1995

Interview with Yuan

Shun Yuan 袁顺

Good Copy

Yuan Shun

"deutsche Fahne", 1995 Lichtkasten (90x110cm, Foto: Petra Löber)

A photo of the artist mimics the German flag, altering the connotations called forth by the black, red and yellow fields of color. The symbol on the red Stirnband is the inverted Chinese character for "self", positioned for its wearer. The photo stands on the floor as a lightbox facing the wall mural "Denkmal der Stadt".

"Denkmal der Stadt", 1995
A monumental wall mural (app. 5 x 10 meters) forms the street pattern of Berlin. This map consists of double-sided tape covered with clippings of the artist's own hair collected during the duration of his stay in Europe.

"Thinking about yourself," 1993
Asked by a German artist to do something using a spiral, Yuan Shun and his wife Petra Löber create a ceremony in which the symbol is cut into the artist's hair. This action reflects the Buddhistic view of the scalp as the interface between body and universe.

ICH BIN BERLINER...

The following interview was conducted on the 17th of October, 1995. Dr. Alexander Tolnay was born in Budapest in 1944. While studying at the University of Wien he met his future wife and resettled in Germany. From '83 to '91, he directed the Municipal Gallery of Esslingen and was the cultural director of the Institute for Foreign affairs from 1991 - 95. He has been director of the Neue Berliner Kunstverein since January, 1995.

Alexander Tolnay: You left China after the massacre on Tian'anmen Square. Was this also the reason behind your leaving?
Yuan Shun: There were a couple of reasons. It was very disappointing to see what happened after June 4th, in the

acadamies and so on. Students from the protests joined the government, the party even. I think they thought they could change things from inside.
TOLNAY: Like Rudi Dutschke proposed to do.
SHUN: Yes. But I became disillusioned, especially with attitudes towards contemporary or modern art. It became very difficult to work as an artist in China. But I was also very curious in western culture and wanted to see what was going on there. The real reason, though, is that I got married. My wife Petra is German. She set everything in motion, so to speak.

TOLNAY: After Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping introduced a more liberal policy leading to the Movement of 85. There were a lot of group movements such as those in Beijing, Hangzhou or Shanghai. This exciting period culminated in the now-famous "China / Avant-Garde" exhibition in the Beijing National Gallery in 1989, in which you participated.
SHUN: Yes, there were three floors and three topics. I was on the floor called "ink join painter" which tried to show links between traditional chinese painting and experimental work. There was also a floor with more political content.

TOLNAY: Exactly. This was the first time that it was allowed to paint Mao as an ordinary person instead of a hero. Later, you made your first installation with the title "Is he a man? Is he a God?" raising the issue of Mao-worship.

SHUN: Yes, this is... the situation in China is funny. This was a new movement in modern art and the circle in which I found myself was not at the center of it. This was the circle of military artists, which isn't very well known. You see, I studied at the Army Art University in Peking. I was very interested in seeing what was going on, but I was on the outside. And even when I finished studying, I was still in the army. While I was in China, I disliked the idea of making political art. I refused. When I was in school, in '71 or '72, I was asked to make a picture for an exhibition called the "Shanghai pupil exhibition." I was a teenager then and was always painting. They said; just draw one big Mao picture with lots of happy children. I couldn't do this, so I drew something else. They said; Okay, it's good. But it's not good enough. This was a real shock for me. Suddenly I saw how the regime gave orders to the artists, how the teachers encourage this and how everyone, because they need work, serves the party. This made a deep impression on me. I mean, I just wanted to paint pictures. There's no family tradition for this, I just liked to do it. So I did this painting, but afterward I refused. I refused to draw political pictures.
I was in the second generation of the cultural revolution, so I got the chance to apply to a university. Since my dream was to become an artist, I applied to the Peking Art Academy but unfortunately it was closed. There were no professors. They'd all been sent away to work on farms. It took a while before they could come back and sometimes they never did. So the only possibility to study art was at the Peking Army Art University. This was a very

traditional school but it was my only chance. I didn't want to wait another year. The competition was tough but I made it. It's really a funny story. Suddenly, I had a double identity: one as an art student and one as a soldier. And while other universities were more and more influenced by the west, our school remained formal. We always had to copy the teacher, we were being educated for the future and were always under control. But we were always dreaming of the other academies. Their lessons were different, their teachers were different, they even had some foreign teachers. These cultural circles in China changed completely in four years. Finally, I joined a student's group in another university. If you press something here, it comes out there.

TOLNAY: So we're talking about the tradition of mentality through education and culture that you bring with you , and that you've experienced the last years of the cultural revolution with, as you said, the double-identity of both artist and soldier. How long does one need to overcome such a breach of identity?
SHUN: Yeah, this has been my problem from the beginning. I don't like to be under someone else's control. That's why I left the army. To be only an artist.

TOLNAY: Otherwise you might have become an Artist-General!
Y: (laughs) Yes, maybe.

TOLNAY: In China, the tradition of working in the style of your master is still very popular, to perfect the art work, while western artists are individualistic; they want to create something new. Do you think this conflict mirrors European and Chinese societies in general?
SHUN: In China, the teacher/student relationship is like a family and the art work is seen as a kind of inheritence. It's not allowed to break this tradition and if you do, if you are not a good student, you will be disowned. The family system is broken. In a way this is normal. Art also reflects the family.

TOLNAY: What is your relationship to ink-painting then, which you studied at the university? Should it be rejected or can it be reformed?
SHUN: Some of my colleagues from then are doing very interesting, very fresh work. But most just make copies.

TOLNAY: Do you feel that your current work has its roots in this background? Can you say: Yes, I've learned a lot from this or that professor?
SHUN: Actually, I learned a lot from my meditation master. About the interconnection of bodies. My teacher said: What about yourself? If you want to be my disciple, you must forget yourself and think about the surrounding context, about the cosmos. In the end, if you manage to find a point deep inside of this consciousness, you will find yourself in another way, as if by accident. This is still very important to me, for how I view myself, my body and the relationships I share with others.

TOLNAY: Which brings us to an interesting point: in the secularized European way of thinking, these things are seperated as "cosmological" thinking and "earthly" thinking. Has this difference in mentality given way to a synthesis of the two, the best of both worlds? How are these complexities reflected in your work?
SHUN: I try to walk a line between interaction and isolation, which in the west are contradictory terms. I try to imbue this work, this sculpture with spirit; with soul, which does not exist as an object. I am interested in Joseph Beuys because of this. He worked in a different way. He has a notion, he proposes something. I offer experience. A dialog between such ways of thinking is important.

TOLNAY: How do you feel being Chinese, knowing how Europeans think about China? Many people believe that the next century belongs to the Far East, that the Pacific is the region of the future.
SHUN: Okay, so the human is an animal. You can tell a Chinese person from a European by looking at their faces. There's a difference. But their basic needs and their consciousness is basically the same. It's only the system that makes them function in different ways.
TOLNAY: ...and culture.
SHUN: Yes, and culture.
TOLNAY: But there is a difference. That's why you're here after all, isn't it? There's much more personal freedom here. As an artist, everything is allowed, there's no suppression or control. You're free to do what you like.
SHUN: Well, this is true. Compared to China there are a lot more possibilities here. But dreams never turn out to be what you expect them to be. I think that there are limits to freedom here too. Each society has its limit, and there are always people who like to play with this limit. If you fall overboard, then you've lost the game.

TOLNAY: But this limit is much lower in China. Its one of the reasons many young artists encorporate nudity in their performances, for example. They know that they'll get arrested and they want the attention. They want to challenge the authorities. In Western Europe, this tolerance of irritation is much higher. You can do a lot of things which are impossible in China and nobody even notices it.
SHUN: Yes. China is a homogeneous society. If something is different, everyone will pay attention to it. If you're the same, you disappear. This is okay. If you're different somehow it might

be because you want to make trouble. This is how a society remains stable.

TOLNAY: I've noticed that most of the Chinese artists of your generation who left China were initially closely attached to western forms of expression, but then, after a few years, became more conscious of their roots and traditions. Philosophical and

aesthetic elements of their past experiences and education began to appear in their work. Is this also true in your case?
SHUN: These things were present in my work from the beginning. The encounter with the modern, so-called Western culture presented me in part with an exploration of traditional Chinese culture. I first appreciated Kandinsky, for example, on a visual level. But he uses a very rich philosophical content to free the picture from its perspective, like music. I can understand this because of my relation to Buddhism, which also frees the mind and spirit like this: together. Not one and then the other.

TOLNAY: Of course, Kandinsky and other artists in western Europe had contact to Chinese culture, to Zen and Buddhist philosophy. China was cut off from the rest of the world for a longer period of time, but when it re-opened there was a lot of interest in the developments in European philosophy. Wittgenstein and the new French philosophy, everything was available in Chinese. I view this kind of interaction as a very positive form of internationalism in contrast to the simple internationalism prevalent today, which strives for equality, for a McCulture in which individual cultures disappear. Aren't artists like yourself like ambassadors.
Y: Yes, like a bridge. But this also works the other way around. We received information about the West in China, but this information wasn't really in the work because you have no personal contact with its source. There's a gap. Since I've been in Europe, however, I can see these things for myself. It's like a dream you have when you're only half-awake. You're there, and things can happen to you, but you aren't there. You have distance.

TOLNAY: You've been in Berlin for two years now. There are a lot of foreign artists here, also a few Chinese. What effect has the city had on your work?
Y: Berlin is special because you can really see east and west here. It's not a typical German city. It's not even Berlin anymore. Because of so many Russians, Americans, German artists etc., it is a bit of all these places.

TOLNAY: When were you last in China?
SHUN: I went back for the first time in 1992. It was an important experience for me. I felt very distant. For one thing, the people there had changed. The artists that I met had become more interested in themselves, their generation and their standard of living. They always said things that surprised me. Another reason was that I was no longer accepted as Chinese. Suddenly, I was Chinese but not REAL Chinese.

TOLNAY: Are you German, then?
SHUN: I don't know who I am.

TOLNAY: What is it that you wish to express in your work? The question of identity and nomadism or your situation between different cultures and traditions?
SHUN: Before, my work was quite detached, but since this visit I don't think this is enough. Context always changes according to position. Also the position within yourself. It links two points.

TOLNAY: You exhibited "Die Verbotene Stadt" in the Ruine der Künste in '93 and "The Trinity" in Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 1994. Both employed human hair. The first was laid out horizontally in a glass vitrine and formed a ground plan of the Forbidden City. The second presented two forms of the swastika on the wall. Do you use human hair because you think you can express the duality of your background?
SHUN: I started working with hair in the 80's, when I was in the army. Hair became a symbol of personality. In the army, everything was controlled.
TOLNAY: You mean, they cut off your hair?
SHUN: Yes, eight years long. Hair is a natural thing. It was taken undersomeone else's control. But I also learned its spiritual aspect. In Buddhism, the disciple gives a strand of hair to the master, and they are connected by this. Like a thread of thought. Everytime he returns, he brings new hair, with new experiences. Then, when I went to Poland and then Germany, I visited lots of places and saw concentration camps. This is another context in which hair, human material, links one thing to another. In this case its more serious, more tragic. After this, in my work, I began to think more about Buddhism.

TOLNAY: Your new work for the exhibition "Station Deutschland" shows the street structure of Berlin. Is this connected with this city, or could you transfer this to, say, Copenhagen if you happened to be living there.
SHUN: I've collected all of my hair during the five years I've lived in Europe. I will only be using my own hair for this project and it can only take place here, in Berlin. I chose Berlin as a city, as I chose to live here. Just like what's his name... "Ich bin (ein) Berliner". John F. Kennedy: (1963 in Berlin)
TOLNAY: You're using the German national colors as well as human hair, which will inevitably be associated with Germany's Nazi past. Can your work be described as politically critical or socially engaged? Just as Chinese artists in past decades respected Käthe Kollwitz as an ideal of political engagement and artistic quality. Do you feel obliged to continue this tradition?
SHUN: Oh, I've always liked Käthe Kollwitz. Really liked her. Yes, I am concerned about social concerns, but - in general - only as reflected through my personal reaction to the situation, to my experiences. In China, they say: if you are in a country, you should get used to its customs.
TOLNAY: Or in English: When in Rome, do as the Romans.
SHUN: And if you go into a temple you should respect the rules of the house.

TOLNAY: Which brings us to one of the central questions of this exhibition: identity and assimiliation. Have you become a different person in Germany? Do you want to become assimilated at all, or is it more important to retain your Chinese origins?
SHUN: I'd already made these decisions when I first came to Germany. I'm not really Chinese anymore. Neither socially nor in private. I'm in between.

Yuan Shun wurde 1961 in Shanghai geboren. Nach eine längere