10 years of Chinese Reform, and 10 years in The West.¹²

Chen Zhen reflects on the different ways of inhabiting a place and of relating to one another, be it ‘around’, ‘side by side’ or ‘face to face’. The artist not only exposes the points of encounter, the disagreements and misunderstandings between different cultures and ideologies, but also focuses on the confrontation between a ‘supposedly developed world’ and those undergoing ‘development’.

With the term ‘transexperience’ Chen Zhen sketches out a concept to define a state of transformation and focuses on the areas that exist outside the rigidity of the system. He juxtaposes centre and periphery and, in so doing, he questions the location of the construction of the dialogue between East and West, a dynamic that has been at the core of postcolonialist and postmodernist inquiry. In contrast to the construction of the asymmetric and vertical art history that continues to perpetuate a colonialist relationship with the ‘Other’, the historian Piotr Piotrowski proposes a horizontal art history that brings together multiple narratives.¹³ In the same vein, the historian Jonathan Hay, whose enunciation ‘The West and the Rest’ describes international relations,¹⁴ explicitly illustrates the

10 Art Map, Chen Zhen, <https://artmap.com/perrotin/exhibition/chen-zhen-2014>, accessed 20 August 2020

11 Hanru, ‘Transexperiences of a Spiritual Runaway’, op cit

12 Chen Zhen, *Chen Zhen*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2003, p. 181

13 Piotr Piotrowski notes: ‘Just as a horizontal art history, or histories, should critique the vertical, centralized model, a world art history should critique the universal one, the history of imperial art in the literal sense of the term, which imposed on the colonies the hierarchies, the epistemological categories and the value system of the metropolis. In other words: the world art history that has been my subject matter on this occasion should be horizontal rather than vertical’. Piotr Piotrowski, ‘On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History’, *Umění/Art*, vol. LVI, no. 5, 2008, pp. 382–383.

14 Jonathan Hay, ‘Double Modernity, Para-Modernity’, in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2008, p. 114

dynamics of power – political, economic and cultural – of the self-nominated ‘first world’ in relation to ‘second and third worlds’ which are situated outside ‘western’ geopolitical coordinates.¹⁵ Similarly, Zhu Qi, in his article ‘Two Histories of Art: What Arts Represent China?’ (2011), notes that there are two art histories, one written by Chinese historians and the other written by Western ones and warns of the risks of homogenising what is known as ‘contemporary Chinese art’ and the fascination with its exotic, dissident and subversive aspects.¹⁶ The Euro-American hegemony in the construction of the historical narratives of art implies a conditioned perspective on non-Western artistic production. Chen Zhen exposes this in relation to the notion of the ‘Other’:

15 Laia Manonelles Moner, *La construcción de la(s) historia(s) del arte contemporáneo en China: conversaciones con comisarios, historiadores y críticos* [The Construction of Chinese Contemporary Art Histor(ies): Conversations with Curators, Historians and Art Critics], Bellaterra, Barcelona, 2017, p. 33.

16 ‘At present, there actually exist two histories of contemporary Chinese art, one written by the Chinese and the other by Westerners... Despite their differences, the two histories of art have the same purpose. What artists can a history of art explore in order to represent the art of that nation? Many of my colleagues and I would like to write a ‘history of contemporary Chinese art’. However, we have not been able to do it. This does not mean that we do not have enough material in our hands but that we have been thinking of and making judgments about the standards that apply to contemporary Chinese art’. Zhu Qi, ‘Two Histories of Art: What Arts Represent China?’, in Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan, eds, *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China, Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics*, University Press, Hong Kong, 2011, p. 143.

17 Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences*, op cit.

18 Ibid.

Zhen: First look at the global structural set-up of multiculturalism under this definition of ‘Others’. Now imagine a picture in front of you: at the center of the picture is a big circle with lines connecting its perimeter and radiating outwardly in all directions. At the end of each of the radiating lines is a small circle. The big circle in the middle is of course where the concept of ‘Others’ was defined: i.e. the western world. All the surrounding small circles represent the ‘Others’ group: Asians, Africans, Latinos, middle easterners... Things couldn’t be simpler here: each small circle on the outskirts is interested only in the big circle in the center. For many decades, you have heard such things as: China-West artistic exchanges. East-West cultural conflicts, black-white integration, white-black clashes, anti-West, challenging the West, anti-American, etc... But how many artists, if any at all, I mean non-western artists, move among the small circles on the periphery? How many of them, if any at all, have taken an interest in the outer circle formed by the cluster of small circles? Why do we hear so rarely or see so rarely in the art world such things as ‘inter-permeation between yellow and yellow’, ‘yellow-black exchange’, or ‘South-South dialogue’? In reality, the more you step on a piece of ground, the more solid that ground becomes. That is the law: ‘whatever it is, the more you are opposed to it, the greater it becomes’, and ‘the more you criticize it, the more popular it becomes.’ We therefore should often change our courses.

Zhu: Therefore, your strategy is to avoid the center?

Zhen: No. I want to change the picture entirely in my inner world. I want to eliminate the big circle, so that all are ‘Others’, and all cultures are ‘Other cultures’, including the white culture. Therefore we will have a ‘multi-other world’. This is called ‘among the colors’. The center will be left totally blank. This is my revision of the definition of ‘Others’.¹⁷

Chen Zhen revisits the definition of the ‘Other’, noting that all cultures are ‘Other cultures’ and removing the hierarchies and asymmetries of these polarised relations. The artist stresses the need to avoid inhabiting the ‘centre’, breaking the dynamic between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, favouring spaces of transit and drawing on the cultural misunderstandings that emerge in the attempts at dialogue.¹⁸ Chen Zhen assumes the challenge of circulating through a space ‘in-between’ and, within these parameters, he proposes a journey to corporeal and intimate landscapes.

Chen Zhen: In-between, Landscape of Inner Body

19 The art critic and curator Gao Minglu analyses the term 'in-between': 'Now I think that Chinese artists overseas are becoming objects of a kind of 'post-orientalism'. Homi Bhabha uses the term 'third space' to turn what Edward Said considered as the opposition between the East and the West into a kind of interactive 'in-betweenness'. It can help in understanding the work of the Chinese artists overseas. Although centred in the 1980s, their background also includes the whole of the twentieth-century history in China, that is, the antagonism between eastern and western aspects of China's modern and contemporary culture. However, in my opinion, what is crucial for overseas Chinese artists is not the preservation of Chinese characteristics but rather to act effectively in the third space. This causes a kind of metamorphosis: a shift from dichotomous ideas about East and West to the practice of cultural strategies. More concretely, the artists' task is to make their own Chinese cultural experiences into efficient languages to intervene in the new social reality, instead of holding on to a preconceived idea of Chinese culture. It is important to practice these languages in concrete cultural contexts.' Gao Minglu, quoted in Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground*, selected texts edited by Yu Hsiao-Hwei, Timezone 8, Hong Kong, 2002, pp 64–65.

20 Aurélien Le Genissel, 'In-between', in *Chen Zhen, In Between*, Blueproject Foundation, Barcelona, 2015, p 11

21 Menene Gras, 'The Great Void', in *Chen Zhen, In Between*, Blueproject Foundation, Barcelona, 2015, p 59

22 Le Genissel, 'In-between', op cit, p 7

23 Gras, 'The Great Void', op cit, p 83

The term 'in-between' was coined by theorist Homi K Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). This notion has been linked to specific concepts, such as the 'Third Space', the 'No Space', or even the condition of 'Homelessness'. Following these connections, and Chen Zhen's exploration of this intermediate space,¹⁹ the 'in-between' can also be linked to his notion of 'transexperience'. This association has been noted by the curator Aurélien Le Genissel, who explains the relevance of these notions explored in Chen Zhen's exhibition:

For us, the title of this exhibition seemed almost obvious: 'Chen Zhen: In-Between'. After all, the place where Chen Zhen (and perhaps all artists?) created was always somewhere in between, where instability offers us a new perspective; that place 'between two places' which can be both painful and fruitful. Some of the most innovative aesthetic concepts that Chen Zhen proposed, like synergy, 'transexperiences' or his 'double exile', are fuelled precisely by that space that we could call 'halfway'.²⁰

These are the concepts that the exhibition 'Chen Zhen: In-Between', curated by Xu Min, draws on to present a series of projects conceived by the artist in the year of his death. Chen Zhen's death was caused by haemolytic anaemia, from which he had been suffering since he was twenty-five years old. In 1983, he spent three months in Tibet to treat his illness and study *Qi*, universal energy.²¹ In 1986, the artist emigrated to Paris, where he continued to develop his artwork.

The exhibition includes a series of works in which Chen Zhen re-appropriates his body and his illness and explores creative process as a form of therapy. In this way, the artist transcends the personal sphere and becomes actively involved in the social domain. Chen Zhen's installations dwell on the fragility of existence, and engage with birth, childhood, memory, suffering and death. While the exhibition 'Chen Zhen: In-Between' (2000) consists of five art works, I have chosen to explore three of them, because these are representative of the artist's ideas about the different ways in which Chinese and Western medicine deal with healing and care. The powerful and poetic artworks, *Lumière innocente*, *Zen Garden* and *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* deal with topics such as inner balance (physical and mental) and the cultural relations between the East and the West. These intimately entwined works of art were produced the year the artist died and engage with his own experience and reflections about how art becomes an effective means to channel unease. Aurélien Le Genissel explains that the show should not be regarded as a retrospective because: 'It could be seen as a kind of educational journey, an emotional and emotive stroll, meandering through the inside of the human body'.²²

The first installation shown is *Lumière innocente* (2000), in which a cot hangs from the ceiling, wrapped in transparent tubes used for blood transfusion, drains or drips. The shape of *Lumière innocente*, evocative of a chrysalis, is also connected to his other work *Cocon du vide* (2000), built from Buddhist rosaries.²³ With these works, the artist reminds us of the ephemeral nature of existence and focuses on the



Chen Zhen, *Lumière innocente*, installation, 2000, photo: courtesy Blueproject Foundation

- 24 Chen Zhen's installation *Field of Synergy* (2000) consists of seven lit cots, suspended from the ceiling and wrapped up with medical tubes, which can be related to *Lumière innocente*, from the same year.
- 25 Chen Zhen, Concepts, <http://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=40>, accessed 20 August 2020
- 26 Chen Zhen explains: 'Zen Jardin is in the form of a maquette which explores the encounter and the fusion of two visions of medicine – Chinese and Western – in relation to the human body, care/therapy and the meditative/physical state of Man.' Chen Zhen, *Chen Zhen, Metaphors of the body*, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece, 2002, p. 63.
- 27 Fiaschi, 'Chen Zhen. Fragments d'éternité', op. cit.
- 28 Roberta Bosco, 'Los paisajes humanos de Chen Zhen Blueproject Barcelona expone la obra de uno de los artistas chinos más influyentes' [The human landscapes of Chen Zhen Blueproject Barcelona exposes the work of one of the most influential Chinese artists], *El País*, 1 December 2014, http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2014/11/30/catalunya/1417368942_896611.html, accessed 1 December 2014. The project *Jardin Zen* was created to be located at the top of a mountain near Volterra (Tuscany, Italy): 'Es una montaña extraordinariamente parecida a las que hay en China. Durante las investigaciones para conseguir los permisos, descubrimos que en la antigüedad fue un enclave espiritual con mucha importancia desde el punto de vista geomántico' [It is a mountain extraordinarily similar to those in China. During the investigative process to request the

continuous connection between life and death. While in this installation the light that emerges from the cot, which is hanging in an empty space, is suggestive of both the innocence and the energy of birth, the medical tubes around it hark back to the deathbed. Beds (Chinese beds, Western beds and/or cots) – understood as symbols of regeneration in sleep, love as well as places of death – are recurrent objects in his installations between 1998 and 2000.²⁴ Chen Zhen explains how beds are linked to the human body in the different stages of life: 'la naissance, la vie, la mort; et il nous montre la lumière, la guérison et la purification' [birth, life, death; and show light, healing and purification]²⁵. The tension generated by Chen Zhen from the combination of elements of the cot and hospital tubes can also be linked to the vulnerability of existence and the connection between beauty, danger, life and death.

Lumière innocente enters into a dialogue with *Zen Garden* (2000) – a garden of white sand, in which translucent organic volumes of alabaster, cut through by surgical instruments, appear to be floating.²⁶ Lorenzo Fiaschi notes the contrast between the beauty of the alabaster organs and the aggressiveness conveyed by the surgical instruments, and exposes the links between micro and macro in the singular temple of meditation built by Chen Zhen.²⁷ In *Zen Garden*, landscape merges with the human body, with the sculptural representations of the guts, heart and lungs which, in a manner similar to the chrysalis in *Lumière innocente*, radiate light and therefore hope but are also suggestive of human fragility. *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* stresses the interaction between body and spirit, and the elements that form this installation refer to both the nature of Qi and Western medicine. By referring to distinct medical treatments, this installation examines the synergies between his culture of origin and his host culture. The installation is also suggestive of the artist's desire to become a doctor and take on a more active role in the management of his own illness.

This work was exhibited alongside *Étude pour 'Zen Garden'* (2000), which consists of a glass and a metal frame on which Western surgical instruments are hung next to Tibetan ones.²⁸ The later piece is connected to the installation *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* (2000), in which the artist lays a liver, lungs, a stomach, kidneys and other organs made of glass on a glass table. The material used stresses both the fragility and purity of existence and the piece is part of a series of twelve tables used in clinical observation. Each table represents one of the dozen signs of the zodiac, symbolising, therefore, the plurality of bodies.²⁹ Chen Zhen made eleven crystal organs and arranged this 'interior landscape' on a surgical bed, the surface of the crystal reflecting the external landscape, and in so doing connecting the human body to society (the inner and outer spaces). The delicacy of the crystal is reminiscent of his failing organs as well as the purification of the body. In deploying different strategies, be it with organs made of translucent alabaster that radiate light or organs made of crystal, the artist explores the human body, and medicine and creative process becomes a lab of experimentation and meditation: 'The work *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* evokes the centuries-old Daoist concept of "Internal Alchemy" a practice of visualizing the human body as a form of healing. In order to initiate a process of purification in the body, one meditates on each internal organ and body part.'³⁰



Chen Zhen, *Zen Garden*, installation, (detail), 2000, photo: courtesy Blueproject Foundation



Chen Zhen, *Cristal landscape of inner body*, installation, 2000, photo: courtesy Blueproject Foundation



Chen Zhen, *Cristal landscape of inner body*, installation, (detail), 2000, photo: courtesy Blueproject Foundation

permission, we found out that in ancient times it was a spiritual enclave of importance from a geomantic point of view]. Xu Min notes 'Tanto los instrumentos como la forma de los órganos, proceden de un antiguo libro tibetano de anatomía. Es la realidad del hombre frente a la realidad del mundo' [Both the instruments and the shape of the organs come from an ancient Tibetan book of anatomy. It is the reality of a man in the face of the reality of the world].

- 29 Gras, 'The Great Void', op cit, p 90

- 30 Smart Museum of Art and Wrightwood 659, 'The Allure of Matter', 2019, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artistschen-zhen/>, accessed 25 August 2020

- 31 Fiaschi, 'Chen Zhen. Fragments d'éternité', op cit

- 32 Maxwell K Hearn, Ink Art, Past as Present in Contemporary China, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2013, p 73

- 33 Chen Zhen, *Invocation of Washing Fire*, Gli Ori Editore, Prato-Siena, 2003, p 321

- 34 Chen Zhen, *Chen Zhen*, MoMA PSI, New York, 2003, p 19

- 35 Jeffrey Deitch, 'Sculpture as doctor', *Chen Zhen*, op cit, 2003, p 13. Jeffrey Deitch explains: 'Toward the end of his life, Chen's preoccupation with his own health problems, along with his family's background in medicine, led him to investigate art as an alternative path toward healing. He resolved to teach himself traditional Chinese medicine through the practice of art. The centrality of the body in the structure and experience of his work was pushed to the next dimension. The title of one of his last exhibitions, 'Between Therapy and Meditation', is a description of his artistic

This awareness and acceptance of illness and his own body stress the relationship between body and community. *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* focuses on this inner landscape. External and internal conflict surface in the works of Chen Zhen, insofar as these depart from his personal experience. Chen Zhen builds imaginary landscapes. He notes that in Chinese tradition the body is not conceived as a machine but as a landscape where organs exist in synergy in order for that landscape to function harmoniously.³¹ Understood in such way, the landscapes become allegories of mood. As the art historian and curator Maxwell K Hearn explains: 'Landscape imagery long served as a metaphor for the political world and the individual's place within it – either prospering in a summer scene or living as a recluse through a desolate winter.'³² In *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body*, the artist poetically links his failing organs with the exterior, establishing in this manner a clear relationship between micro- and macrocosmos. He presents an affective and embodied landscape to represent illness and the various therapeutic processes that he is subject to, be it the surgical tools of *Zen Garden* or the Daoist mediation of *Internal Alchemy*. He also stresses his active role in self-examination and self-care. In works such as *Zen Garden* and *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body*, Chen Zhen models his own body symbolically, and this corporeal and affective landscape becomes a process of therapeutic self-consciousness. As the artist notes: 'Quand notre propre corps devient une sorte de laboratoire, une source d'imagination et d'expérimentation, le processus de vie se transforme en art' [when our body becomes a laboratory, source of imagination and experimentation, life is transformed into art].³³ The artist understands art as an instrument to reflect on existence and links the corporeal with the immaterial. In this exhibition one can clearly see how life and creation feed on one another. In the words of the artist:

For many years, my personal illness has influenced my professional life. My daily battle against illness has given me such energy that the whole experience has been transformed into a positive creative force. Treatment, cure, therapy, purification, and meditation: these daily preoccupations have become the universe in which art and life feed on each other.³⁴

Chen Zhen came from a family of doctors and he used art as a means to self-heal, showing an intention to manage illness and share the process.³⁵ He titled one of his last exhibitions 'Between Therapy and Meditation' (1999), and in it he examined the relationship between the doctor, the patient and illness by offering a holistic, artistic and philosophical investigation, and establishing links between Western medicine and Buddhist practices. Chen became an active agent by managing – through art – his own illness, and transforming the personal into the collective. With regards to this, Hou Hanru notes: 'Therapy is central to his thought and work. His belief in the curative function of art relates to his own physical state, and his spiritual reflection on it.'³⁶ In the same vein, in a conversation between Chen Zhen and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the artist explains:

Now I'm developing this project of becoming a doctor because I am a patient. And I ask myself, Why not make the process of healing a creative one? I'm going to take advantage of all these trips to see doctors, sorcerers,

approach at this point. Chen came from a distinguished family of doctors, and made a tremendous sacrifice in stepping away from the family tradition to find his way as an artist. Ironically, his art brought him back to medicine: he had become the sculptor as doctor.³⁶

- 36 Hanru, 'Transexperiences of a Spiritual Runaway', *op cit*, p 44

- 37 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 'Conversation with Chen Zhen', *Chen Zhen*, MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art, New York, 2003, pp 22–23

- 38 Laia Manonelles Moner, 'El abismo y la muerte en el arte experimental; la gestión de la enfermedad y el duelo' [The abyss and death in experimental art; the management of disease and mourning], *Muerte y transfiguración en el mundo artístico contemporáneo*, [Death and transfiguration in the contemporary artistic world], Edicions UB, Barcelona, 2015, pp 155–170

- 39 Maxwell K Hearn, *Ink Art, Past as Present in Contemporary China*, *op cit*, p 73

- 40 Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences*, *op cit*

- 41 Irene Pomar, 'The Eternal Misunderstanding', *Chen Zhen, In Between*, pp 21–23

- 42 Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences*, *op cit*

- 43 Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences*, *op cit*. Chen Zhen says: 'If you look at things only through the yardstick of western art history, or speak of things only in a tone consistent with the thinking that "contemporary art was invented by the westerners", then, not only are you going to lose what you will have, but what you already have will also disappear.'

etc.; I'm making my treatment part of an artistic process. The project of becoming a doctor would be a synthesis of my journey – my way of making art, and of living.³⁷

In this process, the body becomes the inner landscape in transit, and both *Zen Garden* and *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* are suggestive of how the artist transforms his unease and shares it with society, understanding artistic creation as a means to manage suffering, but also as a way of reflecting on medical and therapeutic processes from different cultural realms.³⁸ By drawing on his own transcultural experiences and various approaches to medicine, he creates artworks where the internal organs shape the interior landscape and reflect both beauty and vulnerability. Life rhythms are embodied in the Chinese landscape and ancient artists expressed their feelings through landscape, as Maxwell K Hearn says: 'and while the transience of individual lives is mirrored in the cycle of seasons or in the growth, maturity, and decay of a tree, the mountains and rivers represent the eternal face of nature to which humankind also belongs'.³⁹ Chen Zhen's experience therefore transcends the personal to connect with the collective and understands this relationship from a transcultural perspective. In fact, Chen notes how individuals are capable of turning into a kind of 'virus' and uses this metaphor to affirm that cultural exchange can be related to the process and the symptoms of a viral infection.⁴⁰ Creative process can be contagious; it can bring feelings out and affect the spectator by generating a space for thinking about life, transcultural experience and the sites between spaces. The domain of the individual and the collective are interwoven by this connective tissue.

The 'Eternal Misunderstanding' and Final Considerations

It is tempting to define his work as a dialogue between two cultures; to say that it shows the conflict between two ways of understanding medicine, life, and art... However, confining ourselves to this level of perception would mean reducing his creation to a conflict between nationalities.⁴¹

Irene Pomar, in her article 'The Eternal Misunderstanding', explores one of the main problems in relation to critical reception of so-called 'contemporary Chinese art' that is exhibited in the Euro-American context: simplification and over-interpretation. This analysis of the 'Other' still stresses exoticism, the construction of clichés, stereotypes and 'Chineseness' from a Euro-American perspective that perpetuates alterity. Chen Zhen explains, in precise terms, how he would like to get rid of the dynamic of 'centre' and 'periphery' by reflecting on the 'multi-other world', revising the definition of 'Others' and exploring new terms and concepts related to hybrid or 'in-between' spaces,⁴² beyond the confrontation between East and West that should have been already overcome in the twenty-first century.⁴³ Chen Zhen theorises about his own transcultural experience and christens it 'transexperience', a concept he describes as:

- 44 *Transexpérience, une conversation entre Chen Zhen et Zhu Xian, Invocation of Washing Fire*, Gli Ori Srl, Prato-Siena, 2003, p. 150
- 45 Chen Zhen, *Mots clef*, <http://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=40>, accessed 20 August 2020
- 46 Blueproject Foundation presents the work of Chen Zhen, one of China's most renowned contemporary artists, Blueproject Foundation press release, 4 November 2014, https://www.blueprojectfoundation.org/images/prensa/NdP_ChenZhen_eng.pdf. The original Spanish text reads: 'La muestra que reflexiona sobre el equilibrio de la vida interior, la relación con la cultura oriental y la fragilidad de la interioridad individual'.
- 47 *Ibid.* See also the publications: 'La Blueproject foundation acull el treball de Chen Zhen' [Blueproject foundation hosts the work of Chen Zhen], *Bonart*, 4 November 2014, <https://www.bonart.cat/actual/la-blueproject-foundation-acull-el-treball-de-chen-zhen/>, accessed 2 September 2021; 'Exposición del artista chino Chen Zhen en Barcelona' [Exhibition of the Chinese artist Chen Zhen in Barcelona], *Asiared*, 27 November 2014, <http://www.asiared.com/es/notices/2014/11/exposicion-del-artista-chino-chen-zhen-en-barcelona-6134.php>, accessed 2 September 2021; 'La vanguardia artística china llega a España de la mano de Chen Zhen' [Chinese artistic avantgarde arrives in Spain in the hands of Chen Zhen], *La Vanguardia*, 28 November 2014, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/2014/11/28/54420844443/blueproject-acoge-la-primera-exposicion-en-espana-del-artista-chino-chen-zhen.html>, accessed 2 September 2021

un concept empirique impur, un mode de pensée et une méthode de création artistique... Elle consiste en une double intersection. La première, entre mes expériences passées et présentes ; la seconde, entre le réseau de mes expériences personnelles et celles des autres, de tous les autres, par exemple des Occidentaux. Rien n'est indépendant, rien n'est fixé. Plonger dans la vie, s'adapter à l'évolution des circonstances, se mélanger, s'identifier avec les autres... C'est la stratégie de l'eau. Transparente, changeante, mouvante, pénétrante; elle rassemble les expériences, les continents, les hommes... L'intéressant, c'est d'être en mouvement. En Chine, nous disons : « Les arbres meurent quand on les déplace ; les hommes survivent en se déplaçant. [an impure empirical concept, a way of thinking and a method of artistic creation... It consists of a double intersection. The first, between my past and present experiences; the second, between the network of my personal experiences and those of others – all the others, for example, Westerners. Nothing is independent, nothing is fixed. Diving into life, adapting to the evolution of circumstances, mixing with, identifying with others... It is the strategy of water. Transparent, changeable, in flux, penetrating; it [water] resembles experiences, continents, mankind... The interesting thing is to be in movement. In China, we say: 'Trees die when we displace them; men survive when they move']'.⁴⁴

This fluid and evolving reality is linked to other concepts, which the artist terms 'voyages', and which have to do with encounters and the reciprocity between various cultural frameworks in a global context, that is, 'double exil' [double exile] as a process of 'constant recontextualisation' and the notion of 'entre' [between] that alludes to the virgin space across two cultures and that can be opened up to new connections and encounters.⁴⁵ Despite Chen Zhen's theoretical and practical exploration of the notion of 'transexpérience', critical reception remains largely oblivious to this concept. Articles in various newspapers and cultural publications that discussed the exhibition 'Chen Zhen: In-Between' repeat the same sentence: '(The exhibition) is a reflection on the balance of inner life, the relationship with Western culture and the fragility of the individual's inner world.'⁴⁶ But these brief articles do not explore *how* the works of Chen Zhen address these relations, when copying the expression provided by the Blueproject Foundation press dossier.⁴⁷ This exemplifies the generalised absence of art criticism, but also the ways in which media reproduces the discourses of the institutions that programme the exhibitions. This is a problem that transcends the Spanish context and is true of the global milieu. Similarly, it is worrying to realise that – from the information provided by the foundation – the sentences that are reproduced are those that evoke the dichotomy between East and West, avoiding the inclusion of the fragments that allude to concepts – such as transexpérience – that attempt to transcend the stereotyped gaze to the 'Other' and open new spaces in transcultural communication.

There are only three reviews by professional art critics that actually engage with Zhen Chen's work on display: those of Roberta Bosco in *El País*,⁴⁸ Teresa Sesé in *La Vanguardia*,⁴⁹ and Laia Antúnez in *Quèfem*.⁵⁰ The headings of the three critiques note the relevance of the artist and the presence of Chen Zhen for the first time in Spanish territory. Similarly, Roberta Bosco and Teresa Sesé both quote directly the words of Xu Min, who curated the exhibition at the Blueproject, and Laia Antúnez

- 48 Roberta Bosco, 'Los paisajes humanos de Chen Zhen. Blueproject Barcelona expone la obra de uno de los artistas chinos más influyentes' [The human landscapes of Chen Zhen. Blueproject Barcelona exhibits one of China's most influential artists], *El País*, Barcelona, 1 December 2014

- 49 Teresa Sesé, 'La Blueproject desvela los paisajes internos de Chen Zhen' [The Blueproject reveals Chen Zhen's internal landscapes], *La Vanguardia*, 2 December 2014, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/2014/12/02/54420431141/la-blueproject-desvela-los-paisajes-internos-de-chen-zhen-teresa-sese.html>, accessed 12 February 2014

- 50 Laia Antúnez, 'Anatomia d'una trajectòria artística, la mirada íntima i personal del xinès Chen Zhen s'exposa per primera vegada a Espanya' [Anatomy of an artistic path, the intimate and personal gaze of the Chinese Chen Zhen is exhibited for the first time in Spain], *Què fem*, 23 January 2015

mentions the words of Aurélien Le Genissel, the artistic director of the foundation that hosted the show. Laia Antúnez emphasises – using her own words – the cultural shock as a point of departure in the work of Chen Zhen, and Roberta Bosco, in her brief critique, also mentions the relationship between East and West:

Chen Zhen estaba débil y cansado y tuvo varias premoniciones de que su fin estaba cerca, así que su natural interés por el cuerpo humano y su ritmos, la fragilidad de la vida, su equilibrio y sus límites se incrementó aún más', recuerda Xu Min, que debido a los estrictos controles de la inmigración de su país, pudo reunirse con su marido en París sólo tres años después de su salida... Las obras, en muestra hasta el 22 de febrero, revelan una profunda reflexión sobre las diferencias culturales entre Oriente y Occidente, sobretodo por lo que concierne la espiritualidad, la relación con el cuerpo y la práctica de la medicina. [Chen Zhen was weak, tired and had many premonitions about the end of his life. Therefore, his natural interest in the human body and its rhythms, the fragility of life, balance and its limits was more heightened, recalls Xu Min, who could only join her husband in Paris three years after his departure due to the strict immigration controls in her country... The works, shown until 22 February, reveal a profound reflection of cultural differences between East and West, especially with regards to spirituality and the relationship between the body and medical practice.]⁵¹

Teresa Sesé is the only one who introduces the concept of 'transexperiencia'. In the words of the art critic:

'– la transexperiencia – que consistía en bucear en la vida, en fluir, en dejarse llevar por sus propias experiencias y las de los demás, abierto siempre al cambio, a crear relaciones dinámicas con el otro, a reformular su compromiso con su cultura original al tiempo que construía otra en Occidente' [– transexperience – which consisted in embracing life, in flowing, in living fully one's own experiences and those of others, reconfiguring one's relationship with the country of origin and constructing a new one in the West].⁵²

Moreover, despite citing curators and articulating their own discourse, the concepts stressed in the texts quoted above by Roberta Bosco, Laia Antúnez and Teresa Sesé focus on the East–West dynamic (as in the press) without exploring this relationship in depth. Only Sesé uses the concept 'transexperience' and transcends this dichotomy to analyse its nuances.

In conclusion, in the critical reception of the exhibition 'Chen Zhen: In-Between' – apart from the general absence of professional art criticism engaging with it – only one text uses the term 'transexperience'. None of the critiques analyse the space of the 'in-between', a concept that is directly linked to the notion of 'transexperience', as noted by Aurélien Le Genissel. Similarly, direct or indirect references to the condition of the 'hybrid man' or 'amphibian man', as the artist referred to himself, or even his determination to go beyond the definition of the 'Other', is missing. Art critics have not engaged fully with the curatorial proposals of Xu Min, Chen Zhen's widow, who has lived the same transcultural

51 Bosco, 'Los paisajes humanos de Chen Zhen', op cit

52 Sesé, 'La Blueproject desvela los paisajes internos de Chen Zhen', op cit

experience. Her curatorial work is highly personal, that is, it builds on complicity, love and care. Curation for Xu Min is a transcultural process insofar as it establishes a dialogue between herself, the team at the Blueproject Foundation in Barcelona, and that of the Galleria Continua in San Gimignano. The spectator was invited to an introspective reading, an intimate space for reflection where s/he could get close to the works. The visual poetry and world of affects of *Chen Zhen: In Between*, encourages the emancipated spectator to explore different avenues, to appropriate them and think about how these experiences can resonate in his or her own life.

Chen Zhen maintains that all cultures are 'Other' and questions openly the dynamics between 'centre' and 'periphery', drawing on cultural misunderstandings as a productive force and investigating spaces of transit or 'in-betweenness'. Within these parameters, the artist explores the relationships that are established by transcultural artistic exchange alongside those that occur in the inner world. In so doing, he contextualises and links his vital experience with the artistic or more general aesthetic spheres. 'The Eternal Misunderstanding', that is, the reductionist temptation, is to define the work of Chen Zhen as 'el conflicto entre dos formas de entender la medicina, la vida, el arte' [the conflict between two ways of understanding medicine, life and art],⁵³ stressing how the reception of his work is simplified as a 'una pugna de pasaportes' [conflict of passports]. As observed previously, over-interpretations, reductionisms and the heightening of alterity and difference are recurrent in the reception of contemporary Chinese art in Euro-American contexts.

Another matter worthy of mention is the role of art criticism and its responsibility in a context where only one discourse is repeated by the media. Frequently, art criticism is substituted by the informative notes from the press dossiers prepared by the programming institutions, which avoid a critical positioning. In order to open a polyphonous space in this context the words of the art critic and curator Hou Hanru (who develops his work in a transnational context) need to be revisited. Hanru reminds us of the need to go beyond stereotypes: 'the challenge lies in reorienting Western expectations of the oriental towards the unexpected'.⁵⁴ In the face of the homogenisation of reception it is important to leave space for that which is unexpected to construct a history articulated by plural and multiple narratives.

As suggested by Chen Zhen, clichés can only be transcended by drawing on cultural misunderstandings in order to transform them into a fertile terrain, an inspiration and tool to examine spaces of transit and rethink new hybrid spaces:

53 Pomar, 'The Eternal Misunderstanding', op cit, p 22

54 Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground*, selected texts edited by Yu Hsiao-Hwei, Timezone 8, Hong Kong, 2002, p 66

55 Chen Zhen, *Transiexperiences*, op cit

Misunderstanding is a most tantalizing state of communication. It is an effective 'medium' through which cross-cultural exchanges and the very co-existence of the various cultures are made possible... Misunderstanding is predicated on meeting each other. It occurs only when you are trying to know and to understand the other party. Things obvious and superficial will not cause misunderstanding, which takes place only in certain deep layers of communication... Today, one of the major merits of art is to stimulate the true desire to study 'Others' and 'other cultures' by creating misunderstanding.⁵⁵

The artwork of Chen Zhen encourages the spectator to think about misunderstandings, the spaces in-between and transexperiences. These concepts need contextualising in relation to the migration of many artists during the 1980s and 1990s. The art historian and curator Wu Hung uses the expression 'a craze for going abroad' (*chuguo re*) to indicate the longing of those youngsters who emigrated to the US, Europe and Australia, noting the process of re-invention they underwent while reflecting on transcultural identity.⁵⁶ Other historians, such as Gao Minglu, Hou Hanru, Melissa Chiu, Katie Hill, Paul Gladston and Chen Zhen used the terms diaspora, exile, double exile, in-between and Third Space in relation to the works produced during these migration processes. As Melissa Chiu explains, from the beginning of the new millennium 'the art communities inside and outside China have grown more connected than ever'.⁵⁷ She also stresses the creative potential of transexperiences and links it to globalisation and transnationalism. Likewise, she warns us of the risks of processes of acculturation due to the fact that young people in present-day 'liquid society' (Bauman, 1999) transit through or inhabit more mobile environments which are affected by globalisation's dynamics of homogenisation.⁵⁸

To conclude, I should like to stress the need for attentive reflection on transexperience and transcultural processes to avoid epidemic approaches to other cultural environments and to open up new, organic, flexible and non-static spaces for thinking and debate – spaces that go beyond the prevailing dichotomic relationships and transcend the still present 'gaze of the Other'.

56 Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, Thames & Hudson, 2014, p. 278

57 Melissa Chiu, *Breakout. Chinese art outside China*, Edizioni Charta Srl, Milan, 2006, p. 8

58 *Ibid.*, p. 45

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