

Performance on the Blockchain

Zhang Huan and EchoX

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In 2002, Chinese artist Zhang Huan crossed through New York's streets wearing a bodysuit made of raw meat that shaped him with bulging contours and expanded his presence to into a humanoid, Hulk-like figure. By this time, it had been four years since Zhang left China. He had previously studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he graduated in 1993. With personal identity and existential survival being his most pressing topics at the time, Zhang was able to exercise a radical, self-exploitative practice as a performance artist. In 2021, as part of a collaboration with the Taipei-based tech platform EchoX, Zhang created *Celestial Burial of an Artist*, a digital project that revisited Zhang's meat-suit intervention *My New York*, his earlier work that now holds a firm position in the canon of performance art at the turn of the century. The two decades since Zhang's original performance intervention have seen a trend towards score-based, multi-scale practices, depending less on artists' physical presence, and departing from extreme physical actions. Zhang's artistic trajectory relates to the conceptualization of the performative, too, even though his practice has since focused on the creation of object-based works.

The artist's return to China, in his words, marked a "point of no return," separating his past productions from his future work. Zhang stopped performing his repertoire of past interventions because of a conscious desire "not to repeat himself," as he considered his practice to have reached "the maximum results" with performance art by then. Reflecting this sentiment, Zhang's 2021 return to *My New York* stayed away from the notion of reenactment. *Celestial Burial of an Artist* was conceptualized for online audiences to participate one-on-one in a performative interaction with Zhang's avatar in a virtual game room. In reference to *My New York*, the artist's avatar was rendered to be dressed in a golden meat suit. During period of several weeks in November 2021, audience members (or users) could engage with him in a game-room setting as a vulture-headed avatar, picking parts from the artist's figure, with their mouse clicks simulating a hungry bird's beak. This

interaction was rewarded symbolically, with a small amount of the cryptocurrency Ethereum (ETH). A few weeks later, participants were then able to transform the amount of ETH, generated through their interaction, into an NFT (non-fungible token). EchoX then minted a collection that is hosted on the NFT-platform OpenSea, displaying a total of five hundred and ten avatar-NFTs in metaverse meat suits, in a total of six different colors.

NFTs are used mainly by media artists and seem to have very little to do with performance—or do they? This question arises since the boom period of NFTs has sparked conversations around collecting intangible art forms and their social and monetary value. Entering into public awareness from 2017 and experiencing a peak during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, artists and art institutions have since shown great dedication to exploring the technology's potential.¹ Genre-defining figures of performance art such as Marina Abramović and Robert Wilson have entered the “global” NFT market to tokenize documents of their iconic, past performance works and sell them as NFTs, thereby solidifying the links between the live form and artists' reliance on (sellable) documents.

The conceptual grounds of NFTs are pegged out by an envisioned singularity, which, at first, seemingly (and *only* seemingly) recalls how the concept of the unique, non-exchangeable artist body is commonly addressed in performance studies. From a theoretical perspective, these approaches demand upholding the notion of performance art regarding the live event. This yearning for presence has been described by Amelia Jones as “the dilemma how performance cultures *work*. Precisely because it claims both to be ‘art’ and to be ‘live’ [...], live and/or performance art presses together modes of being, meaning and value that have historically been considered incompatible.”² To carve out the territories of Zhang's project, it is first necessary to delve a bit further into crypto language. In short, an NFT is a non-interchangeable unit of data that is stored on a digital ledger called the blockchain. NFTs are recorded through blockchains: decentralized, distributed digital ledgers that build from records, called blocks.

Blockchains function to track transaction records across many computers, creating a system in which no block in a chain can be altered retrospectively without altering subsequent blocks at the same time. In a chain, a token simply describes a sequence of related characters that may be associated with digital files such as those containing images, video, audio, or text. In theory, this immutability—the ability of the ledger to remain unaltered—leads to a permanent and indelible history of transactions, which has been praised as a specific quality of blockchain systems. The ways in which blockchains store information in encrypted form across peer-to-peer computer networks thus, from a technological perspective, make them useful as keepers of important records and proof of ownership. In a blockchain context, the specific asset characteristic of NFTs is their *non-fungibility*. They are deployed to

track a given file as a *specific* asset. Designed to represent a unique claim of “thingness,” they introduce an artificial scarcity into the vast landscapes of digital data.

Drawing parallels to performance art in an analog setting, owning an NFT can be compared to owning a unique photographic print of a performance signed by the artist, while multiple other individuals may simultaneously own identical unsigned prints. The value of an analog work of art, after all, relies on social consensus as much as physical reality, and the current consensus around art NFTs largely forms the same way. Countering early adopter prophecies of democratization and decentralization, the “social factor” in fact plays an equally important role in how artists can position themselves within the platform-settings of the crypto market. As China has officially banned non-state crypto currencies and trade in September 2021, Zhang’s project benefitted from the infrastructure and resources of a Taiwan-based tech company in order to reach an international audience and market, using the Ethereum chain and the platform OpenSea.

The setting of *Celestial Burial of an Artist* resembles that of online games, defined by the use of avatars, a clear set of rules, and resulting in a quantifiable outcome.³ For their collaboration with Zhang Huan, EchoX built a simple-to-navigate digital “live-site” with limited but clear directives regarding how the artist and his audiences were supposed to interact. The performance/game was organized in three rounds that took place over a ten-day period. In order to be part of its social-technical casino, participants entered the gaming room one by one, as a vulture-head avatar, to mine pieces from the artist’s avatar. Blending in with its meta-environment, *Celestial Burial* avatar of Zhang referenced the character of a Celestial, inspired by fictional figures of the same name that appear in an iconic series of American comic books published by Marvel Comics. Visually, it can be best described as a voxelized version of a bulky statue made of gold ingots. In connection with the artist’s spiritual beliefs, the concept of *Celestial Burial* drew from the praxis of sky burial, in which a human corpse is exposed in mountainous areas to be eaten by scavenging animals, especially carrion birds.

In Tibetan tradition, it is believed that this procedure serves the wish of the deceased to go to heaven. It is considered a bad omen if only a small number of birds come down to eat from the corpse, or even leave the body untouched. For a good re-birth, complete destruction of the remains is the practice’s goal. According to Ellen Pearlman, Zhang has called himself out as a *Ju Shi*, or “householder” Buddhist about eight years ago, “taking on the name *ci ren* or Sky Human. He has also studied Chán Buddhism, the Chinese precursor to Zen, with Master Sheng Yen in Queens, New York.”⁴ A bird had already featured in the setting of *My New York*. As Zhang moved through the busy metropolis, he released a single white dove to channel Christian symbolism of the peace-bringing dove as well as ancient Chinese *fang-sheng*, animal-release rituals that are practiced until this day. While a bird served as

a rather tangible metaphor in *My New York* and featured in Zhang's performance *Seeds of Hamburg*, which he created back in 2002, *Celestial Burial* appropriated its symbolic presence as a tool to ignite an exchange between the artist's avatar and its online audiences.

In the performance, for thirty seconds, audiences could "pick" on the artist's avatar to remove golden cubes from his figure. After this period, the game automatically ended, and participants were shown the amount of ETH that had been generated through the interaction. Presented in such framework, *Celestial Burial of an Artist* referenced the fact that games are experienced through the instance of playing. Therefore, each "play-through" constituted a key moment for a participant (as a player) to interact with Zhang Huan's avatar. Moreover, the invitation to interact provided itself as the only opportunity to even enter the game's experiential setting. An audience's meeting with the delegated artist's avatar, however, did not mark their status as co-authors whose presence would impact the situation and its potential ways of developing. Instead, a fully preprogrammed setting served to commodify an algorithmically shaped form of "interactivity." The audiences' (or players') interactions with the work relied on preprogrammed terms. Playing a game is different from performing in a live (or even digital) setting—according to this logic, it was *not* the artist, but his abstracted golden avatar that audiences/players would be meeting and interacting with.

EchoX introduced *Celestial Burial of an Artist* in slightly different terms, proclaiming that

in the game, the artist waits for players to enter the burial ground for interaction. Each player can cut off [from] the artist's body at will within a limited time. Players then can choose whether to mint the remainder [remains] of Zhang's avatar into an NFT collectible.⁵

This announcement suggested Zhang could actually "be present," ready to encounter an online audience within the project's temporal logic. Promoting an exclusive one-on-one experience with the artist within a limited time, *Celestial Burial* promoted itself through its claimed experiential ephemerality as well as envisioning a unique and special moment of encounter, two elements considered to be constitutive for performative happenings.⁶

"Liveness" is a highly contested term in performance studies, often discussed regarding the ephemeral qualities of performance and the impossibility of its repetition. It is called upon to express the situated moment of encounter as a contingent, uncertain terrain ruled by chance and affect. Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof convincingly argue that "the emphasis here is on a continual fabrication of the newness of the event and the fact that what is happening might go wrong: the dancer might fall, the equipment might fail and the actor might miss a line. Often



Zhang Huan, *My New York* (2002), performance, Whitney Museum, New York, NY. Photo: © Zhang Huan Studio.



Beef Man. Models: Andy Wu and Owen Wu. Photo: Elise Tsai.
© Zhang Huan Studio. Courtesy the artist.



Zhang Huan, *Celestial Burial of an Artist #1*, 2012–2021. Non-fungible token. © Zhang Huan Studio. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

this is hypothetical, a stress on the potential for difference rather than analysis of the impact of actual differences."⁷ In fact, experimentation with visceral experience, bodily endurance, and pain had been core themes in Zhang's early artistic practice which he explored through performance. Works including *My America (Hard to Acclimatize)*, *Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York*, and *My New York*, probe the capacities and limits of corporeal (co-)presence, social norms and behavioral patterns, provoking judgment in the (public) social sphere.

Focusing on this aspect of liveness, as a contingent but shared experience between artist and audiences, Thomas Berghuis, in his influential book on performance art in China, has called for the *conditions of place* in performance to be recognized as one of the core artistic expressions in contemporary art. Writing against the political and discursive marginalization of performance art in the Chinese political context, Berghuis recalls the need to "judge performance on the basis of human perception" and the "embodied sensibility of each individual participant in the performance."⁸ Liveness, then, is within the relation a performance establishes between practitioner and audience. Understood in such relational manner, instead of an ontological liveness, performance proposes conditions of *experiencing* live. Through such unruliness, both parties within an encounter may allow themselves "to be caught out, to be affected, to be relocated and transported."⁹

In digital times, we see liveness expand into the virtual realm, where it may unfold to different degrees, as a co-performance of human and non-human entities. Yet stripping away the flawed human factor, *Celestial Burial of an Artist* states a particular case for an online performance. It stands apart from performances "transported" to the online realm through a *live-stream* that interactively addresses participants (users) in a virtual network. Unlike tech-based performances that would include possibilities for mutual interaction as a condition for its unfolding, the collaboration between Zhang and EchoX was *not* made as it was experienced and could not be experienced as it was made. Accordingly, in their attempt to reproduce the experiential factor, the project's creative team came up with a particular kind of stopgap. In addition to the game-based online setting, performative offline interventions were organized across global metropolises. Demonstrating a well-staged synchronization of art, tech and popular culture, a chain of IRL ("in real life") performance interventions took place in Shanghai, Qingdao, St. Petersburg, New York, and London. With the purpose of drawing attention to the project, volunteers strolled around in these cities wearing costumes printed with meat motifs. In truth, they performed dress-up parades through the streets that were thin in substance, more consonant with the folkloristic interventions of Renaissance fairs or Christmas markets than a philosophical expression of cryptofuturism. Their activity, shared all across social media, was geared towards the promotion of the *crypto-performative*, purposed to draw attention to Zhang's artistic engagement with blockchain technology.

A performance work enters Web3, as the “new,” decentralized and token-based internet is called, in a monetarized form, as *crypto performance*. The “crypto” prefix thereby manifests a technological vision that leans towards the prophetic. In a 1997 book titled *The Sovereign Individual*, authors William Rees-Mogg and James Dale Davidson predicted that the currency used in the information age would rely on “mathematical algorithms that have no physical existence.”¹⁰ Early claims such as theirs have shaped an imaginary promise to eliminate the traditional hierarchies of the economic system, and they also have been exploited in the context of the art market for the purpose of stimulating a gold rush inspired new era of sales. Zhang’s concept also bears reference to the aesthetics of online games that must, like science fiction, be regarded as the breeding ground for contemporary metaverse attempts and crypto-fantasies.

To take part, participants first needed to register on the EchoX website. They were asked to provide basic contact information and to link their MetaMask wallet—a popular software cryptocurrency wallet that interacts with the Ethereum blockchain—to a newly created EchoX membership account. Optionally, they could register for a priority pass which required the sharing of a whole lot of data and the submission of “proof of following” screenshots, to document that they followed the Discord and Twitter accounts of both Zhang Huan and EchoX. The first five hundred participants who completed this form were granted “whitelist entry.” This registration procedure had, arguably, been designed to evoke a sense of competition, as if participants would try to squeeze into an overcrowded room in a gallery, but in the context of platform capitalism. While the sharing of one’s DeFi (decentralized finance) wallet in a crypto context does usually *not* require sharing one’s personal identity or data, this principle was disproved by this playful enforcement of social media networking. The formalism of such procedure framed the online event in terms that suggest an exclusive and restricted experience, revealing links to ritualism and its symbolic dimension of social gatherings.

The virtual artist-audience engagement aimed at the creation of blockchain-based assets: sculptural fragmentary renderings of Zhang’s avatar minted into NFTs. This accords with how, as further development from Web 2.0 technologies, Web3 settings generally rely on the idea that users generate not only an information-based or interactive content, but also its economic and social structures. From December 15, 2021, players could mint their results of the game/performance as tokens in order to provide a verifiable and reliable claim of ownership over that asset. In technical terms, this process required (forced) each player to own a crypto wallet on MetaMask. Minting the NFT cost 0.025 ETH and an additional gas fee in order to compensate the computational effort required to execute an operation on the network. Participation was, therefore, asserted not through experience and the factor of a corresponding liveness, but attributed through an economic transaction. In other words, *Celestial Burial of an Artist* staged a virtual gathering to perform a meditated representation of monetary tectonics.

Zhang's revisiting of *My New York* in *Celestial Burial of an Artist* did not question the ability of the work to be alienable from the artist, a principle which is usually considered a fundamental prerequisite for any artwork, to be both collected and sold. The replacement of the performer with his avatar in the name of crypto instead demonstrates the self-identification of artistic labor with the type of capital extracting it. In this setting, the artist figure, in a self-proclaimed holistic manner, enacted his own commodification. Collaboratively, Zhang and EchoX put efforts to engage participation through a playful set-up and design, metaphorically and literally asking people to *join the game*. Their experimental engagement with NFTs demonstrates for the all-encompassing monetarization of the crypto art economy, as it plays through the process required for anyone who wishes to engage with it (as an investor) and mints an NFT (as their contract). What is relevant is that artists retain the copyright to their work, as owning the NFT does not equal ownership of the underlying digital asset. In fact, not a piece of Zhang's avatar was sold, but what the artist offered to be minted was a collectible of the participants' *experience*, exploiting the factor of social participation for crypto investment dynamics. In the game, the dimension of what would be understood as on-site engagement would no longer depend on geographic location. Instead, the priority of the bodily (*a)live* shifted to a code-based virtual space in which the avatars' interaction relies on time-based coordinates. In such a setting, promises of blockchain-backed assetization allow for the permanent and traceable to impinge upon the ephemeral.

In *My New York*, the meat costume covered only Zhang's body, leaving his persona to be clearly identifiable. Addressing topics of identity and belonging, the New York performance, on the one hand, connected well to the larger discourse of questioning artistic "Chineseness" that many protagonists of China's post-socialist art scene were busying themselves with in the 1990s and early 2000s. Further, as Mary Jane Jacob notes, Zhang's approach holds aspects that make it stand apart from earlier examples of what she calls "Buddhism-inspired contemporary Chinese art made before the marketisation of China in the 1990s."¹¹ Developed alongside economic globalization, this points to how Zhang's artistic trajectory was made possible by his strategic employment of his home region's mercantile skills. *Celestial Burial* employs a similar approach to a China-globalist scale strategy. Through the support of EchoX, in terms of artistic creation as well as audience reach, the project navigated blockchain technology on an international level. In Zhang's early performance work, the use of the word "my" is significant in this respect, as it already suggests an ownership, transforming "locations into a personal space," as Christina Yu has argued.¹²

After returning to live in China, Zhang has built his larger-than-life scale career—indeed, very effectively—by outsourcing concepts of the Western avant-gardes and bringing them to realization under the conditions of the Chinese labor market.

His appearance as a faceless golden corpse avatar echoes how the public image of the artist has shifted from first being known in China for his radical approach to performance art to being known in the global commercial market as a tech-savvy materialist. The historic legacy of *My New York* served him as an anchor for market purposes, the participatory consolidation of which only enabled and further expanded its capitalization. In their recent essay collection *Assetization: Turning Things into Assets in Technoscientific Capitalism*, Kean Birch and Fabian Muniesa explain that no “thing” in this world is an asset *per se*, but almost anything can be turned into an asset. In light of the protean grabs of capitalism at play, they consider the questions of who “owns” something and “how they end up owning it and what that means for everyone else” as central to not only the study of assetization, but to the future of our societies at large.¹³ It is no wonder that Zhang’s digital double appears as symbolic gold-nugget avatar, pointing self-reflexively (and cynically) to the artist’s professional credentials which he acquired since the time of *My New York*.

NOTES

1. See Alfred Weidinger, ed., *Proof of Art: A Short History of NFTs from the Beginning of Digital Art to the Metaverse* (Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2021).

2. Amelia Jones, “The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History,” in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heartfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 15.

3. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 80.

4. Ellen Pearlman, “Zhang Huan’s Painterly Buddhism,” *Hyperallergic*, October 3, 2013, <https://hyperallergic.com/84883/zhang-huans-painterly-buddhism/>.

5. EchoX, “Celestial Burial of an Artist,” accessed October 5, 2022, <https://curation.echox.app/nft/curationPage/zhanghuanFirstRegister>.

6. See André Lepecki, “Not as Before, But Simply: Again,” in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heartfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 159.

7. Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof, “Introduction: Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance,” in *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6.

8. Thomas Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2008), 197.

9. Reason and Lindelof, “Introduction,” 2.

10. William Rees-Mogg and James Dale Davidson, *The Sovereign Individual* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 24.

11. Mary Jane Jacob, “In the Space of Art,” in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelyn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 168.

12. Christina Yu, "Tangible Metaphors," *Next Level* 3, no.1 (2004): 20–25, http://www.zhanghuan.com/wzMF/info_74.aspx?itemid=1139.

13. Kean Birch and Fabian Muniesa, "Conclusion: The Future of Assetization Studies," in *Assetization: Turning Things into Assets in Technoscientific Capitalism*, ed. Kean Birch and Fabian Muniesa (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 315.

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