

# C H E N Z H E N

## *Transexpériences*

Galleria Continua

Beijing

**Opening Saturday 24 September, 5 p.m.**

The artist Chen Zhen (Shanghai 1955–Paris 2000) is one of the protagonists of our times, whose work, the essential spirit of which is encapsulated in the notion of “transexpérience”, is a fine example of pluralism in art. After training as an artist in the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Chen Zhen lived and worked between Shanghai, New York and Paris, moving to the French capital in 1986. Constantly traversing boundaries, he operated in an area between Eastern and Western thought, privileging synergy rather than clear-cut choice and rigid classification. Chen Zhen’s art deals with many issues, ranging from international politics to the life of the individual, and in his artistic practice he searched for a visual synthesis which clearly expressed, especially from an aesthetic point of view, the need to be understood in a world with different perspectives from those that had surrounded him as he grew up, and the desire to mix Chinese culture with that of the nations he was becoming familiar with. It was for this reason that Chen Zhen, who was initially oriented towards painting, later began to concentrate on installations. He started to assemble everyday objects like beds, chairs, tables, chamber pots, cots and mattresses, which he rescued from oblivion and

reconverted, giving them a new life. However, in contrast with their original function, the objects were no longer practical for human use. The spirit shaping these works is rooted in ancient Taoist philosophy – where Yin and Yang represent two sides of the same whole –, and he explored the path of Buddhist spirituality without, however, ignoring the scientific and rational culture of the Western world. A key concern in Chen Zhen’s work was also an investigation of the difference between the Eastern and the Western approach to medicine; this emerges in a number of works dealing with the care and treatment of the human body, where the body is viewed as an interior landscape, as an organism that works if its various elements interrelate harmoniously.

Chen Zhen often did projects in unusual places and contexts, seeking the direct involvement of the local population; for instance, he worked with the children of Salvador de Bahia; in the poor, black neighbourhoods of Houston; and with the Shaker community in Maine.

The exhibition will touch on the themes mentioned above through some twenty works produced between 1990 and 2000, which are representative of the various creative phases in the artist’s career.

1990–1993: Chen Zhen focussed on the “relationship between human beings, nature and objects”. “People’s desires lead to an excess of material goods that upset the balance of nature, with negative effects on human existence. It’s a vicious circle” (Chen Zhen).

During this period Chen Zhen introduced natural elements such as “water”, “earth” and “fire” into his works in order to create a metaphysical space where objects and nature can interact, and to remind people living in this materialistic, conflict-ridden world of the need for introspective analysis. *A World in/out of the World* (1991), *Bibliothèque* (1992) and *L’Autel – L’Équilibre/Le Déséquilibre* (1993) are representative of this period.

At the end of 1993, after a period of time in the West, Chen Zhen felt the need to return to China. “You can only arrive at your objective opinion by understanding the East and being involved in the West. Observe the world by examining yourself” (Chen Zhen).

*Round Table – Side by Side* (1997): this work represents the conflicts and misunderstandings between West and East. According to Chen Zhen, despite persisting “eternal misunderstandings”, there are people who want and try to understand the culture, desires and aspirations of other peoples.

Chen Zhen produced *Social Investigation – Shanghai 1* in 1997, when he returned to China. He used photography to reveal the changes and development of Shanghai following the Reform and the greater openness in economic and political matters that ensued.

Besides exhibitions in museums and galleries, Chen Zhen was also very interested in contributing to shows on specific themes; one of these resulted in *Beyond the Vulnerability*. To make this work, Chen Zhen spent a month, with the support of a charity organization, living with homeless children in Salvador de Bahia in Brazil. Through art he helped the children to understand and analyze the city by studying six different architectural styles

associated with six different social strata. In the process he stimulated their curiosity in life, enhanced their understanding of society and nurtured their dream of having a “house” of their own. At the end of the project the children created over thirty small houses made from candles. Six drawings illustrate the gradual development of this project.

*Le produit naturel/le produit artificiel* was also created in a particular environment. Ten artists were invited to work in ten private gardens in the centre of Paris. The chosen theme was “Parcours privé”. Chen Zhen planted 1,400 plastic roses in two cubic metres of cow dung, creating something akin to a mud stela and introducing a new criterion for judging what is beautiful or ugly. The ugly, smelly cow dung is a valuable natural nutrient while the splendid artificial roses are completely odourless.

The perverse, contradictory juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness, truth and falsity is a reflection of how human beings are more and more detached from nature, and their outlook and way of thinking is becoming increasingly narrow and restricted in the “prisons” of today’s cities.

Ongoing project — Becoming a doctor

At the age of 25 Chen Zhen began to suffer from haemolytic anaemia, which from early on in life gave him a keen understanding and analytic perspective on the value of time and space. He viewed his illness as an experience of value from which he would draw inspiration. In 1999 he began to explore a new area in his work with “A life project — Becoming a doctor”.

In 2000, at the Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, he had a solo show entitled “Field of Synergy”, intended as a prelude to this project.

*Zen Garden*: through the interior landscape of the body two elements overlap in this work, the all-embracing nature of Qi and the incomplete nature of Western medicine, creating a field of interaction between body and spirit.

*Crystal Landscape of Inner Body*: Chen Zhen made eleven crystal organs and arranged them on a surgical bed to form an “interior landscape in crystal”. The external landscape is reflected in the crystal surface of the interior landscape of the body, underlining the relationship between internal and external causes, between the human body and society. However, it also reveals the value of life and how fragile it is.

Chen Zhen wrote: “When you feel ill it’s already too late. It’s better not to get ill (that is, to prevent); this is my recipe”.

*Field of Synergy*: In this work, through sight it is possible to experience the magnetic field of an unusual vital energy. Using children’s beds symbolically to represent innocence, Chen Zhen underlines the marked contrast with the adult world, which is full of desires and contradictions and where people are endlessly striving for power and money.

The artist uses the child’s bed to represent the human body, and also metaphorically to represent the object of desires and dreams, of human vicissitudes, and to emphasize the organic link between society and the human body; he exhorts people not to ignore the origin of social disorders while they are preoccupied with their physical disorders.

*Bibliothèque musicale, Silence Sonore, Black Broom*: through sound and objects, this series of works emphasizes the Chinese character “Xi” (washing), an action that ranges

from the bodily (washing of the blood and intestine) to the spiritual (purification of the soul and of culture).

During the cultural exchange programme between China and France, held in October 2003 in accordance with Chen Zhen's wishes before he died, Tan Dun (the celebrated Chinese composer who lives in the United States) and Huang Doudou (the famous Chinese dancer) were invited by the director of the Paris Musical Institute and the directors of the Palais de Tokyo to participate in the Chen Zhen retrospective exhibition held at the Palais de Tokyo. Tan Dun devised a percussive method for *Jue Chang*, while Huang Doudou and two percussionists devised the performance *Dancing Body/Drumming Mind*.

Chen Zhen's work has been exhibited extensively around the world, with shows at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1994; Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan, 1997; Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York, 1998; Venice Biennale, 1999; Ludwig Museum, Cologne, 1999; GAM, Turin, 2000; MOCA, Zagreb, 2000; Serpentine Gallery, London, 2001; Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2003.

For further information:

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