

GLADSTONE GALLERY

JOUANNO, EVELYNE, "HUANG YONG PING," FLASH ART, SUMMER 1999, pp. 114-115

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

515 West 24th Street
New York, New York 10011
Telephone 212 206 9300
Fax 212 206 9301

HUANG YONG PING

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND NEGOTIATION

Evelyne Jouanno

HUANG YONG PING (along with Jean-Pierre Bertrand) is representing France at this year's Venice Biennale. Having remained in Paris after his participation in the "Magiciens de la Terre" exhibition in June 1989, this Chinese artist has rapidly become one of the most influential figures in the reconstruction of the international art scene. The selection policy for this French Pavilion is significant as it seems to break away from the promotion of a "national art" and encourage a multicultural understanding of contemporary artistic creation in France.

Reforming artistic and cultural structures so as to invent a new cultural identity was the principal motivation for all the Chinese avant-garde groups. Huang Yong Ping (and his Xiamen Dada group) best represents this movement as he was the first to introduce Dada-inspired avant-garde notions to the Chinese context. This led him to develop alternative "anti-art" strategies and to free himself from the ideological and linguistic constraints that had deeply marked the ways of thinking, working, and even existing of Chinese generations. At the same time, he was aware of Western hegemony in contemporary art and culture, and

soon began looking for solutions that would allow him to find specific, strategic meditations between Chinese cultural heritage and the rational, conventional artistic expressions of Western contemporary art.

In the West his work focuses on criticizing the culturally, economically, and politically dominant reality in which he now finds himself. By introducing ancient systems of Chinese divination — including the *I Ching* (*The Book of Changes*) — into his work, he not only suggests that the universe, the world, and human cultures are constantly changing, but he also provides a strategic alternative to rationalist ideology and challenges Western definitions of truth as well as its hold on the world. The result was his *Four-wheeled roulette wheel* (1987) which enabled him to produce works using all kinds of different objects without having to account for his actions or control the results.

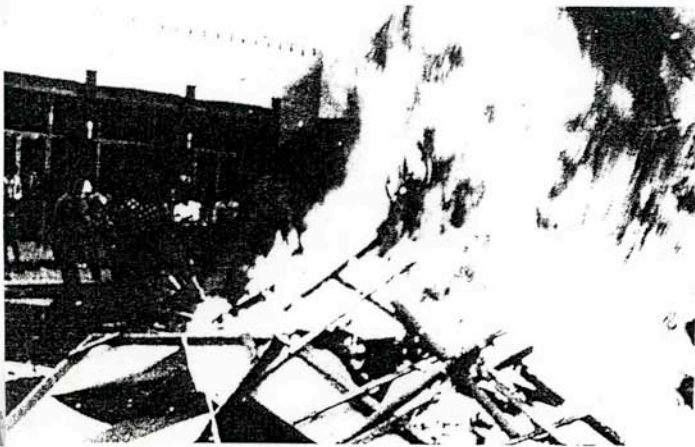
If the West has always been modern, and the Orient, by definition, traditional or pre-modern, then any re-reading of these two cultures implies a critical analysis of Western discourse and, simultaneously, an enunciation of the different relations and contradictions be-

tween tradition and reality. This insightful awareness, along with the *Great Roulette Wheel's* guidelines, is what in 1987 led Huang Yong Ping to put Wang Bomin's *History of Chinese Painting* and Herbert Read's *History of Modern Painting* in a washing machine for two minutes, to end up a dirty block of pulp. This process, which one again implies transformation, allows him to act physically and symbolically at the very root of culture and historic logic in order to break down the forms of classification and categorization based on Eurocentric ideology.

In 1990 he used paper paste made from books and newspapers to "bandage" the "wounds" of an uprooted tree; the following year, he "washed" a whole section of books at the Carnegie Museum of Art library, Pittsburgh; he even turned twenty-odd volumes of Beuys, Kounellis, Cucchi, and Kiefer's *Ein Gespräch*, along with their catalogues into "vomiting" as a means of questioning the political power of such art world superstars.

In the West, Huang Yong Ping took his direct attacks on daily and political reality a step further by adding even more surprising materials to his artistic vocabulary, including cooked rice, Chinese medicine, and even live animals and insects as metaphors for different ethnic groups. Rice, animals, and insects constitute an essential part of the everyday Chinese reality where they have been used to formulate an entire system of languages, symbols, beliefs, social and moral codes emphasizing the non-difference between Man and Nature, or between the World and the Elements. On the contrary, Western thought has viewed Nature as "other" compared to Culture (or to "civilized humanity") ever since the ancient Greeks. Therefore, introducing "Nature" (rice, animals) with its traditional and cultural connotations as the incarnation of art in the Western institutional context becomes a radically subversive, even inconceivable act of provocation.

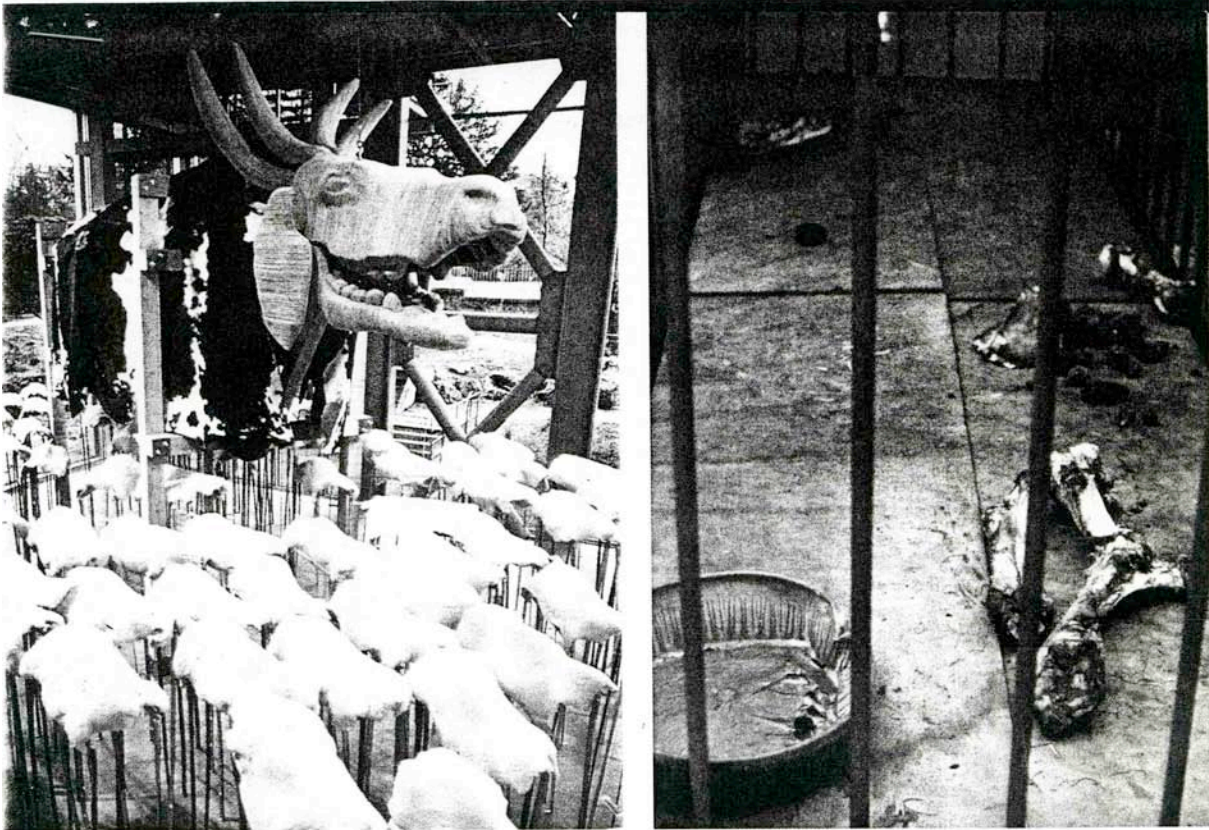
One of the characteristic strategies of Huang Yong Ping's works resides in their mutability: actually, most of them are continually changing mainly due to the passing of time (the rice slowly begins to decompose during the exhibition, the insects fly around and eat each other up, etc.). This strategy of mutation reveals a highly provocative dialectic: a subversive action



Xiamen Dada — To Destroy The Works, 1986.

114 Flash Art SUMMER 1999

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Left: *Péril de Mouton*, 1997. Right: *Passage*, 1993.

against contemporary art and its established definitions.

Over the last few years, Huang Yong Ping's exploration has "naturally" turned towards current events involving intercultural conflicts and cultural repression. In this regard *Passage* (1993) remains highly significant and marks the beginning of this trend. For this installation, the artist "rebuilt" the passport checkpoints at Glasgow Airport, complete with their "E.C. NATIONAL" and "OTHERS" signs, in order to question the meaning of national and cultural borders in today's world. Huang Yong Ping had actually planned to put a pair of lions in cages located under each of these entrances. They would have been both real guards and symbols of the powers that hinder and control the freedom of the "other."

By installing a tent at the MOMA in Oxford in which visitors were obliged to witness a battle between thousands of crickets and a handful of scorpions, he directly challenged colonialist attitudes toward the Asian people (Huang means "cricket" in Chinese). But the most emblematic work in this regard is certainly his *Théâtre du Monde* (Theater of the World, 1993). In an arena shaped like a tortoise — an animal which Chinese tradition

associates with harmony and balance — he brought together thousands of insects and animals from different species and origins in a metaphoric representation of inter-ethnic conflicts. "For me, conflict is more important than harmony. Conflict brings freshness and this attests to the fact that history is moving on and the world is changing." This work provoked real politico-cultural conflicts which led to its censorship at the "Hors Limites" exhibition at the Pompidou (1994).

In this critical period of changes and politico-cultural conflicts, Huang Yong Ping's strategies for transforming and even transcending a setting in order to reveal its reality appear all the more effective and important. For instance, in New York in 1994, he transformed the entrance of the New Museum into an automatic car-wash, recalling the history of the first Chinese immigrants in the United States and the racist discourse that accompanied them (*Chinese Hand Laundry*). *Da Xian, The Doomsday* (1997) with its three over-sized bowls exotically decorated with images of old European concessions in the Far East and full of all sorts of foods products that had to be consumed before "July 1997," is a direct reminder of the historical context of a culture that at the time

was preparing to lose its last great colony.

Huang Yong Ping confronts territories with their own history; he reinvents their mythologies (such as of the "mad-cow crisis" in *Péril de Mouton* at Fondation Cartier, 1997), and he analyses and deconstructs their cultural foundations. This is where we can effectively call to mind issues of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of cultural differences and negotiation, of exclusion and co-existence, of Man and Nature, etc. They have become the fundamental issues of contemporary, globally-oriented reality. ■

Evelyne Jouanno is a critic based in Paris.

Huang Yong Ping was born in 1954 in Xiamen, Fujian province, China. He lives and works in Paris. Selected solo shows: 1994: New MoCA, New York; 1995: Froment & Putman, Paris; 1998/99: Jack Tilton, New York; De Appel, Amsterdam; Art & Public, Geneva. Selected group shows: 1989: "Magiciens de la Terre," Pompidou, Paris; 1992: "Small, Medium, Large, Lifesize," Museo Pecci, Prato (Italy); 1994: "Hors-Limites," Pompidou, Paris; 1995: "Ripple Across the Water," Watari-um, Tokyo; 1997: Johannesburg Biennale; Kwangju Biennale; "Truce," Site Santa Fe; Skulptur Projekte, Münster; "Manifesta 1," Rotterdam; 1998/99: Venice Biennale; "Unfinished History," MoMA, Chicago; "Cities on the Move," Louisiana Museum (Denmark); "Inside Out," PSI and Asia Society, New York; "Unfinished History," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; "Etre Nature," Fondation Cartier, Paris; "Cities on the Move 2," Capc, Bordeaux.

SUMMER 1999 *Flash Art* 115