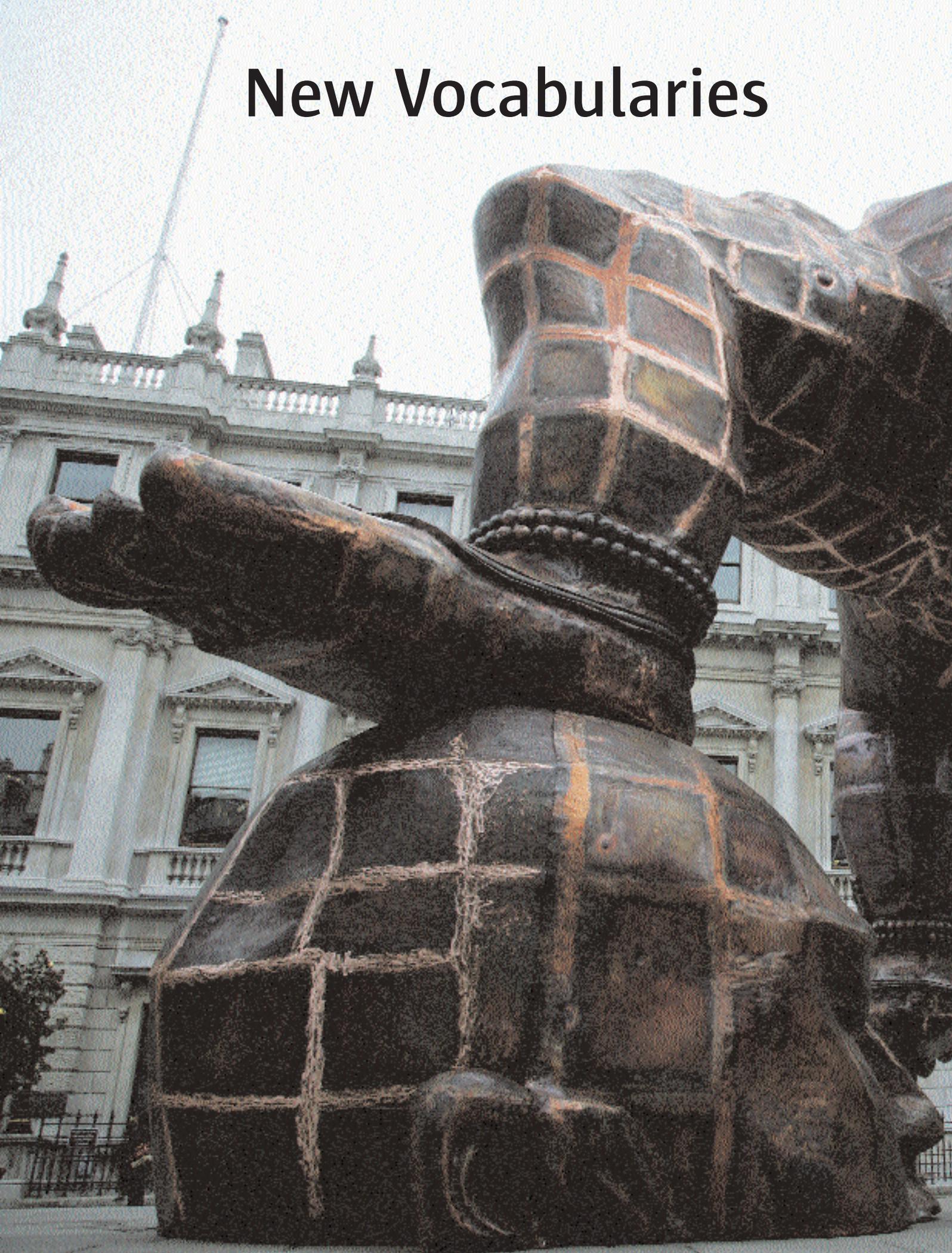


New Vocabularies



A Conversation with

Zhang Huan



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Three-Legged Buddha, 2007. Beaten copper, 8.6 x 7 meters. Work installed at the Royal Academy of the Arts, London.



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

“I’m trying to find a new vocabulary to express certain things artistically,” Zhang Huan says. This comment applies to everything from his earliest performances in a poor part of Beijing, which he named the East Village, to his recent two-ton self-portrait as Buddha. Zhang’s early performances were motivated, in part, by issue-driven ideas. *Angel*, a nude performance given in China in 1993, protested compulsory abortion policies; his props were a white sheet, red paint, broken tiles, dismembered dolls, a rope, and Pink Floyd’s “The Wall.” Many of these controversial early works tested his physical endurance and pushed the limits of acceptability in post-Tiananmen China. After moving to New York in 1998, he began to stage photographs as performances, enacting large-scale events that often involved scores of volunteers, live animals, and high drama to call attention to humanist themes.

Two years ago, his work took another turn when he established a 75,000-square-foot studio in a former textile factory in Shanghai, employing about 100 workers, and began to produce monumental sculptures that engage viewers in philosophical dialogues. These suggestive and forceful works made from copper, found materials, and incense ash were recently featured in “Zhang Huan: Altered States”—the first major solo show by a living artist at the Asia Society in New York. Using films, photographs, prints, mixed media, and sculpture, Zhang blends Western performance art, European semiotics, and Eastern crafts, histories, and philosophies. His way of combining old and new processes and materials seems equivalent to Anselm Kiefer’s brave foraging through German history. Zhang uses ash gathered from places of worship, then sifts and sorts it into surfaces whose textures seem to resurrect or trigger memory. His self-portraits in ash re-use a material that has already passed through three or more prior states. Never one-dimensional, these portraits question the historic glorification of subjects as varied as Chairman Mao, Buddha, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Andy Warhol.

Zhang’s numerous exhibitions have taken him all over the world, including Canada, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, France, Denmark, England, Mexico, Spain, and many cities in the United States. This interview also shows the artist’s remarkable intensity, humility, and openness to modifying his concepts as a result of his processes of working with others.

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Jan Garden Castro: *Could you discuss the composition of Long Ear Ash Head and the concept behind the long ears?*

Zhang Huan: As you can see, the primary form is my self-portrait. I really want my inner state to be more Buddhist, and by transforming myself physically, externally, with the long ear lobes, somehow I can get closer to enlightenment and to becoming Buddha. Also, I opened up my head and revealed the brain to symbolize that I want to somehow absorb all the qualities of life.

JGC: *What about the Buddha and doll images on the head?*

ZH: There is a laughing Buddha on top of the nose, which means he doesn't have any hatred and is very happy. On top of the head is a doll—I'm very touched and moved by the sight of discarded baby dolls, especially. The doll on top of the head refers to my previous work in Beijing. I used dolls in the *Angel* performances to symbolize a lot of things that I wanted to express about the family planning laws in China relating to abortion. There are actually two dolls in *Long Ear Ash Head*: one is coming out or going in, sort of in transition, and the other one is trying to absorb and enjoy the aroma of the burnt incense.

JGC: *Why no lower half of the face? The mouth is missing.*

ZH: Somehow if you stop breathing, you transcend life and death. You're in an eternal state.

JGC: *The Memory Door works use historic doors on which scenes are carved in relief and images are collaged. And Dam refers to Three Gorges dam project that flooded large areas of farmland.*

Opposite and center detail: *Long Ear Ash Head*, 2007. Ash and steel, 146 x 133 x 158 in. Above: *Smoking Buddha*, 2007. Ash, canvas, and paper on steel frame, 430 x 200 x 300 cm.

ZH: For the *Memory Door* pieces, we got old doors from the Shaanxi Province. The images you see on top of the wood are photographs and images collected from magazines and movies from the 1920s to the 1980s. We silk-screened the prints on top of the wooden board and then carved certain parts of the photographs and left some parts out. In a way, we created two spaces and two realms, one positive and one negative. As a viewer, you're trying to decipher which world is the real one. *Meeting Table* [a door with empty chairs around a square table] shows a very famous meeting that took place in the past. *Break* [a phalanx of smiling workers] is a famous cultural project. These are all historical images. *Dam* is not specifically about the Three Gorges but refers to the time after liberation when there were many big dams and projects. In a way, I'm trying to find a new vocabulary to express certain things artistically, and I'm very surprised by the outcome of this particular series because I don't think I've ever seen anything like this before. I've almost come up with a new language in which to express myself.

JGC: *It's very moving. Did you do the wood carving yourself? It is intricate and beautiful.*

YH: As part of our contemporary art team, we have 20 masters from the Dongyang province. They're famous for their skills in



carpentry and woodcarving, so we recruited them to our studios to help us to create my concept.

JGC: *As in much of your work, there seems to be a symbolism underlying Fresh Open Buddha Hand, a giant copper hand with the palm detached and fallen on the floor.*

ZH: In the process of making a piece, sometimes the work changes and is not just based on my concept. It's a result of collaboration, with all of the assistants bouncing different ideas back and forth. It might not be my original concept, but we're going with the flow, with the artistic expression of this huge group of people. To demonstrate this, last year, we were doing a piece similar to the copper *Head from Buddha Foot*. One night, I was visiting the studio, and I saw the half-finished product. Actually, I think the assistant made a mistake and was trying to open it up somehow. Looking at the unfinished stage that had been opened up, I was very moved by what I saw. So I decided to tell everyone that it was done and not to touch it. It might not have been what I wanted before, but it was what I wanted now. Then they moved on to the next piece.

JGC: *12 Square Meters (1994) must have been very painful. [Zhang coated his body with fish oil and honey and sat in a public latrine.*

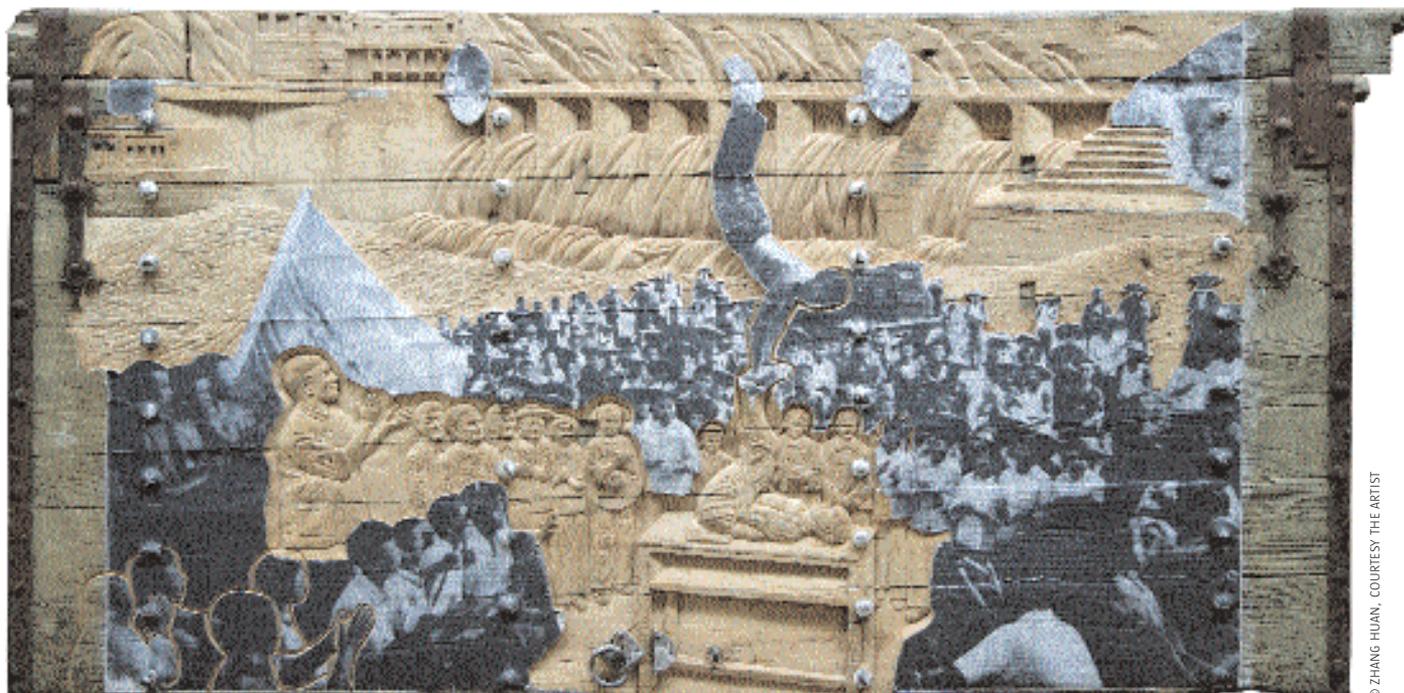
Above: Head from Buddha Foot, 2006. Copper, 224 x 67 x 39 in. Below: Memory Door Series (Dam), 2006. Woodcut, mixed media, and antique wooden door, 59 x 120 in.

Covered with flies, he then he walked slowly into a nearby body of water.] How did that feel, and what was the response?

ZH: That piece was done 13 years ago, and both the critics and the audience thought that it looked very, very painful. But, for me, it was not painful at all. Life itself is more painful. It is nothing in comparison to being starved for a long, long time. I was well fed at the time and just sitting there. It was not torture at all. In a way, it also facilitated the process of meditation and helped me to forget the reality of life and how much suffering there is. This is your life. Life is suffering.

JGC: *What school of Buddhism do you follow?*

ZH: As long as they're part of the Buddhist tradition, I like them all. It doesn't matter which one. Also, I have the greatest respect for other religions. It doesn't matter which religion we're talking about, the core concept is the same—just as you are white and I'm yellow, but at the same time, on a human level, we are the same.



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Top and center: Two views of *Berlin Buddha*, 2007. Aluminum and ash, two figures, 370 x 260 x 290 cm. Below: *Ash Heads*, 2007. Incense ash, wood, and iron, view of installation at Haunch of Venison, London.



JGC: Was that also the message of *My America at the Seattle Art Museum*? In that performance, everyone stood in rows, nude, behind “bars.” After a ceremony, people pelted you with bread and eggs.

ZH: That piece was part of my response to my experience living here in New York. It was hard to become acculturated to the new environment. I felt culture shock, as though I didn’t quite belong here. If you transplant a fish used to warm weather into a cold weather culture, it is hard for it to adjust and to feel alive. In a way, I returned to China because I feel much more alive artistically in my own homeland, but I also consider New York to be my second home.

JGC: Language is an important part of your performances, especially *1/2* (1998) and *Family Tree* (2000). You used calligraphic texts in the first, and in the second, the audience wrote on your head until it was solidly black. Do you want to talk about language and the texts you chose for *Family Tree*?

ZH: *Family Tree* is not about genealogy and different generations of names; it has to do with a famous Chinese story about an old fool trying to move a mountain inch by inch. I find it very interesting to combine the mediums of language, of skin, and of body into one work. That, to me, is something new and something interesting to do.

JGC: In *1/2*, you used two pig rib cages on the outside and then text on your body. For that piece, you said, “Half of a person is his body and the other half is his soul.” So where is language—on the body side or the soul side or both?

ZH: I think it’s half and half: half toward the body and half toward the soul.

Zhang Huan’s comments were translated by Vincent Cheng.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer living in New York.

