

He Yunchang - A Bodily Poetry

François Jullien begins the fourth and titular chapter of his book *The Great Image Has No Form*, the with an insightful question: “How to conceive of and produce an image that is not limited by the individual character of form?” He responds by arguing that “the great image has no form,” which redirects his attention to Chinese art and its interest in depicting pluralist and juxtaposing forms, for instance, seas and mountains.¹

“The Great Image Has No Form” points out a contrasting path from the philosophical *truth* on which a significant number of Western artworks in a conventional or modern context are predicated, propagated, and appreciated accordingly. This new path does not purposely turn a blind eye to the physical existence of materials or patterns as optical representations of “images.” An image will be created the moment the artistic vision meets the natural forms even if they might exist otherwise. It will be created the moment the artistic action bilaterally meets the human eye in a synchronic manner, as the brush touches the surface - “the golden touch” if phrased and supposedly criticized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his seminal work, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*.² Merleau-Ponty points out the limit of this artist-art relationship to be mechanically scientific, unilateral and failing to explain the new relationship when it comes to Paul Cézanne and other modernist artists, who often described art as a process of the world/images entering their bodies to move their hands.

¹ François Jullien, “The Great Image Has No Form,” in *The Great Image Has No Form*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 53.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et L’Invisible,” in *L’Oeil [check spelling] et l’Esprit* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2016), 40.

The interaction between optical functions and worldly forms still creates images de facto, yet the consequent images, if created and appreciated based on Chinese philosophy in the most specific understanding, will yield images that are not fixated upon a telos-oriented perspective. The same images could presumably read as otherwise or even as obverse if situated in a symbolic order saturated with dialectical aesthetics. In J. M. W Turner's landscape paintings, dialectics rule the compositions, background-character relationships and most narratives – either nature triumphs humanity or the opposite as in *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*. However, Chinese art often involves a non-confrontational or even anti-confrontational relationship between the landscape and the painter/viewer, and only in this manner can a painter absorb and visualizes the essence of the images/the world through painting and calligraphy.

A non-telos-driven perspective is salient in the creation and appreciation of the expanding oeuvre of a Chinese performance artist, He Yunchang. His images are incessantly and often painstakingly generated by his body and the artistic explorations of it as performance or diurnal practice. These undertakings orchestrate bodily poetry emanating the serendipitous quality of a non-telos and even anti-telos perspectives, acting as the extensions instead of the futile failures of his physical strength. In this fashion, the poetic elements recur and attract his readers as poetry is necessitated, consecrated, and animated only through an unconstrained poetic body.

Fig. 1 showcases He Yunchang's early work, *Dialogue with Water*. This piece implements a non-telos perspective and embodies a comparison between an "aimless" aim (*telos*) and other tendencies to construct and appreciate the works. This uneasy approach to creating and appreciating the work demonstrates the conflicts and reconciliation among these tendencies. To describe the work with Jullien's phrase, *Dialogue with Water* is "very empty and very alive." To create the work, the artist hung himself upside-down from a crane while holding a knife,

attempting to cut the water in half. He purposely left an open wound on his hand, cut by the same knife, to allow the blood to drip, creating a divisive thread of red color on the water surface.

The title of the work is an appropriation from a crucial text of Chapter Eight of Laozi's *Daodejing*, in which Laozi (or more likely others, including his disciples) write, "the best is like water and water is good for all things without fighting."³ From this work, the "good" of water is obscured, but its capacity to counteract any adjustments or confrontations is rendered visually prominent by the constructive component of the performance: cutting the water. By attempting (at least seemingly so) to create a mark, a trace, a sense of performance in the fresh flowing water as the direct embodiment of "the best" and "good for all things without fighting," the artist is fighting to make his mark on the art material and surface--water--as an appealingly futile effort. However, throughout this "futile" process of withstanding water and fighting his art material, He Yunchang foregrounds a series of relationships in contemporary art: permanence versus impermanence, materiality versus immateriality, constant violence versus reconciliation through time, the artist with capital "A" versus nature as an object or subject. In his essay "Cézanne's Doubt", Merleau-Ponty similarly throws into doubt the artist who believes in and often enjoys a sovereign relationship with his subjects popularly understood to be at his/her disposal. He contrasts this to the artist with a different attitude, like Paul Cézanne who might ponder before paint and let nature enter his body to act as the independent and sovereign object.⁴

In reality, the artist did make his image by using a different form of water, a fluid--his blood to leave a relatively enduring mark (as long as the "red water" still flows in his body) on

³ Lao Zi, "Chapter Eight" in *Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way*, trans. Moss Roberts (London, England: University of California Press, 2001), 25.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," last modified December, 2020, <https://faculty.uml.edu/rinnis/cezannedoubt.pdf>.

the water with his physical endurance at test. Simultaneously, the mark made by the action of cutting appears to be a non-image while it attempts to create one. By dripping his blood, a sustaining substance from his body, the artist drives his body as the flexible vehicle to “decompartmentalize”⁵ and vitalize the rigid taxonomy between human bodies and other worldly existences under the transcendental eye. As a legacy of the Renaissance optics, the transcendental sight intends the world to be objective and submissive and thus centers the artist to be the differentiating conscience from other objects. The internality of the human body and the externality of the images are critical to constructing a painting, with or without focus perspective. By contrast, He Yunchang’s work breaks open this compartmentation between the artist and the world.

This consequent decompartmentalization renders the artist’s body transcendental in a Chinese sense, to bind with water, because the blood, however long it could stay in the water visually or chemically one would also argue, its marking as art in the water as the passive receiver and active agent (a Taoist juxtaposition) is ultimately ephemeral and non-traceable. The only transcendental entity in Daoist and Confucius philosophy is the omnipresent energy or “Qi”. Art means to an artist not positing him/herself as Qi’s equal or superior, but a carrier and channel of this Qi. In this sense, nothing is traceable, but everything is transferable to Qi. Likewise, an image on the water, the body, the soil...all the existence made from this “transcendental” unit will be “meaningless” and unexceptional. Making an image here implies not leaving a lasting mark on the powerless receiver as either female, blank, or transcendently malleable, but becoming part of nature even in a visual and physical gesture towards the opposite (to master

⁵ François Jullien, “The Great Image Has No Form,” in *The Great Image Has No Form*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 53.

nature). Becoming part of nature might endow a dynamic endurance not only to the body but also to the resulting artwork per se, even as a temporal performance. The piece is most poetic in this new framework of time and being.⁶ As bodily poetry, the work transcends the constraints and the specificities of body, as is prominent in most western art, a subject to impose, or an object to be imposed by nature.

The second work, entitled Shanghai Water Record (Fig.2), demonstrates a similar poetic quality from a body versus nature perspective. A statement again from *Daodejing* well captures the spirit of the work: “Advanced way-making seems to be receding.”⁷ To create the work, the artist once again made a futile attempt at the ineffable, lively yet powerful character of water. In the summer of 2000 in Shanghai, He Yunchang took ten tons of river water from Yangtze River and transported the water alone by boat five kilometers upstream to pour it back into the river, causing it to flow for five kilometers.

A long tradition of adopting water as the art material precedes He Yunchang. Differently in He Yunchang’s work, the artist foregrounds the incessant movement of water with an almost violent juxtaposition with the artificial and manual transportation of water. The transportation is executed alone by the artist with the liminal assistance of modern machinery, but the artistic sovereignty is otherwise emphasized on the water, the river, and nature because the result is the same and the “creation” is futile.

He Yunchang showcases critical interpretations of Daoism through the creation and expectation of his artworks, but his works share striking commonalities in the unique use of

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1962), 372.

⁷ Laozi, “Chapter 41” in *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, Inc., 2003), 141.

water. He Yunchang's use of water experiments with the natural occurrences and transitions between solid, liquid, and vapor and the consequent opportunities to appropriate and attempt at these iterations by revealing the nature of presence, absence, action, trace, and impermanence almost as an artistic destiny. He Yunchang's work, especially stridently and critically responds to the quote from François Jullien, "the greatest skill seems crude." Even with the presence of machines, the water rendered both the artist and machines crude, but the question continues – the crude is staged for whom? The clumsy hands of *homo sapiens* or the agile manipulation of nature?

It is also intriguing to examine the role of artificial tools (the knife and the crane) especially that of the heavy technology (the crane) in He's works, which stand a bit digressional against the unexceptional use of water. However, the empirical results of the two performances both point out the unnecessary use of the technologies and thus their redundancy. This redundancy is unique in a world full of technocratic praises, and it underscores an essential tension and struggle between artificiality and nature around the boundary being human bodies.

In *Daozang*, an encyclopedic book from Taoist cannon, an anatomic illustration (Fig.4) answers this question by breaking the boundary between the human body and the external nature.⁸ From the illustration, the unbreakable organs of the human body are matching up with landscapes and constellations, thus implying a cosmology without an absolute rupture between humans and nature.

He Yunchang's works, which might frequently appear to be the sovereign artist fighting to master nature, surprisingly exposes the obverse direction - nature masters the body and always so. They remind us in a context of performance and contemporary art, how far a body can

⁸ “道藏,” *Chinese Text Project*, December 16, 2020, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&collection=132&remap=gb>.

challenge nature and master the materials, and how can a body act as the vehicle for channeling natural energy or the independent agent to challenge and create. For He Yunchang, this will never be a binary question but a contextual one - poetry is never binary.

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Figures

Fig.1:



Fig.2:



Fig. 3:

