

HOW TO LET YOUR BODY BE BOTH A MEDIUM AND A LANGUAGE:
INTERPRETING CAO YU'S WORKS

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At the Central Academy of Fine Arts recent Master's Degree Exhibition, Cao Yu's performance/video work, *Fountain* (Single-Channel, HD, color, silent, 11'10", 2015), aroused great attention and interest from the audience. Her works are not large productions, and *Fountain* is comprised simply of an HD television hung vertically on the gallery wall. The screen repeatedly loops a moving image of the artist forcefully squeezing two mountain-like breasts until pure white milk spurts out. The breasts spray like geysers and drip all over her body. Supple breasts are slowly squeezed until they are dry and empty. There is no trace of context or narrative to be seen in her work, but she is obviously using new methodologies to question art and its meaning as it relates to the body, the self, the extensibility of media, the role of language, as well as the rational judgments and phenomena involved in artistic awareness, viewer experience, etc. She uses her body as a tool to reveal the relationship between media and art, art and language, as well as language and experience. As she puts it, "I have transformed my own essence into a sculptural material, and my body has become a container for growing and ejecting milk." (See Cao Yu's statement). In this sense, the body demonstrates a kind of pure significance. It is simultaneously media and language.

If one were to compare Cao Yu's work *Fountain* with Bruce Nauman's work *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, one would realize that Cao Yu's work reconstructs the art of imitation and post-imitation, or perhaps, misappropriation and post-misappropriation. As everyone knows, the fountain is full of special symbolism in both traditional painting as well as city sculpture. In Bruce Nauman's 1966 photographs, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, the artist became a fountain himself by shooting a column of water from his mouth. This is clearly a reflection of Duchamp's *Fountain*, and it is also an extension as the artist transformed his own body into media/material. Bruce Nauman realized, while observing the art of his time that many artists were focused on thinking about how to organize and structure temporal issues. Examples include John Cage's compositional methods, Merce Cunningham's choreographic methods, and Andy Warhol's film production methods, etc. Clearly, Bruce Nauman had adopted a method of thinking that was different from theirs and worked in a perpetual form that continued even after the audience had seen it and walked away. It means that the work was not of a specified time. It was constant and repeating. In this sense, from her *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* enlightenment to performing with her own body's breast milk spray in *Fountain*, Cao Yu expresses her conversation with Bruce Nauman in a kind of parodistic method. She views her body as a container of life that holds boundless energy and form. "Look deep into your own heart, and you will find miracles within yourself." (Francis Bacon). What Cao Yu's *Fountain* relies on is her own body's natural state. She uses her own lactating body to create a remarkably masculine fountain monument. Of course it is a temporary dramatic form, but she has used a video loop to transform a temporary image into an eternal image. In other words, as far as the audience is concerned, it is a kind of work that doesn't need them to sit there and watch. One can watch it for a period of time and walk away. It will always continue to play because it is like a normal object and will always be there. The audience can come and go.

In fact, Cao Yu's *Fountain* is seen as a living sculpture. The information of the released image is affected by the emotions of others. From delicate skin and full breasts, to the process of squeezing the breasts and spraying milk, to the breasts gradually shrinking and emptying: these are the changes of a nursing mother's breasts. The images of these changes are moving because, from the heart, they sublimate to the erotic and then transform to the sad. As Francis Bacon said, "the hoax of the senses is also the senses kind of pleasure." In this sense, Cao Yu's *Fountain* not only creates a kind of bodily pleasure, but it also constructs a kind of bodily communication of emotions.

Closely linked with *Fountain* is Cao Yu's other work, *Artist Manufacturing* (the artist's own breast-milk, 2015). She used many clay-like hand-shaped compositions made of dark and light brown dried mother's milk. In fact, it was here that the artist realized while holding dried breast milk tightly in her own hands was that it was an experience full of the weight and feeling of motherhood, bodily congestion, painful memories, as well as motherly love. She also realized that it was a medium of artistic creation. Though

regarded as a form of bodily waste instilled with emotion, it has been transformed by the artist into a form that mixes rational judgment and ideological phenomenon with the complex relationship of art experience and audience experience.

Additionally, Cao Yu's other work *Every single grain is the fruit of hard work* (left-over grain, 2012-present) is a conceptual work full of time, process, and performance. Although she did not experience the hardships of the 20th century that the saying refers to, the artist has borrowed words that contain former suffering as a method of conceptual art. She handles the leftover rice from every meal and kneads the yellow-grey grains into the shape of a hill, using her own body and experience to visualize the connotation of an "arduous task of rice". This work also shows no trace of narrative, showing only pure abstract forms. It implies the relationship between self and material, time and behaviour, as well as process and change.

Similar work *Canvas, 130508-130809* (paint-marker on canvas, 180 x 180 cm, 2013) also reflects Cao Yu's artistic logic and concept. The artist used paint markers to paint every warp and weft in the canvas so that the picture reproduced is nothing other than the canvas itself and the meaning produced is nothing other than meaninglessness.

With a unique approach and concept, Cao Yu has changed the form of the body or material. In constructing an artistic language with unique character, she has enacted a bold interpretation or extension on the foundation of established experience and established approach to art. She has derived new concepts and forms from body art and conceptual art in order to explore, within art, life and death, love and hate, happiness and sadness, time and consequence, as well as methods of expressing meaning and meaninglessness. This kind of experimental attitude, in a decontextualized manner, avoids any kind of contamination from didactic narrative. It allows the body or materials to return to purity, exploring the inner relationship between concept, language, and form. In other words, when the body or materials are transformed or shifted, the changes in form and conceptual significance are immediately highlighted. The rustic aesthetic that her work holds is supported throughout by strength of concept.

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