

The Difference between Indeterminate and Determinate Bodies

The Performances of Zhang Huan and Images of Torture and Interrogation at CIA Black Sites

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Artist Zhang Huan performed *Seeds of Hamburg* (fig. 1) in 2002 at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany. Huan stayed in a cage with pigeons and doves while covered in honey and sunflower seeds during the performance. After 11 September, a year prior to his performance, the United State's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began operating an international network of prison facilities for the incarceration, interrogation and torture of supposed terrorists (figs. 2 and 3) called "black sites." *The Washington Post* published on 26 December 2002 an article reporting a CIA prison in one corner of Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan made of metal containers. The relationship between these two events is stark. Both Huan's performances and images of interrogation and torture at CIA black site detention facilities disseminate images of bodies tested to their limits. Yet, the latter happens by coercion to fit the criteria for the spectacle of Western imperialist norms while the former happens by self-imposition for the purposes of empowering the body.

Figure 1



Zhang Huan

Figure 2



A detainee forced to

Figure 3



An image taken from Abu

Seeds of Hamburg
2002

Performance, Kunstverein
in Hamburg, Germany

Source:
<http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWorkContent.asp?id=20&iParentID=16&mid=1>

stand on boxes

Source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse

Ghraib of a hooded and
wired Iraqi prisoner,
believed to be Satar Jabar,
who reportedly was told
that he would be
electrocuted if he fell off
the box

Source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse

Huan's *Seeds of Hamburg* is self-imposed, whereas, the torturing of detainees at CIA black sites happens by way of coercion. Yet, not all self-imposed acts empower their actors. However, Huan undermines the spectacle that colonizes the gaze through seemingly arbitrary performances that negate the latest commodity fetish. Examples include *Nine Holes*, 1995, (fig. 4) in which the artist and his friends place their genitals next to the earth in holes (for males) and mounds (for females) outside of Beijing, China, and *Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York*, 1998, (fig. 5) in which the artist lay on a bed of ice with dogs tied with their leashes to its posts outside of P.S. 1 Contemporary in New York. In these performances, Huan locates himself counter to the spectacles that stereotype others, stereotypes which the United States projects in images disseminating from their CIA's operations at black sites.

Figure 4



Zhang Huan

Nine Holes

1995

Performance, Beijing, China

Source: <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWorkContent.asp?id=74&iParentID=42&mid=1>

Figure 5



Zhang Huan

Pilgrimage--Wind and Water in New York

1998

Performance, P.S.1, USA

Source: <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWorkContent.asp?id=36&iParentID=20&mid=1>

Images coming from CIA black sites are spectacular in that they appear extraordinary in an attempt to project the West's fear of the other in a rigid and stereotypical fashion. While images depict the West's fears of homophobia with detainees piled naked in heaps and masturbating in front of their peers, Huan's performances attempt to dissimulate performances that colonize the body. Huan locates his body in a process despite the prevalence of images which attempt to fix bodies into notions of development. Huan writes that the "main train of thought in my work is actually a view of humanity today. It's a negation of human development from the beginning of time to today."¹ Huan seems to locate himself in nothingness.

Huan may know that the time will end when he will occupy a cage in *Seeds of Hamburg*, whereas, detainees at CIA black sites may not know when their occupation will end. Yet, the two events correlate with what is perceived as a testing of the body's normal limits. The difference lies in the nature of the testing. Huan's performances allow him to perceive and test limits which become indeterminate, whereas, any limits a detainee incarcerated in CIA black site prisons perceives depend on the perceived ends of a faceless oppressor.

Huan's performances like *Seeds of Hamburg* cause him to experience first a loss of the perceived normal limits to his body, such as feelings of irritation, exhaustion and pain, which results in the finding of new limits to his body. In the case of *Seeds of Hamburg*, the sensation of birds eating the sunflower seeds would cause less pain than works like *12 square meters*, 1994, (fig. 6) in which flies bite him in a filthy public toilet due to a coating of fish smelling liquid and honey applied directly to his skin. Instead, *Seeds of Hamburg* simulates being eaten by birds, which possibly refers to the ritual of feeding deceased monks to vultures in Tibet. Huan thus simulates the dispersion of the deceased monk's body through the metaphor of pigeons and doves eating off of him. The metaphor is a stretch. However, Huan writes of *Seeds of Hamburg*, "[p]erhaps I represented a Tibetan ritual in a different form."²

Figure 6

¹ Borysevicz, Mathieu, "Zhang Huan, Before and After," interview with Zhang Huan

² Huan, Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing"



Zhang Huan

12m²

1994

Performance, Beijing, China

Source:

<http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWorkContent.asp?id=43&iParentID=43&mid=1>

Huan loses himself in order to find himself. It is relevant that Huan describes a fundamental moment in his thinking following an accident when an outer latch of an iron box accidentally closed with him in it on Miaofengshan Mountain outside of Beijing around 1995. A cleaning lady heard his calls for “help!” and opened the box. Huan writes, “[a]fter the accident, I had a deeper understanding of life. I could live without much to eat and without money. However, I could not live without freedom. Being alive is the most important.

Life is the priority.”³ For many of the detainees, however, life becomes subordinate to the limits imposed by the CIA interrogators. Life becomes an obstacle rather than a priority. Life becomes seemingly against the process of defining the self since any definition becomes that given by a faceless oppressor. The detainees lose the ability to redefine themselves. Detainees in CIA black sites lose this feeling altogether whereas Huan may hope to find a new limit to feeling his body.

Pain becomes a process by which Huan senses new limits for his body. The images of Huan’s performances shock, but not in ways meant to induce exotic fantasies according to the latest consumer fetish. Images from Huan’s performances appear uncomfortable. Yet, unlike flagellation, Huan does not perform out of feelings of guilt. For that matter, Huan does not like to perform. He “despises” it. Nonetheless, his performances appear masochistic. Huan attempts to find peace under pain. Such peace comes from the destabilizing of limits to the body for the purpose of finding indeterminate ones.

Perhaps the most troubling psychological aspect of becoming a detainee within the CIA’s black site network is the knowledge that any limits on the body depend on the determination of a faceless oppressor. Many former detainees describe that any knowledge of the outside world would come from the interrogators and prison guards, whereas, Huan knows exactly where he is.

Does Huan’s experience in performances like *Seeds of Hamburg*, performances that locate new limits to the body, relate to the experiences felt by detainees in CIA black site detention facilities? While Huan locates his humanity in the variable limits of the body, by the indeterminate space between the mind and the body, it appears that the bodies of detainees in CIA black sites are all too determined by Western fears of the other.

Can Huan’s losing himself in order to find himself correlate to the sensation of the loss of sensation former detainees describe of their experiences during torture? Does the process of losing oneself offer some sense of indeterminacy with regard to the detainee in a CIA black site? In other words, do the loss of sensory perception on the part of detainees and the resulting loss of their cognitive abilities during torture correlate with the pain felt by Huan during his performances? One of the starkest contrasts appears to be the psychological impact. Detainees held at CIA black sites appear trapped, with the only hope coming from that of a faceless oppressor whom they completely depend on for any hope of any future. Huan, however, limits his performances.

The performances of Zhang Huan negate the spectacle of Western imperialism that appears in images disseminated from CIA operations of torture and interrogation of supposed terrorists at black sites, while both test the limits of their subject’s bodies. Western imperialism seeks to colonize the body by

³ *Ibid*

exploiting fears and fantasies that imagine it according to the spectacle. If the spectacle is the quintessence of consumerism then Zhang Huan's setting of seemingly arbitrary limits for the purpose of enduring his performances signal the absence of the spectacle via their location in nothingness. Indeed, nothing can determine the limits of the body may prescribe the philosophy behind Huan's performances, whereas, US imperialism seeks to determine the lives of detainees held at CIA black site prisons.

Works cited

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