

# Perception and the Art Object: The Art of Michael Zheng

By Terri Cohn

One significant legacy of the perceptual vocabulary of Minimalism has been artists' continued exploration of the phenomenological experience of objects in relationship to architectural space, and the dismantling of a fixed position for the viewer. Forty years after Minimalism's initial inception, artists continue to address notions of immutable visual and material relations, and to explore ways in which space, objects and perception interrelate--inflected by Conceptual art's primacy of ideas--to form an aesthetic experience. It is in this realm of investigation that Michael Zheng creates performative situations, subtle spatial interventions, and discrete works that pose questions about the social, philosophical, and corporeal relationship of art to individuals. The systems he devises and disrupts to achieve this become the space in which his works manifest, on material, conceptual, and experiential levels.

Zheng's inquiry into the structural aspects of systems and how they impact people is a critical facet of his artistic interests. The form the work takes creates alliances between the performative, formal/mathematical, and social realms of inquiry, revealing the natural link of his artistic sensibilities with facets of Systems- and Actions-based Conceptual art. This is evident in some of his site-specific installations such as *Media Shower (Pardon Me)*, which was commissioned for the 2006 *Emerge* exhibition in San Francisco. Zheng's work made physical references to the 1974 kidnapping of newspaper heiress Patty Hearst by the guerrilla Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a response to the exhibition's setting in the Warfield Building (originally the offices of the *San Francisco Examiner*, a newspaper). The formal aspects of the work—which included red, white and blue paper strips printed with “Pardon Me” on one side, and various reprinted images from Examiner newspaper coverage of the SLA bank robbery and more recent terrorist images of the Iraq war and 9/11—created esoteric and more universal social links with the public below as the strips fell to Market Street from red boxes Zheng installed in windows on the fourth floor of the building. Zheng intensified his interventionist methodologies and intended statement concerning the highly mediated



*Media Shower (Pardon Me)*, installation viewed from the street.

nature of the Hearst story and the dialectic of terrorism by appearing at the exhibition's opening event dressed in black, wearing a balaclava, and brandishing a nail gun. The intended absurdity and Dada-like nature of this performance became clear as he yelled gibberish and used his device to adhere red, white and blue paper strips to the gallery wall, creating a chance composition.

The inherently multifarious relationship of social, aesthetic, and conceptual intentions in this work—which blurs boundaries between our expectations of the art, its material realization, and the role of the artist—is central to Zheng's sensibilities and a number of his artistic projects. One of the most complex in this genre is *Four on One – Curators Create, Artist Curates*, which Zheng created as part of the 2006 Garage Biennial<sup>1</sup>. In this instance, he used the invitation to curate an exhibition as an opportunity to question the structural aspects of the art system by creating a show about curating rather than simply curating an exhibition. His approach, which involved the installation of four one-week exhibitions of a single artist, curated by four curators, obscured his intentions and raised

such questions as, is he the artist using curators and another artist as his raw material? Or, acting in his role as artist/curator, was he attempting to deconstruct the authority of curators to shape art movements and the effect of curatorial choices on the art being presented?<sup>2</sup>

This is an area that has long been explored and subverted by artists in various ways. Most analogous in relationship to *Four on One*, which again allowed Zheng to explore ideas concerning chance in composition, is John Cage's exhibition *Rolywholyover: A Circus*. While both Zheng's and Cage's projects were taking issue, in part, with exhibition venues, curators, and their presentation methods, Cage's intent was also to create a composition for a museum setting by applying chance operations according to the same rules and structure he used in creating music or visual art. By contrast, in *Four on One*, Zheng shifted Cage's paradigm to expose the role of the curator as creator, placing high demand on the artist. In this way, the project ultimately commented less on curatorial authority and more on how an artist/curator can create conditions that simulate some art world circumstances.

One of the most significant facets of this project was the perceived ambiguity of Zheng's intentions, the confusion created by his purposeful elusiveness, and the breadth of ensuing dialogue—the buzz—that emerged in the art community as the exhibition unfolded. In some of his other related site- or situation-specific works—including *Art for Sale!* (which was part of the *9th Baltic Triennial of International Art: Black Market*); and Zheng's *Untitled* installation of 88 banners for his MFA thesis exhibition—he stimulated this buzz by acquiring permission to subvert and comment on the social intentions and material nature of these exhibitions. Masterful about these projects is the way in which Zheng's interventions—replete with the contradictions inherent in the structure and implementation of the works and the issues they address—are his art. The concerns Zheng addresses bring to mind Guy Debord's prophetic warning in *Society of the Spectacle*, of capitalist society and the culture at large becoming the ultimate commodity.

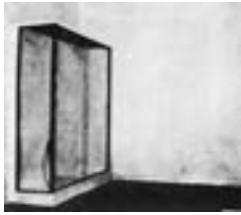
Zheng's ongoing questioning of his multi-tiered relationship to the gallery system sometimes manifests as exploration of its inherent physical dualities. This central concern is clearly evident with the installations and discrete works work that comprised Zheng's exhibition *As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu*, where he deliberately complicated our experience of the distinctions between the gallery space and what we perceive as the art. In works like *Hole in the Wall*, he played with this perceptual ambiguity by attaching an unframed photograph of a hole he had punched in the gallery wall over the same area, leaving visible the tiniest portion of the cavity. With *The Pillar*, where Zheng sheathed an existing pillar with unfinished plywood, he even more radically poses the contradictory nature of such physical manipulations and their unclear status as objects. This project evokes ideas explored by Yves Klein in his 1958 exhibition *Le Vide* (the Void)—held at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris-- which Klein described as his "project of eliminating the visible art object altogether." Klein's vision of the artist of the future was one who would "only leave his vibration in a space, to be picked up later by the immaterial antennae of others working there...opening the door to the age of immateriality."<sup>3</sup> In light of the heavily commodified tendencies of twenty-first century art and institutional practices, Zheng's iteration of these premises



*Four On One: Curators Create, Artist Curates.*



*Art for Sale!*



Yves Klein, *Le Vide* displayed at the Galerie Iris Clert. Source: Wikipedia.

today continue the subversive artistic project of creating spaces of reflection for the viewing public.

Consistently important in these works is Zheng's relationship to physical and psychic space, and by extension, his interest in the effect of works on audience or the "social body." Both his performance- and his object-based works express the key importance of the body. This area of artistic inquiry most clearly exposes the psychological component of Zheng's artistic vision, as these works often manifest as acts of endurance. Some of the performance works present the ap-

pearance—but not the actual threat—of danger. These include *Stare*, a piece that involved the artist and a volunteer at a time maintaining eye contact for a total of eight hours, a process that culminated with the artist in tears; and *Groundbreaking*, for which Zheng had assistants bury him with his head in the earth and his bare butt sticking up out of the ground for two hours. While Zheng created both of these performances during a period of personal crisis and need for catharsis, they also implicate the viewer and insist on their participation in experiences of physical and psychological duress. In a performance context, they raise social, philosophical, and perceptual questions similar to those posed by Zheng's object-based works.



Bruce Nauman, *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*. Source: <http://images.google.com>.

With these works, Zheng again comments in various ways on the intrinsic nature of being an artist. As part of the process of performing *Stare*, Zheng drew dark circles around his eyes, which he described as means to "objectify" himself. As an extension of this thinking, his body, emotions, and psychological state become "materials to create interpersonal sculptures." With somewhat more paradoxical and humorous intentions, Zheng describes *Groundbreaking* as a response to the art world pressure to "break new ground," which he does here by creating an in-your-face sculpture of his ass in the air.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Zheng's endurance performance *Geographical Center of Europe*, which took place on July 27, 2004 at that supposed location in Lithuania, has far more political intentions. Standing between the two official monuments that mark the supposed Center(s) of Europe (this spot has also been declared at locations in Ukraine and Slovakia), Zheng whistled the phrase "Center of Europe" in Morse Code for nine consecutive hours. This sustained, repetitive action has a venerable alliance with the work of such artists as Bruce Nauman, whose time-based performances like *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*, 1968 and *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 2: Upside Down*, 1969, express significant facets of his artistic identity and intentions.

The physical demand explored in and required by these works is regularly evident in Zheng's perceptual approach to sculpture. A good illustration of this is *The Chair*, a work that requires the viewer to bend down to read a text under its seat through gaps in the wood. Zheng plays with the liminal space between the demand placed on the viewer and the reward they receive in the work, in this case with the label text which states, "Chair made by artist Patrick Wilson based solely on the photograph of Kosuth's Chair piece that I provided him." Similarly, for his 2004 *Untitled* image/text installation, the viewer must stoop to read a small passage, printed with a tiny font and hung 3' from the floor. After finally deciphering the narrative, which reads "My 3 year-old daughter holds a branch to the sky and says, 'It's the same!'", the viewer must turn to look up and see a photograph of upraised leaves, hung one inch from the ceiling.



*The Pillar*

Ironically, the type and level of questioning Zheng consistently poses with his work sets up series of challenges for himself and others to experience, understand, and resolve. Yet, this process—or gauntlet—Zheng structures must be understood in the larger context of his philosophical world view, poetically expressed in philosopher Chuang Tzu’s statement, which Zheng used as the defining concept for his 2006 exhibition *As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu*,

*Long ago, a certain Chuang Tzu dreamt he was a butterfly—a butterfly fluttering here and there on a whim, happy and carefree, knowing nothing of Chuang Tzu. Then all of a sudden he woke to find that he was, beyond all doubt, Chuang Tzu. Who knows if it was Chuang Tzu dreaming a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming Chuang Tzu?*<sup>5</sup>

Like Chuang Tzu, Zheng’s work expresses his understanding that much of the meaning of the world is bound up in apparent contradictions. His art expresses his desire and commitment to explore and resolve them through his material, perceptual, and philosophical inquiries.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The Garage Biennial is a project of San Francisco-based artist/curator Justin Hoover.

<sup>2</sup> The artist chosen for *Four on One* was Stephanie Syjuco, and the curators included Clark Buckner, Joyce Grimm, Steven Wolf, and me.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas McEvilley, *Yves Klein 1928-1962: A Retrospective*. (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982), 50.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted passages in this paragraph from Michael Zheng's website, <http://michaelzheng.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Chuang Tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, 4th century B.C.E.

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