

TANIA BRUGUERA



el peso de la culpa (the burden of guilt), 1997
Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, and Cuban soil, dimensions variable

Art Museum, he lead a group of naked Americans through a set of ritual actions that culminated with their pelting him with food as he sat passively in a chair. The sight of this mob turning on the expressionless artist was both comic and unsettling, dramatizing Zhang's sense that he could never fully belong in this alien world.

By contrast, Ma Liuming uses nakedness and his feminine face to explore sexual ambiguity and the porous line between male and female, playing a character named Fen-Ma Liuming. (The addition of the feminine sounding Fen to the artist's otherwise masculine name emphasizes the mixing of genders.) With makeup, Ma's face resembles that of a beautiful woman, while his unclothed body is unmistakably male. Echoing Abramovic and Ulay in *Fen-Ma Liuming Walks the Great Wall*, 1998, he traverses the Great Wall of China in character. While Fen-Ma Liuming raises issues around homosexuality and feminism for Western audiences, the artist declares himself more interested in the exploration of mental and emotional states of being. For instance, he notes that he frequently uses fish as a metaphor for the state of innocence and sexlessness of the fetus immersed in the maternal body. Similarly, his use of nudity, which may be read in China as sexual provocation, is for Ma a demonstration of gender ambiguity.²

Performance art suggests the transgressive potential of the body as an art medium. Artists like Bruguera employ performance to challenge the political powers that be. Abramovic and Antoni use body-based performance art to gain control of their own subjectivity. Someone like Zhang might use it to dramatize the individual's alienation from society. The subversive use of the body in art is not confined to performance, however. In the 1960s, feminist artists and critics began to re-evaluate the use of the body as subject matter and to react against sexist assumptions embedded in traditional artistic representations of the female body. Reflecting the same experimental ethos that inspired the performance art of the 1960s and '70s, they were galvanized to rewrite the history of Western art and to examine the political implications of the body's representation in painting and sculpture.

The feminist analysis of figurative representation drew on several key ideas. The first, outlined by art historian Kenneth Clark in a series of lectures given in 1953 at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., revolved around the distinction between the "naked" and the "nude." "To be naked," Clark maintained, "is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude,' on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed."³ This distinction allowed art connoisseurs in the pre-feminist era to separate artistic delectation from prurience. On one side were the refined sensibilities of the aesthete, for whom statues or paintings of nude women could be read as allegories, symbols, or tributes to their own impeccable taste. On the other were those degraded individuals for whom nakedness was associated with lust, desire, or embarrassing physical functions.

By the 1960s, however, this neat distinction was becoming muddled. Feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Carol Duncan, and Ann Sutherland Harris began to wonder why the female nude had been the quintessential motif of post-Renaissance art. They examined the subliminal messages conveyed by nubile flesh served up as coquettish allegories of virtue, justice, and truth. And they asked why men and women are represented so differently in the work of the Old