

Body, Time, Ritual—Performance Art and Zen Practice

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Abstract: *Performance art based on the three elements of body, time and ritual can enable artists to achieve a life experience similar to that of a Zen practitioner beyond the rational dimension. This essay first explains the relationship between performance art and Zen practice from the perspective of author's own artistic practice, then analyses how artists can achieve the state of Zen through performance practice in terms of the three dimensions of body, time and ritual in relation to the works of Marina Abramović, Xie Deqing and He Yunchang respectively, and goes on to argue that performance art practice and Zen practice have something in common, namely, the path to the realm of "perfection of consciousness and action".*

Keywords: *Performance art; Zen Buddhism; Body; Time; Ritual*

1. Introduction

The process of spiritual transformation through performance art practice is akin to the Zen practice of 'transmitting the mind to the heart', which cannot be seen or touched, but can only be achieved through the immediate awareness and enlightenment of the knower. As a practitioner of performance art, I believe that this process of spiritual transformation involves the artist placing himself in a specific environment and performing ritualistic actions or behaviors for a certain length of time, a process that transforms the artist's mind into a psychological or physical perceptible object, which in turn transforms the viewer into a thought-like being through a specific space arranged by the artist.

A few questions are raised here: how does the artist achieve a spiritual transformation of himself through performance art? Is there a channel or pathway? Is this path universal? The article tries to answer these questions based on my own performance practice: performance art based on the three elements of body, time and ritual can enable the artist to achieve a life experience similar to that of a meditator who transcends the rational dimension[1].

2. Performance Art and Zen Practices

In the summer of 2019, I made a 7-day performance 'One of Us Will Know It Sooner Or Later' at Camberwell Space, University of the Arts London. The installation space made up of my body, a flower, lawn, a television, and a candle. I was forced to find another way out of the painful state I was in and realized that I had to throw myself into this state in order to get rid of the pain from my life, and this work was born. A flower is held in my hand and I rooted in a fixed place for seven days, from 10am to 8pm every day (opening hours of the art space). During the performance, I restricted myself from eating, talking or moving my feet, but all body parts except my feet are allowed to move, just like a tree, rooted in place, the branches can swing, this is to give the body a certain degree of restriction. 7 days is the result of the Creator creating the world in 7 days, a kind of rebirth. The belief and longing for self-cultivation and self-rebirth becomes the ultimate meaning of this work, as the seven days are also used as a stage in Zen meditation. The simple act of holding a flower and standing in place for seven days, which is ritualized, which resembles the ritualized action of offering, bowing and devotion. At the end of the work, I had a rebirth experience of life, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: One of Us Will Know It Sooner Or Later, Lyu Wen, 2019

This life experience allowed me to experience it during the same winter when I attended the Zen Seventh Ceremony at Sizu Temple, this Zen Temple is located on Shuangfeng Mountain in Huangmei County, Hubei Province, where the landscape is beautiful. It was the opportunity that allowed me to observe the extraordinary body-mind training of Zen Buddhism through meditation and sutra chanting in close proximity. It was not an easy time for me, especially when I experienced struggle, failure, guilt and pain while meditating in the meditation room. Nevertheless, the experience brought me perfect happiness and great perceptual acuity. Meditation put me in touch with an infinite energy, no longer the little self-held back by all sorts of limitations, it was as if I had hooked up with the cosmic consciousness, and soon I also realized that it seemed to be the same as what happens in performance art: you are under a larger frame where there are no longer limitations[2-3].

These experiences led me to become very interested in the relationship between performance art and Zen practice, both of which can lead to a purification of the body and mind and an uplifting of the body and mind. What was more interesting was how the whole process took place and whether there was a universal path that could lead one to this life experience again. I then find commonalities between performance art and Zen practice, especially in their emphasis on the body, the mind and perceptual experience, and in what follows I explore the body, time and ritual in performance art, and then argue that the body, the time experienced and the ritualized behavior of the artist are similar to the Zen view of the body, time and ritual when a life experience beyond the rational dimension occurs. The artist's body, experienced time, and ritualized behavior are similar to the Zen view of body, time and ritual.

3. Body

In performance art, artists use the body as a means of expression. The first level of body is the physical body, which exists as a material in the art work and plays a role in the construction of space, or, to be precise, a sculptural space, called the "body in space". The second dimension is the social nature, what Michel Foucault called the body as "the imprint of social rights, which can play a key role in questions of political philosophy and justice", where the body becomes a medium and a vehicle to convey the symbolic meaning of the body. The third dimension of the body is Richard Shusterman's body aesthetics, which advocates a 'holistic life of mind and body', making the body the centre of our daily lives, increasing awareness, achievement and pleasure through physical training and improved body awareness, and ultimately achieving a state of unity between mind and body. His view of the body coincides with the Zen view of the wholeness of mind and body. This part focuses on the third dimension of the body, namely, the 'unity of mind and body' as a whole.

Some artists subject their bodies to a certain intensity of austerity, imposing limits on physical behavior in an attempt to gain greater inner strength. Artist Marina Abramović sets her body to constant intensity in each performance, pushing it to its limits. In the work *Rhythm 10*, she uses ten knives to

pierce rapidly between her fingers, experiencing absolute freedom and the body's lack of restraint and limits, despite the intense pain. As she describes, *"I felt a great freedom from the real Marina who was afraid, scared, in pain and with a sense of shame, and played a higher level of Marina in the performance."* It is evident that the artist transcends her own pain and fear by limiting her body, allowing for greater freedom and strength, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: *Rhythm 10*, Marina Abramović, 1973

From a Buddhist point of view, Marina crosses the barrier of the physical body, as it is said, *"With the body, suffering is born, without the body, suffering is destroyed, and this body is the root of all suffering"*. Transcending the physical body is the first obstacle faced by those who seek the path. *"The Bodhi is fundamentally without any tree, the bright mirror is also not a stand. Fundamentally there is not a single thing, where could any dust be attracted?"* A verse from the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhist, Master Huineng, we can appreciate the realm of emptiness, his Tao is beyond form and body. He uses Doctrine of Non-duality as a method of practice, transcending the dualistic concepts of subject and object, being and non-being, body and spirit, and eliminating all opposites, thus enabling one to achieve the infinite transcendence of freedom of life. In this performance, Marina imposes restrictions on her body and transcends this painful 'physical body', thus achieving a state of unity between mind and body and a free experience of life[4-6].

4. Time

Performance artists set a specific period of time in their works, and within this fixed period of time they follow the rules and regulations they set for themselves to complete the whole process of the performance. Thus, it is worth exploring the time in performance works. By setting a specific period of time in their works, such as 3 days, 12 days, or even a year, the artists are ostensibly setting limits on themselves, but in essence they are returning to the ultimate freedom, a return to the root of spirituality, the "one".

In 2002, Marina Abramović did the performance, *The House with the Ocean View*, she lived for 12 days in a living installation built by the gallery, during which she could not eat, could only drink, slept for seven hours a day, and could lie, sit, stand, go to the toilet and take a shower. The time of life and the time of art overlap here, as the artist uses time as an experience to purify herself through simple daily disciplines, rules and restrictions. Marina brings to this work the Buddhist practice of 'internal observation', which she acquired through her contact with Tibetan Buddhism in 1981. By sitting, standing, lying down, walking, fasting and eating to learn what you are really doing and to understand the true limits of your body and mind, internal observation later became one of the foundations of the Marina Abramović method, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: *The House with the Ocean View*, Marina Abramović, 2002

Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh interprets life through his art, his performance works are usually based on the year, such as his *One Year Performance Series*. In this work, "Time Clock Piece" *One Year Performance 1980-1981*, he divides a twenty-four hour day into twenty-four punching the clock sessions, dividing a whole year into many one-hour sessions, punching the clock every hour, without any realistic utilitarianism, what is inspiring is the artist's courageous spirit and determination. The view of time embodied in this work is not superficial in the sense that it is a repetitive act to show the passage of time, the time experienced by the artist in this process may no longer be the objective external time, but the time manifested by the mind, perhaps in many one-hour periods, he may find that time goes by like a white horse or the seconds are like years. In the artist's subjective consciousness, the machine used to measure time ceases to exist in many moments, just as in Zen Buddhism, "*Sitting down and breaking the three intervals*", there is no past, no future and no attachment to the present moment, it is an intuitive feeling that the moment is eternal, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4: *One Year Performance 1980-1981*, Tehching Hsieh

The two performance art works mentioned above have a common form of existence and spiritual connotation with the Buddhist Zen practice of 'meditation'. By sitting in meditation, the meditator observes the mind, and through 'mindfulness', 'intuition' and 'epiphany', he or she achieves a transformation of irrational ways of thinking and cognition, the most concrete manifestation of this is the attainment of a certain mystical understanding in time, the so-called "eternal moment" of intuition, which is not logical, but intuitive and experiential. This eternal moment transcends all time and space, cause

and effect, and the past, future and present become one and indistinguishable, transcending the boundaries of all things, myself and others[7-9].

Sixth Patriarch Huineng said, *"In this Dharma, since the above, I have established no thought as the main principle, no appearance as the body, and no dwelling as the foundation."* I believe that "no thought" and "no dwelling" are more deeply related to the question of time, and that Master Jing Hui said that "no thought" means that we should not be attached to the subject of awareness, and "no dwelling" means that we should not be attached to any subjective or objective realm. In other words, there is no distinction between the past, the present and the future, it is one in itself, one is all, and all is one.

5. Rituals

Ritual is an important part of religion, the outward behavioral expression of religious beliefs and doctrinal teachings. In performance art, artists take themselves out of the everyday state of modernity in time and enters into a scene of ritual activity. Although some performances are not related to religion, when artists enter into a specific space and perform everyday behaviors, the performance itself becomes ritualized, as it becomes independent from the world of everyday life and becomes a spiritual symbolic ritual of life, it is a spiritual reflection of the individual detached from everyday life in a specific time and space, they gain a unique experience that is not accessible in modern urban life. *"The 'ritualization' begins when the importance of meaning, communication and expression overrides functional and practical purposes."*



Figure 5: *Everlasting Fruits*, He Yunchang, 2018

The artist He Yunchang made a 72-hour performance work *Everlasting Fruits* at the Today Art Museum in Beijing in 2018. The pavilion was laid out in a semicircle with 500 kg of everlasting fruits (brown peanuts), which were distributed in many transparent plastic containers. He wore long sleeves, jeans and blue socks and spent a full 72 hours on the 1*2m transparent table, during which he did not eat, drink or smoke, he simply existed there like an everlasting fruit, without relying on the substances that sustain us. Conceptually, this work shares similarities with He Yunchang's work *Caochangdi - Tenth Life* in 2012, in which he sowed grain seeds in his backyard, lay in the ground, and lived with the seeds until they grew into small grass. In these two works, his standing, sitting, lying down, thinking, sleeping and dreaming are not dissimilar to those we all perform in a solitary closed room. These daily behaviors of the artist may be seen as a symbol of a fasting ritual, a purification of the body and mind, perhaps with the aim of reaching another spiritual realm. He Yunchang is interested in both Chinese philosophy and religion, and does not regard himself as a strict Buddhist, but he believes that among the Buddhist Zen schools, the 'sudden enlightenment' advocated by the Southern Zen school led by Hui Neng and the 'gradual enlightenment' advocated by the Northern Zen school led by Shen Xiu reveal these methods of spiritual training are still valid for modern people. It is clear that the artist He Yunchang used his ritualistic behavior as a means of personal spiritual practice, as shown in Figure 5.

6. Conclusion

Thus, when the experience of life beyond the rational dimension takes place in the process of performance art, the artist's body, the time experienced, and the ritualized behavior are similar to the Zen view of the body, time and ritual. Firstly, the body as the artist's basic medium is not a mere material 'flesh' in the sense of lacking life and feeling, but a 'mind-body' body full of life and emotion, sensitive to the senses, and a tool for the artist to express his or her beliefs, will and vitality. Secondly, the time experienced in the process of performance art is a Zen view of time, what Master Hui Neng called 'no thought' and 'no dwelling', where previous thoughts, present thoughts and future thoughts are not bound, where the past, present and future no longer pass linearly, but where there is no distinction between the three, transcending measurable objective time and space, and the present moment experienced is the present moment in which there is no thought of the past, no thought of the future, no dwelling in the present, no distinction in the mind. Finally, the everyday actions, including standing, sitting, lying down, thinking, sleeping, etc., occur in performance art and are seen by the artist as a ritual to purify the body and mind, similar to Zen meditation and chanting, in order to gain present presence and awareness, to touch the deepest aspects of life, and ultimately to reach the state of 'complete consciousness and action'.

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