

THE  
WALTHER COLLECTION

**Body, Self, Society Chinese Performance Photography of the 1990s**

April 14–August 19, 2017



Can Xing, *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain*, 1995

**Opening Reception: Thursday, April 13, from 6pm – 8pm**

The Walther Collection Project Space

526 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 718

New York, NY 10001

+ 1 212 352 0683 | [contact@walthercollection.com](mailto:contact@walthercollection.com)

For the second installment of its year-long series of exhibitions devoted to contemporary photography and video art from Asia, The Walther Collection is pleased to present *Body, Self, Society: Chinese Performance Photography of the 1990s*. Highlighting some of the most significant examples of Chinese performance photography from 1995 to 1999, the exhibition features works by Ai Weiwei, Cang Xin, Huang Yan, Ma Liuming, Song Dong, Zhang Huan, and Zhuang Hui. The exhibition is organized by guest curator Christopher Phillips with curatorial coordination and support from Daniela Baumann, Oluremi C. Onabanjo, and Sabrina Mandanici.

*Body, Self, Society: Chinese Performance Photography of the 1990s* presents the richness and variety that marks Chinese performance photography of the mid to late 1990s. Although artists' performances took place frequently in China during the 1980s, visual documentation of these events was initially haphazard, limiting wider awareness of them. By the mid-1990s, Chinese artists began to conceive performances with a clear anticipation of the way they would ultimately appear in photographs or short videos. They mastered the art of creating provocative, iconic images that documented the main elements of a fleeting performance that might be witnessed by only a handful of onlookers. Such images were intended to be visually striking, and to attract attention when they circulated internationally in art magazines and, later, virtually via the Internet. They also provided the artists with the opportunity to produce impressive, collectible prints for the art market.

The works brought together in this exhibition focus on individual artist-performers who explore three key themes: new visions of the performing body, the changing sense of self in modern China, and a continued confrontation with specific aspects of the country's society, history, and culture.

In an arresting series of 20 black-and-white studio photographs, Zhang Huan's *Skin* (1997) shows the artist exploring his own flesh as a material to be systematically manipulated and transformed. He pinches together his lips, tugs on his tongue, pulls on his ears—all the while gazing with ferocious intensity at the viewer. Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming Walks the Great Wall* (1998) brings together in a single, large-format print 16 images of the long-haired artist. Naked and presenting male and female attributes simultaneously, the artist strides along the cold stone surfaces of the Great Wall of China. In three sequential photographs, Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) shows the artist impassively letting a centuries-old Chinese vase fall, which shatters on impact with the ground. This performance has been both vehemently criticized as an act of art vandalism, and praised as an ironic commentary on the nationwide destruction of China's cultural heritage during the country's economic boom in the 1980s and '90s.

Huang Yan's *Chinese Landscape Tattoo* series (1999) depicts a male torso covered with a Chinese landscape carried out in Song Dynasty style. Huang uses human skin as a painted surface to call attention to the surprising absence of the nude figure in traditional Chinese art. Cang Xin's *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain* (1995) is a record of a celebrated performance carried out by ten Beijing artists, male and female, including Cang Xin, Ma Liuming, and Zhang Huan. Having stripped off their clothes, the artists piled atop one another to brashly create a temporary extension of a mountain hilltop. Song Dong's *Printing on Water* (1996) consists of 36 photographs made during a one-hour performance that the artist carried out while standing in the Lhasa River in Tibet. In these images, he is shown repeatedly raising and lowering a wooden printing block to the water's

surface—the block bears the Chinese character for “water.” With this repeated, symbolic action, the artist calls our attention to the fluidity and transience of language. Zhuang Hui’s *One and Thirty Artists* and *One and Thirty Peasants* (1995–96) are series of 30 collaborative portraits arranged in grid format. In each series, the individual images present the artist and a person selected from a specific social category, photographed together in a standardized pose.

**Ai Weiwei** (b. 1957) is one of China’s most widely acclaimed contemporary artists and political activists. During a 12-year stay in New York from 1981 to 1993, he began to produce conceptual sculptural objects and also countless photographs of his daily life. After returning to Beijing in 1993, he served as an important conduit of information that provided emerging Chinese artists with details of the main currents of contemporary Western art, including performance, conceptualism, and installation art. An outspoken critic of China’s authoritarian political system, he became a committed activist following the government’s cover-up of corruption issues surrounding the deadly 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province. Although arrested and imprisoned for three months in 2011 on unspecified charges, he has continued to produce installations and sculptural works that explore a wide of Chinese social and cultural issues.

**Cang Xin** (b. 1967) was born in Inner Mongolia, studied at the Tianjin Academy of Music, and took up painting in 1991. In 1993 he moved to Beijing’s East Village and became active in the performance activities that flourished there. He subsequently incorporated his growing interest in shamanism and in Daoist philosophy into his performances and photographs. This approach is evident in his “Communication” series, in which he is shown touching a variety of objects with his tongue, in hope of making contact with the spirits that he believes inhabit all inanimate forms.

**Huang Yan** (b. 1966) studied at Changchun Normal Academy and started his career as a poet. In 1999 he began to make artworks that involve painting Chinese landscapes onto unexpected surfaces, such as the human body, furniture, and musical instruments. Often these works are carried out in collaboration with his wife, the painter Zhang Tiemei.

**Ma Liuming** (b. 1969) studied oil painting at the Hubei Academy of Fine Art. Two years after graduating in 1991, the artist moved to the Beijing East Village. There, Ma’s nude, gender-bending performances stirred considerable controversy and led on one occasion to arrest and imprisonment. After winning international art-world attention in the 1990s, Ma stopped creating performance art in the early 2000s, and returned to painting.

**Song Dong** (b. 1966) is one of China’s most widely exhibited contemporary artists. Trained as an oil painter at Capital Normal University in Beijing, he

made his reputation in the 1990s with imaginative installations, performances, and multimedia works. Much of Song Dong's work explores the themes of the China's rapidly changing urban environment, the fleeting traces of human activity, and his relations with the members of his immediate family. He frequently collaborates with his wife, artist Yin Xiuzhen, and, more recently, with his daughter Song Errui.

**Zhang Huan** (b. 1965) studied oil painting at Henan University and moved to Beijing in 1991 for graduate study at the Central Academy of Fine Art. In 1993 he moved to Beijing's East Village and quickly began a series of powerful, sometimes harrowing performances that won him wide attention. After relocating to New York in 1998, he launched an international performance career, eventually carrying out more than 40 individually conceived and executed performances before he decided to practice other means of artistic expression. In 2006 he moved to Shanghai and established a large studio that specializes in the production of monumental sculptures, paintings, and carved-wood reliefs.

**Zhuang Hui** (b. 1963) is a Beijing-based conceptual artist whose major areas of activity include performance, sculptural installations, and photography. Born in Gansu province, he attributes his early interest in the arts to his father, who was an itinerant studio photographer. After practicing oil painting and then taking up performance in the early 1990s, Zhuang won attention in the latter part of that decade with imaginative installation works and a series of large-scale portraits of occupational groups made with a banquet camera.

**The Walther Collection** is dedicated to researching, collecting, exhibiting, and publishing photography and video art. Since opening to the public in 2010, the collection has grown to become one of the most important holdings of contemporary African and Asian photography and video art, American vernacular imagery, and nineteenth century photographs and books from Europe and Africa. The collection presents exhibitions and public programs at a three-gallery museum campus in Neu-Ulm, Germany, and a Project Space in New York City, USA. Organized by leading international curators, the exhibitions from the collection endeavor to create dynamic juxtapositions by artists whose contributions to photography significantly expand the history of the medium. The collection's established publishing series with Steidl, complementing the exhibitions program with extensive catalogues and monographs, is informed by comprehensive research by acclaimed writers, critics, and art historians. Recognized as a leading institution in the study and presentation of African photography, The Walther Collection presents new exhibitions annually in Germany and New York, as well as traveling exhibitions around the world.