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Pained Body, Performed Madness

A study of the bio-political philosophy in He Yunchang's performance art

A Master's Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts (120 credits) in Visual Culture

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the considerations of bare life in He Yunchang's performance arts, based on two of his works, *One-meter democracy* (2010) and *Golden Sunlight* (1999). I make a deep analysis of the images and archives of the two performances, about the artist's artistic method of using visual signs. Furthermore, I interpret how the artist used the bodily pain to create figures. I also investigate how the performance art as an imitation of madness became a potential threat to the sovereign and law in some circumstances, based on the comparison with another two performance artists, Hua Yong from China and Pyotr Pavlensky from Russia. The circumstance of these artists corresponded to the situation He Yunchang has presented in both his works.

The theoretical aspects of the bio-political philosophy are mostly from Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer theory and his definition of the State of Exception. Foucault's description of madness in *Madness and Civilization* is also used to interpret why the performance art is seen as madness, from a historical perspective. Finally, these analyses will lead to a discussion of the relationship between performance art and modern politics which, as I conclude, could be seen as the conflict between madness and rational society.

KEY WORDS

He Yunchang

Performance art

Homo Sacer

State of Exception

Madness

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INTRODUCTION

Performance art has a history of over fifty years. In the eastern world, especially in China, because of the particularity of the societal system and the social environment, performance art has developed some forms and themes diverse from the west. He Yunchang is a Chinese performance artist, and his performances are mostly poetic and somewhat idealistic. Many includes the philosophy of Buddhism. For example, there are elements of endurance and purposeless behaviors in some of his artworks. Before 2010, which is when the performance *One-meter democracy* took place in Beijing, seldom did critics interpret his performances from political perspectives. However, *One-meter democracy* reflects He Yunchang's opinion of a bio-political voting system and his care for people's living conditions. One of his articles, *The Fairy Tale of Adults*, also showed his interests and care of how the marginalized people, or the people in the bottom of society, keep struggling for life. Therefore, I turned back to his earlier work, *Golden Sunlight*, and found that similar considerations also appeared in it.

As a performance artist, He Yunchang does not have a wealthy living condition. The society he lives in still treat performance art as a socially unstable factor and a product of irrationality or even madness. This also adds impact, consciously or unconsciously, on He Yunchang's performance artworks. His representation of the spirits of people struggling for life is also a reflection of how He Yunchang struggles as a performance artist in the mainstream art field.

Aim and research question

In this thesis, the aim is to carry out an in-depth analysis of two performance artworks of He Yunchang, in order to investigate the bio-political thoughts of how Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer theory was presented through his works. Another aim is to make comparisons with two activist artists, Hua Yong from China, and Pyotr Pavlensky from Russia, to discuss the bio-political influences on the consequences of their performances, and how their performances differ from He Yunchang's works, as a result of the modern discipline.

The research questions of this thesis are: how did He Yunchang present the bio-political

thoughts, or reflect the political reality in his artworks, through different performance and visual styles? How does the political environment, including the public's political attitude towards performance art, influence the visual presentations of He Yunchang's performance artworks?

Background and relevance

In Chinese ancient myths, fighting and resisting is always the main theme. For example, when facing the Great Flood in apocalypse, in western myths, like in the Genesis Flood Myth, people escaped and hid in Noah's Ark. While in a Chinese myth, a man named Yu used his own effort to control water over ten years. In another myth, a giant called Kua Fu decided to chase and catch the sun, but finally died of dehydration. There is also a story saying that a girl drowned while playing in the Eastern Sea, but she metamorphosed into a bird called Jingwei, and tried to fill the sea with pebbles. All these myths show the effort of individuals fighting against nature and the seemingly unshakable power.

This kind of spirit is also presented in He Yunchang's performances. In *The Fairy Tale of Adults*, He Yunchang wrote a story which he stated was a real event: one day in 1997, a young man went to buy some pork.¹ He could only afford 0.1kg, and the seller refused to sell it, since it is too small an amount. At last the young man told the seller he was an engineer, and that both he and his wife had been laid off. They had not eaten any meat for a long time. Their child was only five, asking for meat every day. The seller then gave him a big piece of pork without asking for money. He took the meat home, negotiated with his wife, and put some rat poison in the meat. The family of three ate the meat and they all died. He Yunchang then wrote that:

This sad story made me notice that there are millions of people who were facing the same condition. No matter what kind of difficulties and powerful forces they were facing, most of them did not choose to give up like that engineer. The sword of reality can only penetrate their limbs, but cannot harm their will. This spirit touched me a lot...I did not deliberately fight against any forces, but it made me admire them from my own feelings.²

This story, as well as the statement He Yunchang wrote, shows his care of people's quality of life, and the strength of individuals living under difficult conditions. These efforts have

¹ He, Yunchang. "The Fairy Tale of Adults" [成年人的童话]. June 28th 2016. *Sina*. Access date: March 5th 2018. <<http://collection.sina.com.cn/ddys/2016-06-28/doc-ifxtmwei9421382.shtml>>. Translated and summerized by the author.

² He, 2018. Translated by the author. Original quotation in appendix.

influenced He Yunchang and his performances deeply.

Golden sunlight, a performance by He Yunchang in 1997, shows the individualistic heroism of changing sunlight; *Inverted River* also presented his attempt of changing nature. In another work of He Yunchang, *Moving the Mountain*, he tied a mountain with wooden stakes and ropes, pulled it hard for thirty minutes, and tried to move the mountain. This performance comes from an ancient Chinese myth called *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, saying that a 90-year-old man wanted to remove a pair of mountains in front of his home because of the obstruction. When asked of this seemingly impossible task, the old man said that he would do this work through his whole life time, as well as his children's lifetime, and their children's, through many generations, and there must be a day that it would be finished. Finally, the God was impressed by him, and helped him to remove the mountains. In He Yunchang's performance *Moving the Mountain*, there was not a God who helped him, while the insistence, or the stubbornness is presented similarly as in the myth.

These performances of He Yunchang corresponded to the statement he wrote in *The Fairy Tale of Adults*. Those people who were facing forces and struggling for life had the same spirit as in the ancient myths. In those myths, the object which the figures are protesting against is nature. However, in the modern era, with the revolution of technologies, nature gradually became not as uncontrollable as before. Therefore, in the context of these performances, instead of resisting nature or the natural disasters, "nature" is turned into a metaphoric symbol, which refers to some irresistible power.

Performance art in China is known as starting from the Dadaistic activities. The art movement Dadaism started in Europe in the early 20th century. However, it was not until 1983 that the first Dadaistic art group appeared in China, due to a series of social upheavals – the civil wars, WWII, the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution etc. As Su Wei has described:

For a long time, those who engaged in the study and creation of art had been working in a highly political environment that completely repressed their freedom of expression and valued above all the principle that "art should serve politics". This principle reached its apex during the Cultural Revolution.³

In the 1980s, the political utopia which the government tried to describe through propaganda collapsed, and the traditional recognition of beauty and art cannot fill the spiritual demand of the young generations in China. The Chinese artists then turned to find an art genre of "anti-art"

³ Su, Wei. "Talking About Duchamp When You Don't Have Pictures." June 2017. *Goethe Institut*. Access date: March 12th 2018. <<https://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/en/kul/mag/20997026.html>>.

and “anti-authority”. This was when Xiamen Dada was established, and Xiamen Dada was known as the first art group who made performance arts in China. This group is described as ‘criticized directly at the institution of art itself, and served as the earliest and most complete subversion of the existing rules governing art history, the determination of artistic value, and artistic knowledge during the '85 era.’⁴ Like Dadaism in Europe, Xiamen Dada also made artworks of cut-up paintings, photomontage, “ready object” art and installation art. As for the performance art, most of their performances looked absurd and ridiculous. For example, in 1986, after an exhibition of this group in Beijing, the artists publicly burned some of their artworks at the end of the exhibition, declared that this behavior was an act of self-liberation. Consequently, they were barred from holding further public events.⁵ However, as the earliest group of Dadaism in China, Xiamen Dada group did not have a fully conceptualized recognition of performance art, and still had many conflicts between their concepts and actions. “Anti-art” was only an attitude instead of a systematic art genre. These features of immaturity finally led to Xiamen Dada group doubting their own artistic values.⁶

The anti-institutionalism was often seen as the ‘institutional critique’⁷, and this kind of critique became the core concept in the art field during the 1980s and early 1990s since Xiamen Dada’s activities. This kind of performance did not fit in with the mainstream ideology of society, and some artists were punished and forbidden to perform again by the government. There were also artists who were caught because of the danger and violence in their works. For example, in 1989, Xiao Lu shot twice at a mirror of her own installation artwork with a gun, in Chinese Modern Art Exhibition, which led to Xiao Lu and her friend being detained for three days.⁸ During the 1990s, the performances gradually turned to underground activities, and the themes of their works became less radical. Some artists turned the accusation to the government and polity euphemistically into the consideration of lower class citizens, which also showed their dissatisfaction to the political regime.⁹ Until now, performance art has been viewed as a marginalized and stigmatized art form in China, often described as being ‘erotic’ or ‘violent’,

⁴ Su, 2018.

⁵ EdwART. “Xiamen Dada.”2011. *Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias*. Access date: March 2nd 2018. <https://contemporary_chinese_culture.academic.ru/883/Xiamen_Dada>.

⁶ Shao, Tianhua. "A Thought of the Artistic Activities of Xiamen Dada" ["厦门达达”艺术的反思]. *Journal of Xiangnan University* 2013: 88. Translated and summerized by the author.

⁷ Li, Shengzhao. “Xiamen Dada: The Most Radical Group of the '85 New Wave.” July 2016. *Goethe Institut*. Access date: April 15th 2018. <<https://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/en/kul/mag/20791689.html>>.

⁸ Shao, Tianhua, 2013. Translated and summerized by the author.

⁹ You, You. "*The Body Narrative of Action Art in China: Typical Form of Yunchang He's Action Art Works*" [中国行为艺术中的身体叙事--以何云昌行为艺术作品为例]. Yunnan Arts University. Kunming, May 2010. Translated and summerized by the author.

or even ‘unethical’.¹⁰ Today, performance artists still could be arrested, if they touch some sensitive political topics or perform in some specific public spaces, such as Tiananmen Square.

Empirical material and delimitation

I have chosen He Yunchang’s performance art *One-meter democracy* (2010) and *Golden sunlight* (1997) as the main material. *One-meter democracy* is a performance which obviously and directly criticized the seemingly democratic voting system, using a violent and bloody way, and *Golden sunlight* has a typical personal style of the artist, which is poetic, metaphoric but brings an impressive theme of the individual’s will to the audience. These two performances were presented in different artistic styles, and there are 13 years between the two pieces, while there are still similarities between the two performances, seen in the political critiques and spirit of the roles.

However, it must be noted that I was not present for either performance when they originally took place. The research objects of this thesis are mostly photographic, textual and video archives. He Yunchang seldom did promotions before his performances, especially in the early years of his artistic career, which was the late 1990s. This lead to the difficulty of learning more about the details during the performance. For instance, the descriptions of *Golden sunlight* in different textual archives are short and similar, and I have found it difficult to confirm with the artist’s each act during the whole procedure, as well as the reactions of audience.

In “*Presence*” in *absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*, Amelia Jones tried to prove that the specificity of knowledge gained from participating in a live performance situation should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledge that develops in relation to the documentary traces of such an event.¹¹ Instead of adding weight to the experience of the first-hand spectating, she believes that ‘the body-in- performance, is fully dependent on the ways in which the image is contextualized and interpreted’,¹² while the experience could be supplementary.

Related to Amelia Jones’ statement, I want to make a comparison with the difference between going to the theatre and watching a recording film of the same play. In the theatre, the

¹⁰ You, 2010. Translated and paraphrased by the author.

¹¹ Jones, Amelia. "Presence" in *Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation.*” *Art Journal* 1997: pp.11-18.

¹² Jones, 1997.

gaze of the spectator is free. He could look at the main actors, the amateur actors, the scenery of the stage, or the audience. But when watching a recording film, the images on the screen are limited by the photographers. It is the photographer who is leading the spectator to watch the selected contents. But due to where an audience member may be sat, they would not be able to see all of the details of performance, while the camera could present some details more clearly. Also, a recording film might have been edited, and this could lead to an inequality of information between the theatre audience and the audience of the recording, despite having seen the same play. Another difference is that the spectator sitting in the theatre may become more influence by those around them in the audience, and feel more engaged in the atmosphere the audience creates. Being around others while watching the play may increase the emotional connection to the artwork.

Sometimes, being present at the performance provides more possibilities of research methods. For example, it is hard to use a phenomenological method based on the author's own experience without really being present at the performance. However, as Jones has stated, 'Body and performance art expose, precisely, the contingency of the body/self not only on the other of the communicative exchange (the audience, the art historian) but on the very modes of its own (re)presentation.'¹³ The archive is also a form of representing the performance, and the main theme does not decrease much through delivering in different media. Therefore, I will try to find various forms of materials related to the two main performances, and find a more objective angle to make the case study. For the lack of the details of the performances, I will make some speculation according to the images and textual recordings, but also use the personal feelings of seeing the archives as supplementary.

In this thesis, I will limit the empirical material to two performance artworks of He Yunchang, *One-meter democracy* (2010) and *Golden sunlight* (1997). For further comparison in the last chapter, I will also introduce some performance artworks by another Chinese performance artist Hua Yong, and a Russian artist Pyotr Pavlensky, to make supports for my theoretical research. But I will not make deep analysis upon either of their works, because it was their experience as performance artists instead of their artworks reflects the social environments which had impact on He Yunchang's performances.

¹³ Jones, 1997.

Theory and Method

In this thesis I will use semiology, psychoanalysis and compositional analysis to analyse the empirical materials. I will also use the theories of Agamben and Foucault to further interpret the artworks.

With the help of Gillian Rose's book *Visual Methodologies*¹⁴, I will use combined methods to deal with the empirical materials. Firstly, semiology is an important part of decoding the visual signs in both of the main materials. I will use a diagram Roland Barthes raised in *Mythologies*¹⁵ to analyze the two-order signs. I will borrow the framework Barthes used, and explain the connotator and connotations as a second-order sign system, with a bit of differences from how Barthes intended his framework to be used. I will explain this method in greater depth in the Chapter 1.

Another method I will use is psychoanalysis. This will be only in the first chapter, when seeing the material from a patriarchal perspective to strengthen the effect of understanding the theme of the artwork. For analyzing a photograph of *Golden sunlight*, I will also use compositional analysis and comparison analysis, in order to decode the sublime in the image.

The main theories in this thesis will come from Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. The Homo Sacer theories of Agamben correspondingly interpreted He Yunchang's performances. In *One-meter democracy* (2010), He Yunchang performed the role of homo sacer under a *State of Exception*, which means a situation that the law is suspended by the sovereign in order to protect the law, in Agamben's sense. In *Golden sunlight* (1997), He Yunchang played the role of a hero, trying to help the Homines Sacri out, with some ineffective behaviors. I will also refer to the concept of madness, from *Madness and Civilization* by Foucault, to understand how performance art as a social event is disciplined by the sovereign.

Previous research

There are many academic articles written about He Yunchang's artwork, and most of them focus on the endurance, the concept of time, and the use of body in his performances. For instance,

¹⁴ Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. 2nd Edition. Sage Publications Ltd, 2006.

¹⁵ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972.

in *The Body Narrative of Action Art in China*¹⁶, the author used Foucault's theories about body and power to discuss how the body as narrative texts was presented in He Yunchang's works. In *Power of Existence: The Diverse Interpretations of He Yunchang's Performance Arts*¹⁷, Jiang Ming interpreted the concepts of time, ineffectiveness, power and freedom, as well as the existential philosophies in his artworks.

However, there is a gap in scholarship on the bio-political aspects of He Yunchang's performances. In some of his performances, the consideration for *bare life*, which is a term raised by Giorgio Agamben to describe the conditions of homo sacer, is clearly expressed through the visual presentations. Similar intention also showed in He Yunchang's own statements, as I quoted above. This is a result of both the political environment and He Yunchang's own thinking. Therefore, I will fill the gap of connecting his performances with political philosophies, especially with the bio-political philosophy in a modern era.

Disposition of the thesis

This thesis tries to investigate the relationship between He Yunchang's performance artworks and the bio-political concepts in it. There will be four chapters including the introduction in this thesis. In Chapter 1, I will make a case study of He Yunchang's performance artwork *One-meter democracy*, and interpret why this performance showed a homo sacer suffering pain under a state of exception. In Chapter 2, I will analyze He Yunchang's *Golden sunlight*, which is a more beautiful and metaphoric work of his, and explain how the bio-political theories were presented in this work. Finally, in the last chapter, I will analyze why the performance art could be seen as an imitation of madness, and how He Yunchang's works become a metaphor of the artists' own destiny, with a comparison with another two artists' performances.

¹⁶ You, 2010.

¹⁷ Jiang, Ming. "Power of Existence: The Diverse Interpretations of He Yunchang's Performance Arts" [存在之能——对何云昌行为艺术的多元阐释]. April 2nd 2008. *ArtArchive*. Access date: April 2nd 2018. <<http://www.artda.cn/view.php?tid=305&cid=14>>.

CHAPTER 1: ONE-METER DEMOCRACY

In this chapter, *One-meter democracy* is presented as the main material for understanding He Yunchang's performance art. It is a performance that took place in October, 2010 in Beijing. This performance is recorded in a 12-minute video, which was edited by He Yunchang himself. I will use Freud's psychoanalytic theory to discuss one important shot in this film, and use the two-order semiological framework Roland Barthes raised in *Mythologies* to explain some visual and linguistic signs related to this performance. Finally I will use Agamben's Homo Sacer theories to interpret the meaning of this whole artwork.

1.1 A description of the performance

He Yunchang is one of the most famous performance artists in China. He studied in Yunnan Arts University in China, and majored in oil painting. After graduation, he tried various forms of art. Since 1994, He Yunchang began creating performance art. Many of his works have a similar theme, which is about endurance, sacrifice and bodily pain. Besides performance art, he also represented many of his performance artworks through oil painting, recreated the images of his performance art in a surrealistic painting style. He Yunchang believes that 'performance art is the basic reaction between body and mind in a specific time period during the performing process.'¹⁸

On October 10th, 2010, a performance called *One-meter democracy* by He Yunchang took place in Caochangdi, Beijing. This performance consisted of three parts. In the first part, 25 volunteers voted if they were in favor of cutting a wound on the right side of He Yunchang's body from the clavicle down to below his knee. He Yunchang presented that this wound would be one-meter long and 0.5-1 centimeters deep, and this surgery would be completed by a medical doctor without the use of anesthesia.

There was a recording film called *One Meter Democracy*, which was edited by He

¹⁸ Cao, Siyu. "He Yunchang: The Spring is Coming" [何云昌：春天来了]. April 23rd 2014. *Hiart*. Access date: March 1st 2018. <<http://www.hiart.cn/feature/detail/e39dvto.html>>. Translated by the author. Original quotation: '行为艺术，就是艺术家在特定时间段内，他的身体和心理在过程里的基本反应。'

Yunchang and posted through his own YouTube account. In the film, He Yunchang looked excited and relaxed during the voting process. The voting procedure took place in He Yunchang's studio. All of the volunteers were He Yunchang's friends. At first, the volunteers were telling jokes, laughing and taking pictures with smart phones, even if He Yunchang tried to make it look like a serious and formal democratic voting procedure. The voting was under the guise of a democratic process, with a teller, a scrutineer and a tally clerk. After the voting, there were 12 votes in favor of doing the surgery, 10 against, and 3 abstentions. After that, it changed to another scene in the film. The operating room is smaller than He Yunchang's studio, and it looks empty. There was only one operating table and one chair in front of a white wall. The operating table is simply a single bed covered with a white sheet and a pillow. In the next shot, He Yunchang walks to the operating table, naked.

The second part of this performance is unpleasant to watch. The moment when a knife pierces his skin, He Yunchang's body trembles intensely. Without anesthesia, his facial expressions in the film shows that he was experiencing a lot of pain (see Figure 1). Six people stood around the operating table, with twelve hands holding He Yunchang tightly. A wound is clearly presented in the image on the right side under his neck.



Figure 1: He Yunchang is suffering from the operation.

There are many close-up shots of the wound in the film. Inside the ragged edge of the wound, blood and fat granules are fixed together. His skin was pulled tight to both sides of the wound, and his body kept shaking. He Yunchang tried but could not stop himself from wailing and moaning, while clenching a tooth guard in his mouth. When the doctor finished, He Yunchang was lying in bed exhausted, breathing deeply. After the cutting, all of the audience were silent, though some were taking photos and another audience member cried.

Figure 2 shows He Yunchang and the voters after the surgery has taken place. The voters stand around He Yunchang's bed, looking at the camera. He Yunchang lies in bed with his eyes closed, and his mouth slightly open. He is still naked, and his blood has soaked the white sheet. It is not hard to notice that no one is smiling. While no one is openly upset, many appear to be numb to what is happening around them.



Figure 2: He Yunchang with voters after the operation.

He Yunchang asked the doctor to stitch the wound in the third part of the documentary, which is also included as a part of the performance. At this point the film becomes gorier than before, as you watch the doctor stitch the wound. The skin is pulled up and sewed together. The right half of He Yunchang's body is soon covered with blood. The last shot of this film presents a scene of He Yunchang lying in bed with bandages and gauze covering the wound. The lighting in this shot is dim. He Yunchang is still naked, but he now appears to be relaxed; his eyes are closed and he is lying peacefully.

1.2 Decoding the visual signs

For me, it is quite difficult to watch the whole documentary film without fast forward. Before the operation starts, the white wall and white sheet has already made me nervous. I think it is because of the instant recall of the memory in hospital, which makes people relate with sickness, pain and even death. The watching experience, especially when seeing the close-up shots of the

wound, was thrilling. Even if I was watching it through the screen instead of the live performance, I could feel the pain He Yunchang suffered, and it sounded like he was moaning just in front of my ears. I had a strong empathetic feeling, like I had a phantom wound on my body. The doctor cut very hard and deep, and this whole scene made me feel fully immersed in his pain, rather than just watching a spectacle.

I tried to find what brings these feelings to me. Even though the performance itself is shocking enough, I believe that there are still shooting skills which drives the spectators' watching experiences. Between the horrible screaming of He Yunchang and the total silence of the background sound, some visual presentations are also crucial elements. For example, there is a moving shot taking sequences of the whole wound, from below to the top of it. The camera moves slowly and close, finally stopping on an extreme close-up (see Figure 3. This image might cause uncomfortable feelings). This whole shot lasts for ten seconds, which is the longest close-up shot in this twelve-minute video.



Figure 3: A wound on He Yunchang's body. Film still of recording film *ONE METER DEMOCRACY*, 6'02".

If we see this image from a phallogocentric perspective, the shape of this wound could lead to a visual association of female genitalia. Laura Mulvey claims that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.'¹⁹ This opinion shows strong limitation that it could only be used in a heterosexual and patriarchal context, but one thing we cannot deny is this long shot presenting the specific shape of the wound has its own purpose. Since the editor of this film is He Yunchang himself,

¹⁹ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Brady, Leo & Cohen, Marshall. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. New York: Oxford, 1999. 833-844.

we may wish to guess: why does he keep this close-up shot, which could bring uncomfortable feelings, for ten-second long? Is this vagina-shaped wound only a coincidence, or a female symbol produced under the male gaze?

I would rather assume that it is not a coincidence. However, rather than trying to satisfy the spectators' scopophilia to a women's body, He Yunchang actually intended to use this symbol as an indication. It is not an indication referring to a female figure, as Mulvey claims above, but to the feminine (at least in a patriarchal stereotype) – weak, pitiful, fragile, helpless but dangerous, and in need of protection. This is the character presented and played by He Yuchang during the performance shows – one who is suffering pain for a voting result, one who is helpless and weak.

This wound also raises the fear of castration. One of the subjects that Psychoanalytic theory has most to say about is that of sexuality²⁰, which is to say that the subject relates tightly with the sexual awareness. Therefore, a phallus is the symbol of the masculine and the subject. From a phallogocentric perspective, under a male's gaze, what belongs to a woman is always seen as objectified, as a 'passive spectacle'²¹. He Yunchang uses this image to objectify himself in order to emphasize a fact that he has been de-subjectified, so he did not have the right to vote for his own destiny.

Bal and Bryson has suggested that psychoanalysis is simply a particular type of semiology, saying that 'psychoanalysis offers a way of interpreting the signs of an image in relation, not to particular referent systems, dominant codes or mythologies, but rather in relation to the unconscious and its dynamics.'²² In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes also held a similar view:

For Freud, as is well known, the human psyche is a stratification of tokens or representatives. One term is constituted by the manifest meaning of behavior, another, by its latent or real meaning; as for the third term, it is here also a correlation of the first two: it is the dream itself in its totality, the parapraxis or the neurosis, conceived as compromises, as economies effected thanks to the joining of a form and an intentional function.²³

According to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, a myth is 'a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order* semiological system'²⁴. It is because that 'a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first

²⁰ Rose, 2006. p.106.

²¹ Rose, 2006, p.112.

²² Rose, 2006, p.106.

²³ Barthes, 1972. p.112.

²⁴ Barthes, 1972. p. 123.

system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.’²⁵ Barthes put forward a two-level theoretical framework to explain how these myths work as second-order signs:

Language	1. Signifier	2. Signified:
	3. Sign	
MYTH	I. SIGNIFIER	
	II. SIGNIFIED:	
	III. SIGN	

Table 1: Roland Barthes’ second-order sign system

Similarly as a myth, the image of the wound is also a second-order semiological system. The first system is the connotator of the second one. From this point, I will borrow this second-order diagram to decode the wound as a visual sign, and explain what further connotation it refers to. In order to make it clearer, here I call the second-order signifier, which is the “I. SIGNIFIER” in Barthes’ diagram as the connotator, and the signified of it (the “II. SIGNIFIED” in Barthes’ diagram) as the connotation:

:I. SIGNIFIER (Connotator)		II. SIGNIFIED (Connotation)
1. Signifier	2. Signified	
The image of the wound (Figure 3)	Female genitalia	the fear of castration; feminine; helplessness, fragility and weakness; objectification/ de-subjectification
	harm, pain, violence, force, power and death	The spectator’s empathy of feeling the pain on body, and the association with He Yunchang’s condition as a weak and poor figure under the torture.

Table 2: Decoding the second-order sign system of Figure 3

This table shows how this image of the wound could be read in the film. For the first order signified, the image of the wound could be seen as female genitalia, as I analyzed before, with

²⁵ Barthes, 1972. p. 113.

the psychoanalysis method. The female genitalia here could be seen as both the signified of the wound and the signifier of the second level sign. In the second sign, the female genitalia refers to the fear of castration/feminine/the feeling of helplessness, fragility and weakness etc. as signified. This also could show how the psychoanalyzing explanation adapted into this second-order semiological diagram. The wound could also be a sign which leads to the pain, harm, violence, force, power and death. It further works to bring forward the spectator's own feelings about bodily pain, and associate it with He Yunchang's condition in this performance, which presents a weak man suffering under no protection of his human rights.

This bloody and violent image indeed has impacted on me during the viewing process. Actually, there are always discussions about the presentation of violence in this performance. Some of the critics, like Fei Luo, believe that performance artists should have a higher standard of ethics, and avoid making performance art filled with violent or pornographic elements.²⁶ However, the voting result in *One-meter democracy* indeed shows the majority's fetish of other's pain.

This performance has another name, *Yu Hu Mou Pi*. It comes from a Chinese allegory about negotiating with the tiger for its skin, which is a metaphor meaning that it is impossible to persuade someone who is evil to do something against their better interests. Used as a name of this performance, it shows strong blame. In the title, "Hu" means tiger, which is a signifier referring to the volunteers who voted in favor of cutting the wound. "Pi" means skin, and it could be read as those voters' desire of seeing violence on body, pain of others, or the visual pleasure of destroying. On a broader dimension, this title shows how He Yunchang understands the democracy, especially the democracy in China. The table below shows how this title as a second-order sign works following Barthes's theories:

²⁶ Luo, Fei. "One-Meter Democracy and suffered body: A Comment of He Yunchang's Performance Art One-Meter Democracy" ["一米民主"与身体受苦——评何云昌行为艺术“一米民主”]. October 30th 2010. Access date: March 2nd 2018. Translated and paraphrased by the author.

I. SIGNIFIER (Connotator)		II. SIGNIFIED (Connotation)
1. Signifier	2. Signified	
“Hu” (Tiger)	The voters in <i>One-meter democracy</i>	Voters in a real democratic voting procedure
“Pi” (Skin)	Cutting a wound on He Yunchang’s body in <i>One-meter democracy</i>	The agendas which people voting for in a real democratic voting procedure

Table 3: Decoding the second-order sign system of “*Yu Hu Mou Pi*”

As it shows in Table 3, the metaphor in the title and the performance constitute the first-order sign. The title gives linguistic meaning to the performance, explaining that “it is as hard as taking the tiger’s skin, when someone wants to make the voters give up their rights of seeing He Yunchang been cut.” Then, this performance becomes a whole visual sign, and has a second meaning referring to a more broad and general object: it is as hard as taking the tiger’s skin, when someone wants to make the voters give up their rights in a democratic voting procedure. The two names of this performance art, *One-meter democracy* and *Yu Hu Mou Pi*, exactly presented a symbol of the power structure between the majority and the minority, and reflected the artist’s anxiety of the political environment in the near future.

Liu Gang, a collector who owns the original film cassette of *one-meter democracy*, found that different attitudes were held of this performance:

someone praised this work for bring erudition for the superficial contemporary art field; someone criticized He Yunchang, believed that this work is a provocation to the moral bottom of art; some scholars believe that this performance woke people’s serious thinking of democracy; and some critics rebuked He Yunchang for the misrepresentation of democracy.²⁷

Many believe that the idea of this performance is quite tricky, since what He Yunchang

²⁷ Liu, Gang. "One-Meter Democracy" [一米民主]. February 21st 2016. *Hiart*. Access date: March 5th 2018. <<http://hiart.cn/observation/detail/2b0grAm.html>>. Translated by the author. Original quotation see the appendix.

presented in this performance is not real democracy, because the propose of the voting – cutting a wound on other’s body – is not tightly connected with each voter’s own right and benefit.

However, these interpretations were broken by supplementary information, which was not shown in the recording. In some informal archives, it is recorded that the voting procedure was actually conducted three times:

Initially, volunteers treated it as a joke. People was laughing loudly when someone shouted: "Be serious! They will cut a real wound on Achang body!" Suddenly, it turned into whispers. We all agreed to re-vote. For the second time, the majority of votes were negative. Seeing that *one-meter democracy* is about to fail, He Yunchang got anxious. He Yunchang claimed that no one could leave his studio without a result he wanted. Under He Yunchang's persecution, we had to vote for the third time. The result of the vote was: 12 votes in favor (including the one approved by He Yunchang himself), 10 votes against and 3 abstentions.²⁸

This description is from Liu Gang, who was also one of the volunteers during the performance. If what Liu Gang recorded is fact, this performance would have another layer of meaning. Did this performance show the real democracy? What role did He Yunchang play in this performance? What kind of power relationship did this performance reflect? I will talk about these questions in the next part of this chapter.

1.3 Suffered body under the State of Exception

Once in an interview, He Yunchang said that ‘*One-meter democracy* is actually a gift for future generations.’²⁹ But he did not explain what kind of gift it is. Many believe that He Yunchang’s idea of *One-meter democracy* actually criticized the tyranny of the majority, which refers to the weakness of direct democracy that ignores the demand of the minority. For example, Wu Wei, an art critic in China, stated that ‘*One-meter democracy* directly pointed the tyranny of the majority under the current so-called democratic polity of China, and this could lead to the suppression, or even the destruction of life.’³⁰ But was this performance really an accusation

²⁸ Liu, 2016. Translated by the author. Original quotation see the appendix.

²⁹ Liu, 2016. Translated by the author. Original quotation: ‘《一米民主》是他提前为后代准备的纪念品。’

³⁰ Wu, Wei. “Is One-meter democracy a false proposition?” [《一米民主》不成立吗?]. October 14th 2010. *Artron*. Access date: March 5th 2018. <<https://blog.artron.net/space-91248-do-blog-id-628065.html>>. Translated by the author. Original quotation: ‘《一米民主》的问题针对性就在于作品直接针对了当下普遍存在的,在“民主”形式下的“多数人的专制(暴政)”及其对生命的压抑乃至毁灭问题。’

of the tyranny of majority? Does the violence only come from the voters? In this section I will use Agamben's bio-political theories to discuss this question.

In this performance, the voters who were against the cutting did not actually have to suffer the consequences of their decision, but He Yunchang did. Therefore, compared with the duality of the majority and the minority, the relationship between He Yunchang and the voters is more like it between the *bios* and *zoēs*.

Ancient Greeks had two different words to describe "life": *bios* and *zoēs*. *Bio* indicates the form or manner in which an individual or a group is living, while *zoē* simply refers to the status of "living". In other words, the *Bio* takes consideration of the quality of life in a political context; *zoē* implies no guarantees of life, it is only a description of the biological fact. Giorgio Agamben recognized this priority of the biological fact over the lifestyle and quality of life, and called it "bare life". Under a sovereign power, one whose life is treated as bare life does not have civil rights, and is not admitted as a political subject. The kind of people who own bare lives are called "homines sacri", "Bare life is the life of homo sacer (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed"³¹. It means that a homo sacer could be killed, and his life is not guaranteed by the law.

If we see the performance of *One-meter democracy*, as it is presented in the recording, without Liu Gang's description, then the circumstance of He Yunchang in the performance has many similarities with a bare life. Imagine all the voters are citizens of a small sovereign; we can treat the performance as a model of a state. In this state, we do not know the exact reason why He Yunchang became the one who must suffer the result – maybe he committed a crime, or he was treated as an inferior life. No matter what the reason is, the role He Yunchang plays in this performance was not under the protection of the "sovereign" for his health and safety, and did not have the equal rights of voting as other citizens, because his life is removed and exclusive from the "profane law", or "human law". As I have discussed, viewing the wound as female genitalia indicated the weakness and de-subjectivity of He Yunchang, and this leads to a connotation that He Yunchang is excluded from the protection of the law.

Another feature of homo sacer is that he cannot be sacrificed, in Agamben's sense. In other words, homo sacer is excluded in both human law and divine law. In He Yunchang's performance, the operation on his body looks like a ritual, but there is no God or purpose he is being sacrificed for. Besides, in the performance, "cutting a wound" is actually a sign, and as I

³¹ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. 1 Edition. Stanford University Press, 1998. p. 8.

analyzed in the second part, the connotation of this sign is “death”. If we review the performance, we could notice that the wound was one-meter long and 0.5-1 cm deep, which has the potential to do irreversible harm to He Yunchang’s body, and even putting him in danger and potentially threatening his life. He Yunchang also claimed that the baseline of his arts is hurt himself to half-death.³² Therefore, even though the voting procedure was a guise and the state was only a rough model, the danger and possibility of death in this performance was real. All of He Yunchang’s reactions during the film were of real pain and fear of death, and He Yunchang exposed himself entirely under the violence.

Michel Foucault claimed that ‘For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death.’³³ In this performance, what could be seen as the sovereign? Who keeps the power, and stands in the state of exception, having the right of deciding life and death?

If we take what Liu Gang noted into consideration, the power relationship will change. Assuming the situation in Liu Gang’s description is true, then in this whole procedure of *One-meter democracy*, He Yunchang played two different roles. He avoided showing that the volunteers voted three times during the performance in the recording, since he wanted to present only one role of him to the audience. So here we need to discuss, are the other two voting processes also a part of He’s performance?

The editing of this film shows He Yunchang’s own intention. However, one important feature of performance art is the liveness, which includes the occasional randomness happening through the performance. The *happening*, a term firstly raised by Allan Kaprow, emphasizes the ‘organic connection between art and its environment, and it is fresh while it lasts and cannot be reproduced’.³⁴ The main object of this research is the performance, while the film is only an archive of it. Therefore, I believe that the happening occurred during this performance is a part of it, no matter if it obeys the artist’s intention. In other words, all the three voting procedures could be seen as the artistic happening within the performance, and they all should be seen as a part of the performance.

In *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben discussed a state in which the law is suspended, and called it “the state of exception”. When the law is imperiled, there must be declared a state

³² He, Yunchang. "Performance Artist He Yunchang: The Baseline of my Performance is Hurting myself to Half-death"[行为艺术家何云昌：做作品的底线就是把自己弄个半死] Journal Xinjing. July 15th 2016. Translated by the author.

³³ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Reissue edition. Vintage, 1990. p. 119.

³⁴ Kaprow, Allan. "Happenings in the New York Scene." *Art News* (1961).

of exception to pause the law and start a new rule. In *One-meter democracy*, when the first and second voting did not go as He Yunchang had imagined, he resisted to admit the result of a democratic voting, which is the start of the suspension of an original rule, or a “law” in this performance, and began with persuading the voters. In this new rule of exception, He claimed that “no one could leave his studio without a result he wanted”, and He Yunchang himself was also given the voting right. Therefore, the result – “12 votes in favor (including the one approved by He Yunchang himself), 10 votes against and 3 abstentions”, was a result of the exception.

This whole procedure is ironically corresponded to the condition of the democratic system in China. The polity in China today, established by Mao, is called “the people’s democratic dictatorship”. All the candidates in elections were chosen or approved by the Communist Party of China. As a one-party led government, it is hard to achieve a condition which really gives power back to each citizen. This is why Liu Xiaobo, who was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for ‘his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China’³⁵, wrote in *Chapter 08* that ‘China still retain an authoritarian system that so infringes on human rights’³⁶.

Whether He Yunchang intended to direct the votes or not, this performance became a metaphor of the modern Chinese democratic polity – a democracy directed by the sovereign under a state of exception. The democracy discussed in this performance is a temporary state of He Yunchang’s own willing. He Yunchang performed both the leader and the homo sacer, which are actually two different roles. So, the saying that “*One-meter democracy* discussed the tyranny of the majority” is invalid. On the contrary, the tyranny did not come from the majority, but from He Yunchang himself, or from the sovereign, the state of exception.

³⁵ *The Nobel Peace Prize 2010*:

<https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2010/announcement.html>

³⁶ Macartney, Jane. “Leading Chinese dissident, Liu Xiaobo, arrested over freedom charter.” *Times Online* 2008 December 10th.

CHAPTER 2: GOLDEN SUNLIGHT

In this chapter I will analyze another performance artwork of He Yunchang, *Golden sunlight*, which took place in 1999 in Yunnan. In order to understand how He Yunchang created sublime in this performance, I will use compositional interpretation to analyze the perspective and composition of a photograph of this performance, and make some comparison with two classical oil paintings. At last, I will still use the diagram Roland Barthes raised in *Mythologies*, combined with Agamben's Homo Sacer theories to interpret the visual signs in this performance.

2.1 The ineffective action

In the early years, He Yunchang's performances did not show such strong political critique like *one-meter democracy* did. On the contrary, his works during late 1990s and early 2000s contain the consideration of aesthetics, especially a classic oriental recognition of beauty, which is poetic, metaphoric, implicit and mysterious.

On October 3, 1999, He Yunchang held a performance in Yunnan province, China. This performance took place outside a prison called "Anning" prison, which means "quiet and peace" in Chinese. Firstly, He Yunchang covered his whole body with golden oil paint, which referred to the color of the sunlight. Then he hung himself up using a crane, and tried to paint the wall of the prison in the same golden color. Finally, He Yunchang held a mirror to deflect the sunlight onto the corner of the wall which was in shadow. While He Yunchang intended to complete this whole performance within half an hour, he actually took at least two hours, due to the difficulty of painting the wall while hanging in the air.³⁷ During this performance, He Yunchang fainted twice under the strong sunlight when he was hanging in the air, and the cheap industrial paint caused severe skin damage to his body and face.

³⁷ Wang, Meiqin. "The Primitive and Unproductive Body: He Yunchang and His Performance Art." *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2014, Jul/Aug: 6-25.



Figure 4: He Yunchang, *Goden Sunlight*, 1999. Photograph.

The recorded materials of this performance are limited. The photograph in Figure 4 shows that He Yunchang was painting the prison's wall in this performance, using a brush with a long holder. Besides the photographs, there are two oil paintings by He Yunchang, one of which is illustrated in Figure 5 on the left.

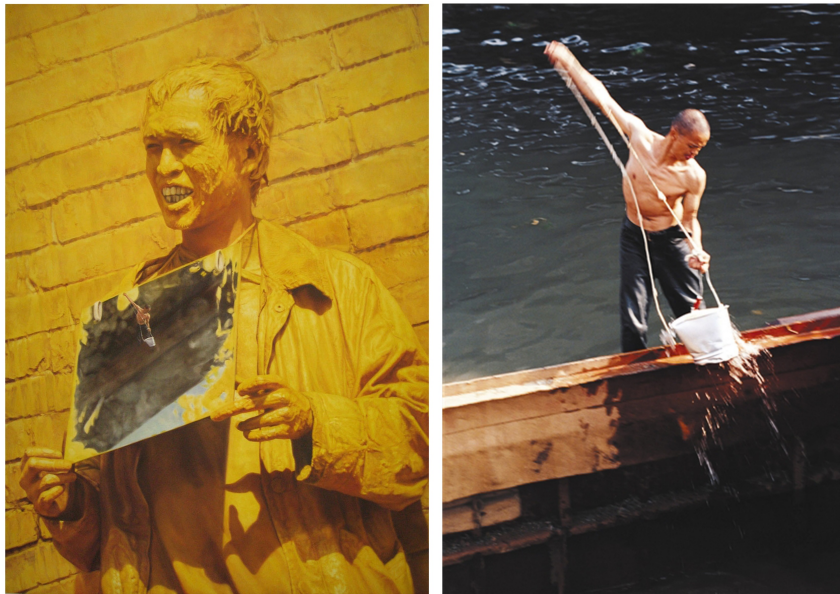


Figure 5: left: He Yunchang, *Goden Sunlight*, 2012. Oil on canvas. Right: He Yunchang, *Inverted River*, 2000.

Photograph.

This oil painting shows two performances of He Yunchang at the same time. In this painting, He Yunchang has the golden paint covered all his body, standing in front of the prison wall, holding a mirror. The wall of the prison is the same golden color. In the mirror, you can see another performance of He Yunchang, made in 2000, called *Inverted River* (see Figure 5 right). *Inverted River* was made in Shanghai, and showed a Sisyphean insistence. He Yunchang spent ten hours carrying ten tons of water in Suzhou River, from the downstream to upstream, boated for 5 miles, and poured it out.

He Yunchang presented two performances into one oil painting, it seems to indicate that he intended to express the same theme in both performances. Maybe it is fighting and resisting nature – light, water, or even the gravity; maybe it is the invisible exhausting torture and pain to body; maybe it is the insistence and the strong will of human, or the purposeless action itself as a critique to the utilitarian world. But from my perspective, I agree with Ai Weiwei's interpretation: the heroic behavior itself weighs more than the effectiveness of it.

For *Golden sunlight* and *Inverted River*, critics in China focused more on the feature of ineffectivity in both works. For example, Jiang Ming wrote that both works showed the “ineffectivity in reality”, ‘this value of ineffectivity make a great contrast with the market economy today which pursues the maximization of profits, and this ineffectivity brings exactly the inherent power to shock us.’³⁸ And You You from Yunnan Arts University, which is the same university He Yunchang graduated from, argued that:

He Yunchang devoted every effort to a goal without a real purpose, looking for the ideal values that no longer exists. He used physical pain to experience the primitive impulse, which is ironical to the attempt of saving the soul with political ethics and economic consumerism.³⁹

For me, however, what shocked me most in *Golden sunlight* was not the ineffectivity, but the humanitarian consideration of the prisoners, the bare lives, as a purpose. It is the beautified and retouched purpose that at last shows the ineffectivity, as well as the poetic and implicit beauty in this performance. In this chapter I will analyze and discuss how this purpose is presented in *Golden sunlight*.

³⁸ Jiang, 2008. Original quotation: ‘这种无效性的价值观与我们今天这个时代追求利益最大化的市场经济原则恰好形成对照。正是这一点让何云昌的作品具有了震动我们精神的内在力量。’

³⁹ You, 2010. Translated by the author. Original Quotation see the appendix.

2.2 The heroic body

Ai Weiwei, a famous Chinese contemporary artist, who is also He Yunchang's friend, has different understandings of this work. In *A Chang's insistence*, Ai Weiwei wrote: 'The heroic form and sarcastic implication of this work has enabled him to be remembered. The basic principles of this early work are continuously reproduced in different ways in many of his later works.'⁴⁰ This comment shows Ai Weiwei's understanding of *Golden sunlight*. Instead of focusing on the ineffectivity, he believed that He Yunchang was trying to build a heroic figure, who is shining in the color of sunshine, to bring the sunlight from heaven to the shadow. I associate this figure with Prometheus, a Titan who stole fire and gave it to humans in Greek myths. Prometheus ended up with being bound to a rock, and each day an eagle was sent to feed on his liver as a punishment. He Yunchang also suffered from skin damage, and he fainted twice during the performance. Rather than seeing his pain as an unpredictable harm of this performance, it is more like a planned sacrifice, a cost which the heroic figure must suffer, like Prometheus suffered from being eaten by the eagle.

If go back to the image, there are many similarities between the photograph of *Golden sunlight* and the paintings of Prometheus. Figure 6 left is the painting *Prometheus Brings Fire to Mankind* by Heinrich Füger (1751 – 1818, German). In the right of Figure 6 is *Prometheus Carrying Fire* by Jan Cossiers (1600 – 1671, Spanish).



Figure 6: left: Heinrich Füger (1751 – 1818, German), *Prometheus Brings Fire to Mankind*, 1817. Oil on canvas. Right: Jan Cossiers (1600 – 1671, Spanish), *Prometheus Carrying Fire*, 1630s. Oil on canvas.

⁴⁰ Ai, Weiwei. "A Chang's insistence" [阿昌的坚持]. AiWeiwei. *Right Here Right Now [此时此地]*. Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010. 273-275. Translated by the author. Original quotation: '这件作品的英雄主义形式和讽刺性寓意使他从此在艺术圈里被人们牢牢记住。而这件早期作品的基本原则在他后来的所有作品中以不同的方式不断地再现。'

If we compare Figure 4 with Figure 6, one common feature is that there is a solitary figure as the main subject of each of these three images. In the photo of *Golden sunlight* this figure is He Yunchang, and in both *Prometheus Brings Fire to Mankind* and *Prometheus Carrying Fire*, the figure is Prometheus. There are several visual similarities in these three images. The content of them all show the main character holding something, and their bodies are all golden. The backgrounds of these images all show the sky which is in blue and grey, with dense cloud reflecting the color of sunlight. If we analyze the images from the perspective of their spatial organization, all these images have a low eye level, which means that the spectators are seeing these images from a lower position to look up at the characters. Like I marked in Figure 7, the red horizontal line is the eye level line, which is at a lower position than the figures. This is a common way for the classical painters to make the audience feel like they are looking up at the main subjects of the images, in order to give the audience a feeling of sublime. Another feature these images all have in common is that all three chose a diagonal composition, as marked in blue in Figure 7. This composition gave the subjects of the images a remarkable sense of motion, and involved the spectators into the actions of the figures. In Figure 4, He Yunchang's body is in a diagonal position in the image, and the eye level is lower than He Yunchang's body. According to this photograph, we could assume that if there was an audience for this performance, he would be standing on the ground. So he had a lower perspective to see He Yunchang's performance, and he needed to looking up at him. In other words, He Yunchang used the perspective to create a figure of sublime, a figure like Prometheus.

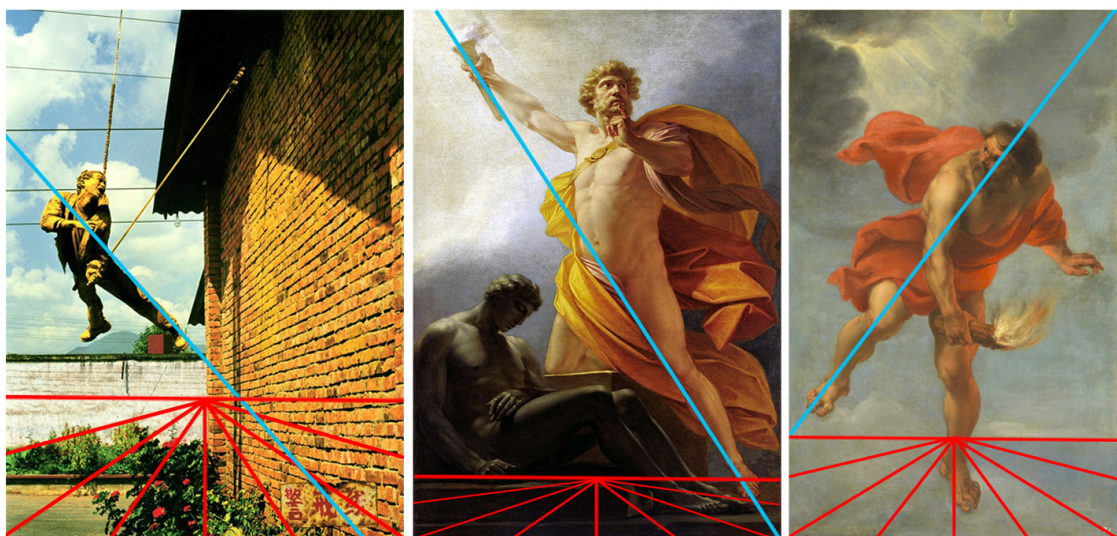


Figure 7: Compositional analysis

From this point, *Golden sunlight* shows an attempt to create the traditional beauty in a heroic genre – creating the sublime. In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant explained the difference between sublime and beautiful: ‘The sublime must always be great; the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple; the beautiful can be adorned and ornamented’⁴¹, ‘Courage is sublime and great, artfulness is little but beautiful.’⁴² According to Kant’s definitions, what I comprehend is that sublime refers to the quality of greatness, nobleness, splendidness, including courage and other moral virtues, and sometimes it can be terrifying, but cannot bring real danger to the spectator. In *Golden sunlight*, He Yunchang shows this kind of virtues – he deflected the sunlight on the wall, trying to deliver warmth to prisoners, and suffered pain as a cost of his actions.

He Yunchang colored his body in golden, using this appearance to divide himself and the prisoners, the audience, and the normal people. Although the prisoners are not visually present in this performance, every spectator has an imagination of them. What He Yunchang did was to distinguish himself from all others. Painting over his body is actually a behavior of dehumanization; he tried to avoid looking like a normal human, and this is the first step towards building the identity of this character he played. This behavior broke the communal recognition and caught people’s attention, led to the doubting and thinking. The dehumanization is actually an attempt to decrease the human features, in order to highlight the spirit, or the subject of him, and this subject only could be seen through his appearance and actions during the performance. The color gold is a sign, referring to the divineness, like Apollo, the God of sun, shining in golden light over his body. This is a romantic and poeticized visual expression to present this heroic subject.

The symbolic figure in *Golden sunlight* shows how the classical aesthetic values were organized in this performance. But the inner philosophy of this work was delivered through the actions. In the following part of this chapter, I will interpret the meaning of these actions.

2.3 The care for bare life

The prison in this performance is an important sign, which influences how we see the whole artwork. The prison, as a tool for discipline, is always seen as a space for the punishment. Death

⁴¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Translated by Goldthwait, T. John. University of California Press, 2004. p. 48.

⁴² Kant, 2004, p. 51.

penalty is an extreme form of the punishment. In China, death penalty has not yet been abolished today. Agamben believes that a modern state today should treat the living quality of its population as its essential task, 'transforming its politics into bio-politics'.⁴³ The death penalty is also a policy for protecting its citizens. The protection is not for the criminals on death row. On the contrary, these criminals are the ones that must be killed, to guarantee the safety and solidity of the sovereign.

Michel Foucault described a tortured and dismembered punishment on the body at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, and discussed how the punishment as a ritual or a public spectacle has disappeared in modern societies. Today, instead of creating the pain, the purpose of punishment is to take the prisoner's freedom and rights. A death penalty 'lasts only a moment – no torture must be added to it in advance...an execution that affects life rather than the body.'⁴⁴ Even more, Foucault described a 'utopia of judicial reticence'⁴⁵:

Today a doctor must watch over those condemned to death, right up to the last moment - thus juxtaposing himself as the agent of welfare, as the alleviator of pain, with the official whose task it is to end life. This is worth thinking about. When the moment of execution approaches, the patients are injected with tranquillizers.⁴⁶

However, towards the conditions of death-row prisoners, Giorgio Agamben holds a more pessimistic attitude. According to his theories, the life of a criminal on death row, whether he admits it or not, is treated as objectified, as a bare life, excluded from the *bios*. As Agamben mentioned, this bare life is seen as 'detached from any brain activity and, so to speak, from any subject – which decides whether a certain body can be considered alive or must be abandoned to the extreme vicissitude of transplantation.'⁴⁷

This view brings a fact to my mind that during the 1990s to 2010s, it was a common phenomenon that doctors used to harvest organs from prisoners who were sentenced to death. These organs were used as transplants. It was confirmed that 'the procurement of organs from executed prisoners, a practice that for many years has provided the majority of organs transplanted in China.'⁴⁸ This kind of harvest was done obligatorily instead of voluntarily by

⁴³ Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. 1 edition. Stanford University Press, 2003, p.15.

⁴⁴ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1995, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Foucault, 1995, p. 11

⁴⁶ Foucault, 1995, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Agamben, 2003, p.15.

⁴⁸ Martin, E.Dominique & Tibell, Annika. "Implementation of China's New Policies on Organ Procurement: An Important but Challenging Step Forward." Lundin, Susanne and others. *Global Bodies in Grey Zones: Health, Hope, Biotechnology*. SUN MeDIA, 2016, p.29 - 34.

the death-row prisoners, especially taken from Falun Gong⁴⁹ practitioners who were held in secret detention since a crackdown on the movement in 1999.⁵⁰ As the Washington Post described, these organs were operated not given to patients who needed them most, but to those who were wealthier:

The use of prisoners' organs had left China a global pariah in the transplant field. Relying on prisoners caught in a corrupt and inhumane legal system, China had built the world's second-largest transplant industry after the United States. It was effectively an unregulated system in which organs were being delivered not to the most deserving recipients but to the highest bidders. Vast profits were generated as medical ethics were set aside.⁵¹

However, even though these organ-harvesting behaviors were defined as unethical or immoral by media, the law was not on the death-row prisoners' side. The living quality of these prisoners, at least in China, were actually in the grey zone – when sentenced to death but not yet executed, they were still living subjects, but not legally treated as citizens. These criminals on death row were given a date when they would be executed, and once this date has been confirmed, the identity of being human was taken away from them.

In an interview, He Yunchang explained that he did not intend to choose the wall of a prison. However, when seeing the final performance, it is not possible for audiences to comprehend this work without decoding the prison as a visual metaphor. Besides, this performance took place in 1999, which was the same year when the Falun Gong movement happened and a large number of Falun Gong practitioners were arrested and faced the organ harvest. With these associations, this performance could be read as the metaphor of a political system, a symbol ironically reflecting the modern rationality. Here I will also borrow Roland Barthes' myth framework to decode the visual signs shown in this performance artwork, according to Figure 4.

⁴⁹ Falun Gong is a Chinese modern spiritual practice combining meditation and Qi Gong exercises. It also has a moral philosophy, based on 'truthfulness, compassion and forbearance'. It was firstly taught publicly in 1992. By 1999, there were more than 70 million practitioners in China, which was seen as a potential threat by the Communist Party of China. Therefore, the Communist Party leadership blocked Internet access to websites that mentioned Falun Gong, and declared that Falun Gong was a 'heretical organization' which threatened social stability.

⁵⁰ Denyer, Simon. "China Used to Harvest Organs from Prisoners. Under Pressure, that Practice is Finally Ending." September 15th 2017. *The Washington Post*. Access date: March 1st 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-the-face-of-criticism-china-has-been-cleaning-up-its-organ-transplant-industry/2017/09/14/d689444e-e1a2-11e6-a419-eefe8eff0835_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7ff983d9101b>.

⁵¹ Denyer, 2017.

I. SIGNIFIER (Connotator)		II. SIGNIFIED (Connotation)
1. Signifier	2. Signified	
The sunny weather, blue sky and golden clouds in Figure 4	Sun	Power, Sovereign
The light on the prison's wall, the golden paint on He Yunchang's body	Sunlight	Warmth, Beatitude, Welfare
The wall of the prison	Prison	Law, Discipline
The shadow of the roof on the wall	Prisoner	Bare life

Table 4: Decoding the second-order sign system of Figure 4

The name of this performance is *Golden sunlight*. Just like “fire” in the myth of Prometheus, the golden sunlight also refers to warmth, and it is a symbol of a high-quality life, the beatitude from the God, or the welfare in a State. Therefore, the sun, who owns the power and privilege of distributing the welfare, is a sign of a sovereign, or a polity. Correspondingly, a prison is a place for discipline, a place where the prisoners’ freedom and rights are taken away, and a place which makes the prisoners become bare lives.

Therefore, similarly to *one-meter democracy*, *Golden sunlight* could also be seen as a model of a modern society. But different from the despair and pessimism in *one-meter democracy*, this earlier performance of He Yunchang showed more hope and optimism. The prison, where there was only shadow instead of sunlight, was not a place in which people were blessed and protected. It was a place between the law and the morality, and a place in which bare lives might face inhuman treatment. Even if it was the rational choice of a modern polity, the behavior of treating the bare lives inhumanly was still unacceptable to He Yunchang.

This is why the “Prometheus” was born. He Yunchang colored his body in golden, using his own body to resist the whole problematic regime. Comprehended in this way, He Yunchang indeed performed an idealistic figure, a figure who had high-level moral qualities, courage, and a heroic awareness for caring about the bare life. These qualities made him a spectacle of sublime not only from the visual presentations but also from the motivation.

CHAPTER 3: SACRIFICIAL RITUAL AND PERFORMED MADNESS

In this chapter, I will introduce two performance artists, Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky. Both of them were punished by the police because of their performance arts. Based on their experiences, I investigate the relationship between performance art and socialistic discipline, and discussed two features of these three artists' performances: ritualized activity and imitated madness. These features lead to the disciplinary action from the sovereign. This social environment added impact on He Yunchang's presentation of his performance arts.

3.1 performance as a political tool

Politics is always a main theme in performance arts in China, some are presented directly like *one-meter democracy*, some are metaphorical like *Golden sunlight*. On some occasions, performance art has gradually become a tool for political protests. On June 4th, 2011, Chinese artist Hua Yong stood on Tiananmen Square and hit himself until his nose was bleeding.⁵² Then he used the blood to write “six” and “four” on his forehead, which was the date of a well-known political movement in China. He tried to use this behavior to commemorate the violent conflict which happened on June 4th, 1989, which is known as the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, or the June Fourth Incident. Hua Yong was arrested by the police after two or three minutes. This performance was named *Memory cycle* by Hua Yong. In 2015, during the military parade for the victory in WWII, Hua Yong gave the Nazi Salute in several public spaces in Beijing, indicating that the government is actually executing a tyranny of Nazism.⁵³ He was taken away by the police again. Hua Yong has been threatened, suspended, monitored and arrested by the police several times because of these kinds of performances.

Similar events have happened in countries other than China. When the Communist system collapsed and the polity stepped into a democratic system, it takes time for the society to

⁵² Hailan. “Beijing Artist is Detained for Mourning the 64 Incident.” [悼念六四北京藝術家被移送勞教]. June 17th, 2012. Radio of Free Asia. Access date: May 12th 2018. <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/64_artists-07172012104016.html?encoding=traditional>.

⁵³ Hailan. “Dissident Are not Tolerated During the Military Parade.” [北京阅兵不容异见人士]. November 2rd, 2015. Radio of Free Asia. Access date: May 12th 2018. <<https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/dissidents-parade-09022015094245.html>>.

experience the upheavals and conflicts, and performance art was also a tool for expression in Russia. The Russian performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky is also known for being a political activist using performance arts. On May 3rd, 2013, Pavlensky held a political protest against repressive government policies. In the news, he was described as ‘entwined barbed wire around his nude body whilst lying before the Legislative Assembly of Saint Petersburg’⁵⁴, and this performance was called *Carcass*. In the recording film⁵⁵ of the performance, he was also taken away by the police. This performance was awarded the Alternative Prize for Russian Activist Art in the category Actions Implemented in Urban Space in 2013.⁵⁶ Pavlensky has also made other performances, focusing on the harm of his own body, such as hammering a nail through his scrotum to the stone pavement on the Red Square (*Fixation*, 2013), sewing his mouth shut while holding a banner that stated, ‘Action of Pussy Riot was a replica of the famous action of Jesus Christ (Matthew 21:12–13)’⁵⁷ (*Stitch*, 2012), or cutting off his earlobe while sitting naked on the roof of the infamous Serbsky Center to protest political abuse of psychiatry in Russia⁵⁸ (*Segregation*, 2014).

These performances of Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky show their desire to protest against both authority and government. The outcomes of these performances also show that the treatment of performance artists as a danger to society is not something unique to China. It is a universal phenomenon under polities with some features, one of which is that the citizens do not have enough freedom and democracy to express opinions that could potentially do harm to the State. Different from He Yunchang, both artists’ performances had real consequences on their own lives. But for them, being arrested might be within their prediction before the performance, or even a part of the performance.

The origin of *performance* is known as coming from the rituals of ancient Greeks. The ritual, as a public event, is completed by both the “actors” and the audience. In the following centuries, the theatre as an art form of performance has gradually been separated from real life. Until 1960s, when performance art as a new art form appeared, performance began to become events again. So, for Hua Yong’s and Pyotr Pavlensky’s performances, the situations they

⁵⁴ ESCAPISTS. “Petr Pavlensky.” July 10th 2013. *ESCAPISTS*. Access date: April 12th 2018. <<https://escapist.wordpress.com/2013/07/10/petr-pavlensky/>>.

⁵⁵ See: https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/sadovye_nozhnitsy_i_odejalo_kak_piterskie_politsejskie_vynima_li_obnazhennogo_hudozhnika_iz_koljuchej_provoloiki_video-342684/

⁵⁶ Grani.ru. "Peter Pavlensky, Saint Petersburg Artist" (in Russian). October 28th 2013. *Daily Internet Newspaper*. Access date: April 12th 2018. <<https://graniru.org/people/1866/>>.

⁵⁷ Pralaya. “Petersburg Pyotr Pavlensky sewed his mouth in support of punk parishioners.” July 24th 2012. *Pralaya*. Access date: March 17th 2018. <<http://pravaya.ru/news/22782>>.

⁵⁸ Hlyupin, Pavel. "Artist Pavlensky cut his earlobe" (In Russian). October 19th 2014. *Slon*. Access date: March 22nd 2018. <<https://republic.ru/fast/russia/khudozhnik-pavlenskiy-otrezal-sebe-mochku-ukha-1173405.xhtml>>.

created were actually the events, which were between art and the everyday life, and also between the aesthetics and ethics. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has pointed, ‘the performance was not framed by the parameters of art alone, it also exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle.’⁵⁹ The elements of both ritual and spectacle are in Hua Yong’s and Pyotr Pavlensky’s performances, and the reason why they were treated as dangerous for society, and were finally arrested, were also due to these two aspects.

3.2 ritualized performance

Firstly, I will talk about the feature of ritual in performance art. In *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), William Robertson Smith recorded that in some Arab tribes by the fourth century B.C., people used camels to make ritual sacrifices. He believed that this kind of ritual ‘tied all participants into a bond of union’, and was able to ‘produce a political community’.⁶⁰ In Hua Yong’s and Pyotr Pavlensky’s performances, the sacrificial objects are not the camels, but the artists’ own bodies. “Seeing the artist bleeding” has the same implications as “eating the camel’s flesh and drinking their blood”. The artists used their bodies and cooked a visual feast. It satisfied the spectators’ scopophilia, and tied a bond with them. It is same with He Yunchang’s *One-meter democracy* – even though watched through the screen, it aroused an emotional response from the spectator, which is the first step to producing the community. Furthermore, Hua Yong’s and Pyotr Pavlensky’s works have another layer of meaning. These works implied, as Agamben pointed out, ‘If today there is no longer anyone clear figure of the sacred man, it is because we are all virtually homines sacri.’⁶¹ In a literal sense, this is to say that in some circumstances, everyone could be homo sacer. For Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky, a fact they revealed is that under such domination, like a totalitarian ruling, a tyranny, or a State of Exception, each individual under the sovereign has the danger of becoming a bare life. They are representatives of normal citizens, using an abnormal action to reveal the absurdity in normal life. Their ritualized actions force the audience to bond together with them, like a political community. In *One-meter democracy*, He Yunchang played the role of the sovereign,

⁵⁹ Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Translated by JainIris, Saskya. 1 Edition. Routledge, 2008, p.26.

⁶⁰ Smith, Robertson William. *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. Adamant Media Corporation, 2005, p. 252, p. 295.

⁶¹ Agamben, 1998, p. 115.

or the State of Exception, while in Hua Yong's and Pyotr Pavlensky's performances, they were punished by the real law and police. In *One-meter democracy*, He Yunchang also suffered the pain of being a homo sacer, which was a metaphoric action under his control, while Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky have really put themselves at the edge of the law.

Here I need to add an explanation of the relations between *ritual* and *sacrifice*, which reveals the purpose of ritual. Agamben emphasized that a homo sacer could be killed, but could not be sacrificed, because he is impure.⁶² In other words, a homo sacer could not be sacrificed for a divine purpose, like the God, or the myth behind the ritual. Before the end of 19th century, it was commonly admitted that 'ritual merely illustrated and "performed" myth'⁶³, and myth was the purpose of ritual, so its status should be above the ritual. But William Robertson Smith had a different idea and raised that myths served only the interpretation of rituals, so it was rituals, instead of myths, deserved the primary status:

So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper.⁶⁴

Homo sacer could be the sacrificial object in a ritualized performance, since the performance did not use a myth or a divine figure as the textual interpretation. In other words, when a ritual is separated from the myth behind it, since it has lost its explanation and purpose, the ritual does not have the divine attributes. Based on this, can the homo sacer really not be able to sacrifice for a purpose? From the perspective of the State, bare life is a symbol of a condition which is not valuable for the common ideals of all its citizens. But for some of the homines sacri, death is the final purpose and the ideal destination of their martyred behaviors. They cannot sacrifice for the sovereign, while they sacrifice for their own ideals. For example, on December 11th, 2017, when Hua Yong was in exile before being captured by the Chinese government, he wrote a statement, said that 'until now, to be or to die is unimportant. I love my country, and I can see the hope...If death is unescapable, I choose to sacrifice for the dawn.'⁶⁵

As I mentioned above, the audience of a ritual could be bonded as a political community.

⁶² Agamben, 1998, p.47.

⁶³ Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.30.

⁶⁴ Smith, Robertson William. *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. Adamant Media Corporation, 2005, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Translated from the handwritten statement posted on Hua Yong's twitter account. Link: <https://twitter.com/lifang072/status/940126777967546369?s=12>. Translated by the author. Original quotation: '事到如今，生死不重要了，我热爱我的祖国，也看见希望！...如果必定死亡，我也愿意在自己的祖国看到天亮！'

Once this consensus was reached, the audience would be in the same standpoint with the artist, which, in Hua Yong's and Pyotr Pavlensky's performances, was to some extent standing in the opposite position to the government against some public agendas. In Hua Yong's performances, the number "6·4" on his forehead, as well as the nazi salute, gave clear interpretation to his behavior. It is the same with Pavlensky's *Stitch*, in which the protest sentences were written on the banner. In states with a centralized authority, the government is not only a department for the implementation of the law, but a symbol of the sovereign. When the sovereign was facing provocation, a state of exception started, and the artist, as the host of the "ritual", was deprived the rights of being a legal citizen, and their identity collapsed to the bare lives.

The situation for He Yunchang was different. Except for his performances in art museums, He Yunchang seldom gave performance in a public space without informing the audience. Most of his independent works took place secretly. In the archives during the early years of his performance career, there are little records about the audience. Even in *One-meter democracy*, most of the audience were people he knew. This leads to a result that if seeing his performance as a ritual, the political community they reached was controllable for the government. Therefore, the threat to the sovereign in He Yunchang's performances is hard to establish. This is one of the reasons why He Yunchang did not cause public panic and was not arrested after his performances, even though he lives under the same sovereign with Hua Yong.

3.3 spectacle and madness

As Erika Fischer-Lichte said, performance also has the elements of spectacle. In the context of her book this spectacle refers to the dramatic spectacle, which, in performance arts, is shown as the irrational, the absurd, and the abnormal. In a word, it is shown as the *madness*.

After Pyotr Pavlensky's performance *Stitch*, the police came and 'called an ambulance and sent him for a psychiatric examination', and 'the psychiatrist declared him sane and released him shortly after the incident.'⁶⁶ This leads me to believe that his performance was doubted as a behavior of madness, since it is absurd, and out of the everyday norms.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault raised an opinion that the victory of human

⁶⁶ Matveeva, Anna. "Petr Pavlensky: A simple intersection of a vertical line with horizontal is already considered as an insult to the faith" (In Russian). July 24th 2012. *artchronika*. Access date: April 10th 2018. <<http://artchronika.ru/persona/pavlensky-interview/>>.

civilization is actually a victory of ‘reason’s subjugation of non-reason’⁶⁷. Madness in literature and theatre has a long history. By the end of the Middle Ages, in some dramas, there was already records of the role of the *madman*, who stood in the middle of the stage and used ridiculous language to tell the truth. As Foucault has recorded:

In farces and soties, the character of the Madman, the Fool, or the Simpleton assumes more and more importance. He is no longer simply a ridiculous and familiar silhouette in the wings: he stands center stage as the guardian of truth playing here a role which is the complement and converse of that taken by madness in the tales and the satires. If folly leads each man into a blindness where he is lost, the madman, on the contrary, reminds each man of his truth; in a comedy where each man deceives the other and dupes himself, the madman is comedy to the second degree: the deception of deception; he utters, in his simpleton's language which makes no show of reason, the words of reason that release, in the comic, the comedy: he speaks love to lovers, the truth of life to the young, the middling reality of things to the proud, to the insolent, and to liars.⁶⁸

It is not hard to notice that from the 15th century, madness has already shown an ironical critique to rationality, and a ‘comic punishment of knowledge and its ignorant presumption’⁶⁹. Then in the following centuries, the madman on stage gradually became a sign of the truth, a sign of the satire to the “rational” world.

No matter on stage or in the real life, madness is always a spectacle. For the theatre audience, the role of madman uses theatrical behaviors and strange language to attract their attention and curiosity. In real life, until the 18th century in France, an excursion to see the display of the insane was at one time entertainment for the Left Bank bourgeoisie⁷⁰.

However, different from the dramatic performances, in modern society, the foreignness which madness shows could not only arouse the curiosity but also bring a fear of danger to the spectators. As a Sunday distraction for the Left Bank⁷¹ bourgeoisie, the madmen should be in confinement, as a result of the rational management and the rule of morality:

During the classical period, madness was shown, but on the other side of bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of a reason that no longer felt any relation to it and that

⁶⁷ Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. 1 Edition. Vintage, 1988, p. ix.

⁶⁸ Foucault, 1988, p. 14.

⁶⁹ Foucault, 1988, p. 26.

⁷⁰ Foucault, 1988, p. 68.

⁷¹ The Left Bank refers to the southern bank of Seine river in Paris. It also refers to the place in Paris of an earlier era, where artists, writers, philosophers and intellectuals always gathered.

would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance.⁷²

This kind of security system was actually used against ‘the violence of the insane’ and ‘explosion of their fury’, which was seen as ‘a social danger’⁷³. Therefore, madness is actually a potential threat to society, due to the unpredictability and violence associated with madness being a product of irrational behavior.

Performance art shows both features of the staged dramatic madness and the madness in real life, from the spectators’ perspective. Including *One-meter democracy*, *Golden sunlight*, Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky’s works, all these performances were presented and located in a real social space, instead of an artificial scenery or a stage. But it does not mean that there is not an invisible stage. Their performances put the dramatic stage into daily life, on which the artists played the madman, the fool, or the simpleton, while the spectators on the scene unconsciously became the other roles who were supposed to be “normal”, who were astonished by them, or making fun of them. In these performances, the spectators were both audience and actors. In *One-meter democracy*, the volunteers’ voting behaviors could directly lead to the real consequence of the performance; in *Memory cycle*, *Carcass* and *Stitch*, the police became involved in the performances and put an end to the artists’ pain.

Different from the dramatic plays, the violence and pain on performance artists’ bodies is real. This drive the spectators into a confused and overwhelmed state – the audience were suspended between art and life, between aesthetics and ethics. They were astonished by the mad behavior, and they could not confirm if this crazy behavior was from real madness, or only an imitation of madness for an artistic purpose. For Hua Yong’s and Pyotr Pavlensky’s performances, since their performances took place in public areas, they could cause more social commotion, due to the confusing circumstance they gave to the spectators. The commotion was a certification of how the performances were seen as a social danger and a product of madness. The spectators’ reaction shows how they see these performances as madness: the police, in Hua Yong’s and Pyotr Pavlensky’s performances, immediately chose legal action to stop and discipline the behaviors that were out of the norm. While in *One-meter democracy*, the second voting result, in which most voters were against the surgery, showed spectators’ own wills of treating He Yunchang’s behavior as abnormal and inhuman. Obviously, most of the spectators were not in favor of the madness in these artists’ performances, and the choices of them were based on the real norm and common recognition from the social discipline, instead of reactions

⁷² Foucault, 1988, p. 70

⁷³ Foucault, 1988, p. 73

toward only an art performance.

Besides the violence and danger, the ineffectivity in performance arts, such as it was presented in *Golden Sunlight* and *Inverted River*, is also a feature of madness. This is related to the ineffective labor as a punishment to the people diagnosed as madmen, started from the 17th century. As Foucault recorded, the labor, according to the classical understandings, possessed the power ‘not so much by its productive capacity as by a certain force of moral enchantment’, but was ‘acknowledged because it was based on an ethical transcendence’⁷⁴. From the 17th century, labor became compulsory for individuals deemed to be mad in confinement. However, by ignoring the economical relationships between labor and need, and ignoring the fact that it can be difficult for those suffering with madness to be productive, most of their work was only a process of a moral discipline instead of efficient producing. The ineffective work therefore became a symbol of the punishment for mad men. Besides, the ineffectivity is also seen as unethical and irrational, since it is a waste of time and labor with no productions. Like it in *Golden sunlight*, only when seeing his performances as a product of madness could the spectators forgive the unethical aspects of ineffectiveness, since a mad man did not have the ability to work effectively and rationally.

But I need to emphasize that these performances of all the three artists were spectacles of madness only for the spectators. For the artists, these performed behaviors are just imitations of madness, using acting abnormally to reveal truths that most people choose not to see, and to reveal the real absurdity in everyday life. Here I will discuss the different results of the three artists’ works: all of them have used performance art to represent and criticize political problems, but only Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky have been stopped or arrested. Besides the reason of the ritualized community as a provocation to the sovereign, which I mentioned in section 3.2, another reason is the language. As Foucault stated:

Language is the first and last structure of madness, its constituent form; on language are based all the cycles in which madness articulates its nature. That the essence of madness can be ultimately defined in the simple structure of a discourse does not reduce it to a purely psychological nature, but gives it a hold over the totality of soul and body.⁷⁵

Foucault has explained a seemingly-logical linguistic structure of people suffering from madness. Following the special discourse structures, one could judge, or at least feel, the different mental condition of someone who is seen as mad. In *One-meter democracy*, during

⁷⁴ Foucault, 1988, p. 55

⁷⁵ Foucault, 1988, p. 100.

the recording, He Yunchang has clearly stated that he was going to create a performance, and the whole procedure of voting was also following a systemic democratic voting process. His linguistic statement ended the suspended condition of the spectators, and ended the confusion between art and life, turned their recognition of his behaviors from “real madness” to “performed madness”. The statement led the spectators from “seeing an event” to “seeing a performance”, and also from “astonished by an event” to “appreciating an artwork”.

Kant has defined the sublime as an encounter with a cosmic power from a safe point⁷⁶. The safe point refers to a situation where the object has no threats against the spectator’s safety. For the madness as a spectacle, it also needs a safe point for seeing. This is why when the Left Bank bourgeoisie watched those deemed to be mad as entertainment, the so-called “madman” had to be in confinement – only through confinement would the consumers feel a sense of safety, and the safe point serves to turn the danger into entertainment. For performance art, however, there is another layer of request for the audience, which is appreciating the artistic value in the performed madness. By staying at the safe point, the spectators acquire the awareness of seeing the aesthetic aspects of the madness without the realistic safety considerations. They then have the choice to suspend their own rationality and ethics, to see the madness as not only a social spectacle but an artistic insinuation to the society.

Therefore, the linguistic statement leads to a safe point for seeing the performed madness, in which the danger ends, and it brings the chance for appreciating the performance in an aesthetical aspect.

As an imitation of the madness, or a “performed madness”, performance art sometimes leads the artists to face a consequence of being disciplined by the authorities or enforcers of a sovereign, even if they are neither suffering from the real madness nor criminals who have broken the law. This is because the art performances have a potential possibility of bonding a political community through the ritualized behaviors, and could finally lead to the provocation to sovereign. The circumstance when the law is suspended and these performance artists are arrested is a state of exception. Therefore, the political considerations He Yunchang delivered in his performances *One-meter democracy* and *Golden sunlight* is not only an insinuation to the centralized sovereigns, but also a pessimistic expectation to the performance artists’ own destiny under the state of exception. In his performances, the bare lives, as well as the heroic figure carrying sunlight to them, all showed a martyred responsibility, which exactly

⁷⁶ Gambino, Richard. *Red Hook: Confessions Of A Brooklyn Eaglet: 1939-1955*. Guernica Editions , 2005, p. 29.

corresponded to the spirit of Hua Yong and Pyotr Pavlensky. This double meaning in He Yunchang's performances aroused my rethinking of both the concept of bare life and the features of performance art.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I investigated the consideration of bare lives in He Yunchang's performance arts, with the concept of homo sacer from Giorgio Agamben as a theoretical guiding of my work. He Yunchang's performances *One-meter democracy* and *Golden sunlight* are two works in quite different artistic styles. *One-meter democracy* chose a direct and violent visual style to awake the audience's rethinking of the democratic system, while *Golden sunlight* used a heroic and romantic way to present the care for bare lives through seemingly ineffective behaviors. Both works presented the consideration for bare lives, as well as the doubting to the modern social system.

In chapter 1, I deeply researched He Yunchang's performance artwork *One-meter democracy*, used semiology and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as main methods for analyzing the images. Then I discussed the main theme of *One-meter democracy*, concluded that this performance presented an execution of a bare life under the state of exception, rather than an accusation of the tyranny of majority. In chapter 2 I made a compositional analysis on the visual archives of He Yunchang's performance art *Golden sunlight*, decoded how He Yunchang created the sublime in a poetic visual presentation, and interpreted the consideration of bare life under seemingly ineffective behavior in it.

Performance art has a feature of madness, and this feature could lead to the condition of bare life under specific polities, with a start of the state of exception. After comparing Hua Yong and Pavlensky's experiences, I also found that the suspension of law upon performance artists is a common and universal phenomenon. The bio-political considerations in He Yunchang's performances indicate the possibility of collapsing from citizens to bare lives when performance artists perform the madness. He Yunchang's performances showed an accusation to the tyranny of the sovereign, and a desire for respect and freedom from the public of seeing performance art.

For representing these thoughts in his works, He Yunchang chose different artistic methods. Rather than making political accusations to the sovereign, he prefers to turn the attention on the bare lives by presenting their living conditions and their needs. Such as showing the pain and violence in *One-meter democracy*, or indicating that they are living in shadows and taking the beatitude to them by playing a heroic role in *Golden sunlight*. This choice of the performing

objects also reflects the main difference between performances of He Yunchang's and Hua Yong or Pavlensky's. The political environment, as well as the public's political attitude towards seeing performance artists, does have potential impact on He Yunchang's performances. Hua Yong's experience reflects that performance artists are still seen as a part of the irrational and threatening factors of the society, and Pyotr Pavlensky's similar experience shows that this situation does not only happen in China, but is a more common circumstance for artists under certain polities globally. He Yunchang is also a part of the class of society that he cares about, those who are struggling not to collapse to a bare life

For further researching considerations, since I raised a new angle of seeing He Yunchang's performance arts, this led to a sociological problem about the discipline of the performance artists, who are acting within the limitations of laws but have potential threats to the sovereign. Is this performed madness valuable for a society? Should the aesthetical values be seen as an aspect for measuring the social impacts caused by performance art? These questions need further discussions.

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APPENDIX

Quotations in Languages Other Than English

Footnote 2:

He, Yunchang. "The Fairy Tale of Adults" [成年人的童话]. June 28th 2016. *Sina*. Access date: March 5th 2018. <<http://collection.sina.com.cn/ddys/2016-06-28/doc-ifxtmwei9421382.shtml>>.

Original quotation: ‘这个令人伤感的故事让当时处境也不好的我注意到，还有成千上万面临同样境况的人，不管面对怎样的困境和强大的势力，他们都没有像那个工程师一样选择了放弃。现实的锋芒只能穿透他们的肢体，但不能伤害意志，这种弱势群体坚忍不拔的精神意志又令我振奋。次年我实施“预约明天”，以后又实施了一些作品，包括摄影和装置。我没有刻意消解或对抗什么势力，只是从自身感受出发，去宣扬一种我所赞赏的群体 还他们的精神。’

Footnote 24:

Liu, Gang. "One-Meter Democracy" [一米民主]. February 21st 2016. *Hiart*. Access date: March 5th 2018. <<http://hiart.cn/observation/detail/2b0grAm.html>>.

Original quotation: ‘有人赞扬何云昌，称其为沉闷的当代艺术带来了一股锐气。有人指责何云昌，认为这是对艺术道德底线的一种挑衅。还有学者觉得，此行为艺术唤醒了人们对民主的认真思考。更有评论家斥责何云昌，认为《一米民主》歪曲了民主的正确本意。’

Footnote 25:

Liu, Gang. "One-Meter Democracy" [一米民主]. February 21st 2016. *Hiart*. Access date: March 5th 2018. <<http://hiart.cn/observation/detail/2b0grAm.html>>.

Original quotation: ‘最初，到场的人都把投票当成儿戏，嘻嘻哈哈地投了赞成票。正当大伙儿谈笑甚欢之时，有人喊道：“太不严肃了吧！这可真要在阿昌身上切出一道口子！”话音一落，屋里的说笑声嘎然变成了窃窃私语。几经讨论，大家一致赞同重新投票。第二次表决结果是反对票居多。眼看《一米民主》将要流产，何云昌心急如焚，他暗下决

心：不得出赞同的表决结果，谁都别想离开他的工作室。在何云昌的苦劝和要挟下，大家不得不进行了第三次投票。此次表决的结果为：12 票赞成（其中包括何云昌的赞成票），10 票反对，3 票弃权。’

Footnote 36:

YouYou. *"The Body Narrative of Action Art in China: Typical Form of Yunchang He's Action Art Works"* [中国行为艺术中的身体叙事--以何云昌行为艺术作品为例]. Yunnan Arts University. Kunming, May 2010. Translated by the author.

Original quotation: ‘何云昌将每一次没有结果的目标付之全部的心血，似乎在寻找现实社会中已经不存在的理想价值。他用身体的伤痛体验人性中非功利的原始冲动，而这种冲动是对企图用政治伦理与经济消费主义来救赎灵魂的嘲讽。’