Re:visit
Humanities & Medicine in Dialogue

"Is Art also a Form of 'Medicine'?" Contesting Classifications in Huang Yong Ping's Art Installations

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Abstract

Huang Yong Ping (黄永砯, 1954–2019) sought, in his artworks, to criticize the art institution and to deconstruct dogmas concerning official art and art history in order to reform and democratize Chinese contemporary art. This often took the form of contesting established systems, orders and classifications through the use of divination, prophecy, chance and gambling. In the late 1980s, he shifted his practice to installation and performance art because the medium of painting failed to represent the realities of life adequately. This realisation marked the end, or 'death', of painting as his predominant artistic practice and Huang's immigration to Paris in 1989 reinforced this transition to conceptual art. The objective of this article is to explore three installations – *108 Cards, The Pharmacy* and *Indigestible Object* – created in the 'second stage' of his life which engage in both form and meaning with imagery and theories relating to health, medicine and healing. They amalgamate Eastern principles, materials, and objects with Western references to overturn conventional classifications of East and West, medicine and art. We will also consider the importance Huang attributes to Chinese medical history, primarily how it produces spatiotemporal incongruities and even humour when received by a contemporary Chinese audience and a foreign public. This disruption of expectations extends beyond medical objects and images to art institutions themselves. Thus, we investigate, lastly, the link between foodstuffs and medicine, which entails bringing 'non-art' objects into exhibition spaces. Not usually associated with traditional art history or medical history, such mundane objects serve to question the artefacts valued by art institutions, thus further demonstrating Huang's contestation of classifications and conventions.

Significantly, we want to offer new perspectives on his work by examining precisely his roles as artist, diviner, and 'doctor' as well as his

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belief in the potential for art to be medicine. Such a conviction is possible since the language used by artists to talk about art has been purged of fruitless art historical discourses and restrictive socialist-realist ideology.

Keywords Huang Yong Ping, installation art, Chinese contemporary art, international art, medicine, healing, classifications

Introduction

During the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976), Mao Zedong, the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, initiated a movement in 1968 called *Cleansing the Class Ranks*. He intended to purge the Party and, thereafter, the country of what he deemed to be 'intellectuals' and 'bourgeois' elements who represented a threat to his ideology. This resulted in thousands of people, including those in the midst of their studies, being sent to the countryside to work in re-education camps. Following the demise of both Mao and the Revolution, students returned to colleges and universities, graduating from the early 1980s. Huang Yong Ping (黄永砯, 1954–2019) belonged to the first generation of art school graduates of the post-Maoist People's Republic of China who, not only trained in traditional calligraphy and realistic painting techniques, were also familiar with Western art history and practices.[1] He became a leading figure in the *'85 Movement*, one of the most prominent of the more than eighty art groups that flourished after the introduction of political, cultural and economic reforms from 1978 and following the end of the PRC's Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (1982–1984).[2] All these groups opposed government-sanctioned culture, valued freedom of expression and individualism and, while they experimented with Western styles from Dada to Pop Art, their work was primarily concerned with expressing ideas rather than reproducing a technique.[3]

1 See Marianne Brouwer, Chris Driessen: Another Long March. In: Chris Driessen, Heidi van Mierlo (eds.): *Another Long March. Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*. Breda 1997, 11-31, 13. Huang Yong Ping studied at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, southeast China, from 1977 to 1982.

2 The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign aimed to suppress Western influences that the Chinese authorities claimed undermined Communist principles. In the fields of philosophy and literature, humanism was targeted, while in art, three Western trends were condemned: "individualistic values, 'art for art's sake', and abstraction". See Irene S. Leung et al.: Chronology. In: Gao Minglu et al. (eds.): *Inside Out. New Chinese Art*. Berkeley 1998, 197-211, 198.

3 See Gao Minglu: Toward a Transnational Modernity. An Overview of *Inside Out. New Chinese Art*. In: Gao Minglu et al., Inside Out, 15-40, 17 and 21.

The artists of the *'85 Movement* sought, in particular, to criticize the art institution and to deconstruct dogmas concerning official art and art history in order to reform and democratize Chinese contemporary art.[4] As part of this artistic (r)evolution, the art critic Li Xiaoshan published the article *The End and Death of Chinese Painting* (July 1985) which provoked a fierce debate between the older, formalist and conservative painters and the younger generation of experimental artists.[5] Huang, through his avid interest in Western avant-garde methods and the art of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys in particular, also came to the personal realisation that "painting was far from sufficient to establish real relationships between art and life",[6] becoming one of the first contemporary Chinese artists to abandon painting in favour of installation and performance art. This turn away from the representational to the conceptual, we contend, led him from analogies between art and death when practising art in China to equating art with life after his immigration to France in 1989.[7] He found the resources and support for his work there, which were not available in the PRC after the Tiananmen Square Massacre (4–5 June, 1989) resulted in a crackdown on all forms of unsanctioned expression, including non-official art exhibitions. France, and more specifically Paris, represented an artistic lifeline, an environment in which he could heal from metaphysical wounds, maintain good creative health and, importantly, access the vital artery of the international art market.

Given the revitalizing consequences of this move, it is not surprising that some installations created in the 'second stage' of his life engaged in both form and meaning with imagery and theories relating to health, medicine and healing. Three of these installations, *108 Cards*, *The Pharmacy* and *Indigestible Object*, are studied here. They draw on Eastern principles, materials and objects, combining these with Western references. While a few scholars and critics view Huang's 'self-orientalization' as a deliberate strategy to position himself globally and commercially,[8] we argue that he intended, rather, to transgress the

4 See Brouwer and Driessen, Another Long March, 13. Huang Yong Ping went on to form the influential and provocative Xiamen Dada group in 1986, described by Hou Hanru as "the most subversive collective in the history of Chinese art, with immense influence on China's revolutionary avant-garde art movement of the last two decades". See Hou Hanru: Change is the Rule. In: Doryun Chong, Philip Vergne (eds.): *House of Oracles. A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective.* Vol. II. Minneapolis 2005, 12-22, 12.

5 See Leung et al., Chronology, 199.

6 Huang quoted in Fei Dawei: Two-Minute Wash Cycle. Huang Yong Ping's Chinese Period. Trans. by Tzu-Wen Cheng. In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. II, 6-10, 7.

7 Huang was participating in the *Magiciens de la terre* (*Magicians of the Earth*) exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, credited as the first truly international art exhibition, when he heard about the Tiananmen Square protests and decided to stay in the city.

8 See, for example, Susan Kendzulak: *Borrowing the Enemy's Arrows. Strategies of Contemporary Chinese*

boundaries between cultures and to overturn conventional classifications, including those of East and West, medicine and art, both in order to challenge what is commonly accepted and practised, as well as to expand the purview of art.

The Artist-Diviner-Doctor

Huang Yong Ping's essay *(8)(h),* published in 1992, is generally understood as providing an insight into the francophone Chinese artist's strategies of "upsetting classification",[9] thus disrupting traditional categorisations of thought, knowledge and meaning. Moreover, it aligns the work of the artist with that of the diviner-doctor. In this way, the essay helps to explain his deployment of the motifs and practices of divination, prophecy, chance and gambling in several of his most well-known artworks.[10] However, his comparative representation of sorcerers and doctors has received little attention. An ancient Chinese saying refers to doctors and sorcerers as "the only ones who can communicate with heaven, earth and man", who are, in other words, "the 'middlemen' who travel freely".[11] The journey to establish this relationship between roles starts with Huang's combination of the classifications used in Chinese history tomes and Jorge Luis Borges's description of the classification of animals from an unnamed Chinese encyclopaedia which is included in the preface to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*. Foucault described this encyclopaedia as a heterotopia, a taxonomy of elements that are so nonsensical that they belong nowhere. It disturbs by "breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things".[12] Observations about the crossing between different epistemological conventions had, then, already appeared in Foucault's work, but Huang directs his attention to the specific categorisation of art, which appears as the eighth entry of the *Liezhuan* (列傳), the 'Biographies of Immortals', in Chinese

Conceptual Artists. Masters Diss. Univ. California State Dominguez Hills 2000; Ryan Holmberg: The Snake and the Duck. On Huang Yong Ping. In: *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 8 (2009). http://yishu-online.com/wp-content/uploads/mm-products/uploads/2009_v08_05_holmberg_r_p038.pdf (10.2.2023).

9 Huang Yong Ping: Excerpt from (8)(h) (1992). In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. II, 91-92, 91.

10 See, for example, his *Roulette Series* (1985–1988), *Four Paintings Created According to Random Instructions* (1985), *Large Turntable* (1987), *Small, Portable Roulette* (1988), *House of Oracles* (2005), *Travel Guide for 2000–2046* (2000).

11 Huang, Excerpt from (8)(h) (1992), 92.

12 Michel Foucault: Preface. In: Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things* [*Les mots et les choses*]. London 2000, xv-xxiv, xv.

history books. He notes that its order corresponds to the eighth letter of the alphabet, h, in the Chinese encyclopaedia, a category with the title "included in the present classification".[13] Putting together 8 and h gives "(8)(h) art – included in the present classification" and by doing this, Huang does not mean "to make an impossible, Foucauldian philosophical reflection on otherness",[14] but rather he intends to upset established classificatory orders. Both '8' and 'h' are situated in the middle of each system, since the history books tended to be numbered from 1 to 14 and the encyclopaedia was labelled from 'a' to 'n'. This ordering leads Huang to ruminate on the roles and professions associated with being mediators. "Retainers" and "protégés" were also positioned in the middle between earth and heaven and had similar skills and qualities to those of sorcerers and doctors, since they "were very often people who had mastered the science of astrology and were capable of foreseeing the future, performing divination, and determining auspicious or inauspicious dates: they were the consultants of the people; they diagnosed the cause of illness, chased away evil spirits, and healed the sick".[15] Huang emphasizes here the connections between art, divination and healing that not only place the artist in the privileged position between humankind and the gods but that also counter the idea that "art and artworks are detached and have no interests at stake".[16] In other words, art has relevance to, and exerts an influence on, reality. By replicating the actions of the diviner when conceiving of his installations, he does not determine the reason for making the works but accepts that meaning is generated randomly by the artistic process and artworks themselves. For him, divination, "the indispensable medium to search for the reason",[17] is similar to healing the sick because it involves discovering the cause of illness, whether physical or figurative. There is a circular, tightly interwoven relationship between the artist, diviner and healer: as a diviner, he would "be situated between 'healing the sick' and 'retainers', and this would determine [his] nature as an artist".[18]

13 Huang, Excerpt from (8)(h) (1992), 91.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 92.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

From Theory to Practice: Upsetting Classification

This relationship, coupled with the coalescence of different epistemological and cultural categories, forms the premise of *108 Cards* (1993) and *The Pharmacy* (1995–1997), artworks in which Huang Yong Ping provides alternative, pharmaceutical taxonomies. For *108 Cards*,[19] Huang produced numbered strips of card, each with an image taken from Western contemporary art set at the top and an accompanying short text from the book *Bencao Gangmu* (*Compendium of Material Medica*), compiled by the naturalist and medical practitioner Li Shizhen in 1590. Card 52, for instance, shows a picture of Piero Manzoni's (notorious) can of his faeces alongside a recipe for a remedy made from human excrement. An image of a newborn in card 56 is taken from a Benetton advertisement and coupled with a medicinal recipe incorporating human placenta. Other images are more general in nature. For example, human hair appears on card 41 with a note about its characteristics – "bitter, moderately warm, nontoxic" – and a description of the ailments it was used to treat:

> [c]oughs, kidney- and bladder-related disorders, constipation and urinary problems, children in shock, nosebleeds, choking, obesity, chronic itching skin disorder, phthisis, malignant furuncles, necrosis, various skin ulcers. Carbonized human hair can cure urinary disorders, and diarrhea [sic]. Efficient in removing blood stasis and curing yin deficiencies.[20]

By taking contemporary images of human body parts and adding descriptions from traditional medicine to create a culturally and temporally infused artwork, Huang Yong Ping emphasizes the reciprocity of the relationship. The piece 'speaks back' to Western art and medicine, just as it represents old, Chinese medicinal recipes in a new form. Huang's account of *108 Cards* in the catalogue accompanying a retrospective exhibition of his work explains that he was trying to open up and challenge the views of those involved in the art world, such as artists, audiences and museums, about the types of objects routinely accepted for display, in addition to depicting the possible correlations with other disciplines, in this case, medical science. He was interested in comparing differing, opposing even, categories of knowledge from both chronological and cultural perspectives:

19 For an image of *108 Cards*, see Huang Yong Ping: 108 Cards. In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. I, 32-33, 33.

20 Ibid., 32.

> When we juxtapose familiar images (objects) in contemporary art with pharmaceutical objects with the same label but belonging to a different time-space, it is not only a reminder of the functions these objects once had; it is more that, in doing so, we achieve a different way of experiencing and using these objects.[21]

In contrast to Li Shizhen's intention to show continuity of knowledge in the *Bencao Gangmu* by building on previous studies of drugs, classical works and natural history,[22] Huang emphasized the rupture of knowledge that results from his artwork's co-existence of discontinuities "on a vertical axis (time)" and "the irrelevancies that exist on a horizontal axis (geography)".[23] This spatiotemporal incongruity produces both disquietude and mirth, reminiscent of the sentiments experienced by Foucault when he read Borges's passage.[24] Similarly, in an interview with Pierre Boncenne, Foucault commented that "a book of medicine from 1750 is, for us, a hilarious object of folklore", while perplexing us at the same time.[25] Huang goes on to confirm his own opinion that these conflicts are perceived as both disconcerting and humorous by the onlooker:

> A modern Westerner will find a Chinese medical book from 1590 amusing; in a similar way, a modern Chinese person will find contemporary works of art that the West is familiar with completely incomprehensible. After all, the 'amusing' folk object and the incomprehensible work of art are each, respectively, a part of their own daily life and culture.[26]

Huang Yong Ping's eclectic grafting of cultures and disciplines produces an effect on the body – laughter – that is known to have positive health benefits. Laughter, then, is a possible response to the dilemma of whether it is "possible to understand a world removed from one's own in time or space".[27] This means that *108 Cards*, more than a curio artwork or

21 Ibid.

22 See Carla Nappi: *The Monkey and the Inkpot. Natural History and its Transformations in Early Modern China*. Cambridge, MA 2009, 50.

23 Huang, 108 Cards, 32.

24 See Foucault, Preface, xviii.

25 Michel Foucault: On Power. Trans. Alan Sheridan. In: Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.): *Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*. New York 1988, 96-109, 100.

26 Huang, 108 Cards, 32.

27 Nappi, The Monkey and the Inkpot, 4.

the representation of a culture clash, offers an alternative reaction to the "epistemological discontinuity in time and geography".[28] It constitutes a kind of laughter therapy involving the absorption of medical and cultural anecdotes by way of the light-hearted juxtaposition of image and text. While the image of an iron padlock on card 65 makes us wonder how it may be used medicinally, the description of the treatment it offers – a cure for a swollen nose that has lost its sense of smell – verges on the bizarre from our modern-day perspective. The instructions on how to transform the padlock into a usable form involve pig fat, an ingredient not readily at hand these days, and a surprising amount of effort: "Grind the iron padlock on a grindstone and collect the powder, mix it with pig fat, and wrap the mixture in a cotton cloth, then stuff into the nose."[29] We see, once again, Huang's evocation of the Foucauldian heterotopia that exposes "the limitations of our own thought structure and points to the existence of rational systems that are entirely different and completely incommensurate",[30] and he uses it to elicit an unexpected response from his audience, that of amusement.

The evocation of traditional Chinese medicine is stronger still in another of Huang Yong Ping's works, *The Pharmacy*,[31] although it lacks the overt, ludic comparison with modernity and Western medicine of *108 Cards*. Instead, what is foregrounded and reinforced is the systematic classification of medicinal objects, firstly on a visual level and secondly, and more extensively, on a textual level. It takes the form of an enlarged gourd lying on its side, with the larger, bottom end cut open to reveal a series of wooden shelves holding a range of variously shaped vessels. Each of these contain *yin* and *yang* medicines that are ordered, in Huang Yong Ping's notes on the piece reproduced in the catalogue, according to their derivation: 1) medicines from animals; 2) mineral medicines; 3) things dried in the studio; 4) found items; 5) homemade pills.[32] The medicines themselves are then listed under each of these categories: those belonging to 1) and 3) are evidently oriental in origin, like pangolin scales, scorpions, mantis egg cases, while those itemised

28 Ibid.

29 Huang, 108 Cards, 32.

30 Doryun Chong: Huang Yong Ping. A Lexicon. In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. II, 97-107, 103.

31 Images of *The Pharmacy* appear in Huang Yong Ping: The Pharmacy. In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. I, 42-44, 43-44 and in: *M+ Magazine* (no date). https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/pharmacy-2012481/ (7.3.2023).

32 See Huang, The Pharmacy, 42.

under 2), 4) and 5) could be found in China or universally, for instance, fossil bone, talcum powder, wet earth and grass. The gourd in Chinese tradition, as Huang explains, "served as a receptacle for medicines. It was the symbol of doctors traveling throughout the country practicing medicines, as well as an object with a mythological aura that was carried by Taoist or celestial figures".[33] The pharmacy acts as another symbol, standing for "civilization systems in general",[34] and with this assertion, we understand how Huang's piece reaches beyond his native country. Although it does not make any visual reference to Western icons or customs, there are textual allusions to Western civilization in the artist's notes. Firstly, under the heading "Medicine", he mentions Plato's reference to writing as *pharmakon*, which is preceded by one word, "Poison", and is followed by the sentence "It can kill but also cure people".[35] Both entries are succinct allusions to *Plato's Pharmacy*, an essay by Jacques Derrida in which he discusses the ambivalence of the word *pharmakon*, meaning both remedy and poison. Secondly, Huang codifies East and West in terms of how pharmacies and medicines are presented in each domain. The West, denoted reductively as 'chemical', tends to have its medicines on show in pharmacies and packaged, with its processed pills coated in a bright colour and ready to take. The 'nonchemical' East puts its darkly coloured medicines in closed drawers and coats them with wax or honey. Usually raw, they need to be prepared and are therefore kept close to the kitchen, unlike medicines in the West. While these two written taxonomies of pharmacopeia are clearly separated by a dividing line in the middle of a page of notes, the concentric circular shelving within the gourd prevents the possibility of boundaries in the installation itself and, therefore, of knowing exactly where China ends and the West begins.

In his second note to *The Pharmacy*, Huang writes that "[e]verything can be medicine", which pre-empts the answer to his question in note 6: "Is art also a form of 'medicine'?"[36] In fact, he had already pointed to an affirmative response in notes from 1987 that accompanied his *Roulette Series* (1985–1988):

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

> Regarding the Idea of 'Healing' in Art
> When R. G. Collingwood said, "Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness," he did not penetrate the crisis of 'healing,' that is, "all those who heal must also be healed." This is an idea that ends up in a vicious cycle. When art wants to take on a condescending position, it needs to be healed. Through healing, art will no longer have profound feelings or systematic viewpoints.[37]

Further on in his notes, it becomes clear that the "profound feelings" and "systematic viewpoints" refer to Maoist and Communist ideology and to the discourses of the history of art which, Huang states, led to "the abuse of language".[38] Since everyone is subject to this polluted language, "anyone who ultimately wants to heal art has to face the fact that he will also start being healed himself".[39] He advocates "scraping" and "bloodletting" as the methods for healing: the former brings inflammations within the body to the surface to reveal what is deeply hidden, while the latter releases "a heavy load".[40] He paints, therefore, a visceral picture of individuals having to penetrate deep into their being in order to consciously purge the impurities of a language full of distorted and loaded meanings so that an emancipated, independent, expressive form suited to today's society may be created. As we have seen, his essay *(8)(h)* explains the idea that the artist, in the guise of a diviner-doctor, may heal the sick. *The Pharmacy* offers, then, a cure to the inherited illnesses of Chinese society through its alternative narrative about culture and modernity, one derived from the history of traditional Chinese medicine "which combines things that are ordinarily considered to belong to separate, unrelated categories of knowledge" and from its encounter with Western pharmacological practices.[41] Lists, taxonomies, dichotomies and shelving give the appearance of order, but they are filled with a mixture of ancient and foreign signs and symbols whose incongruities draw attention to the possibility of another way to understand life and art. As Hou Hanru remarks, in this artwork Chinese medicine acts as "a catalyst to provoke a fundamental shift in perspective on the

37 Huang Yong Ping: Research on independent cases. In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. II, 48-52, 50.

38 Ibid., 52.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 See Hou Hanru: Change is the Rule. In: Chong and Vergne, House of Oracles, Vol. II, 12-22, 16.

world".[42] By foregrounding several classifications, Huang contests the idea that there is only one true way of ordering things as imposed by political factions, or traditional practices, or cultural institutions.

Huang Yong Ping's practice of upsetting categories and conventions in his role as an artist-diviner-doctor also extended, in a more direct and confrontational way, to art institutions in their concrete forms as museums and galleries. Having embarked on *Indigestible Object* (1992),[43] for an exhibition at the *Centro per l'arte contemporaneo Luigi Pecci* in Prato, Italy, he consulted the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), an ancient divination text, to seek his project's purpose and came to the understanding that its meaning was tied up with the question of digestion, specifically, the extent to which a Western art institution was able to 'digest' a symbol of China: rice. Over the period of a week, he cooked 400 kilograms of rice, the staple food of the country, and laid it on the floor of a tunnel within the central hall of the museum. Because the rice was cooked in batches on different days, parts of the sticky trail rotted while other parts, just prepared, were steaming. Rice has been consistently associated with digestion, both good and bad, throughout different ages and traditions. In ancient Greece and Byzantium, for example, it was characterized by "indigestibility, unwholesomeness, astringency (styptic action), as well as the ability to slow down the work of the alimentary tract".[44] The 1800s saw rice water being used as a demulcent drink for fevers and intestinal disorders, while boiled rice was prescribed as a diet for invalids with weak digestion.[45] For Huang in the 1990s, the most digestible foodstuff for the Chinese "becomes an indigestible object for the art institution once it is brought into a museum".[46] Entering into the most protected space for art, this 'non-art' object effects a significant trespass, thereby constituting a subversive act. Hou confirms that Huang was testing the limitations of "the highly codified construct of art discourses and institutional practices" which, still today, separate everyday objects from art objects.[47]

42 Ibid.

43 Images of *Indigestible Object* appear in Hou Hanru: *On the Mid-Ground.* Hong Kong 2002, 55 and Hou, Change is the Rule, 15.

44 Zofia Rzeźnicka, Maciej Kokoszko, Krzysztof Jagusiak: Rice as a Foodstuff in Ancient and Byzantine *Materia Medica*. In: *Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe* 3 (2013), 47-68, 47.

45 See Roberts Bartholow: *A Practical Treatise on Materia Medica and Therapeutics*. New York 1876, 27.

46 Hou, On the Mid-Ground, 63.

47 Ibid.

Given that the tunnel surrounding the rice represents a type of passage, it becomes a metaphor for transformation, both in the sense that the primary material decays during the course of the exhibition and that the piece alters "the existing cultural-artistic system", thus exerting "a double deconstructive function".[48] Huang's choice of a museum in Europe to question the efficacy of its functioning attests to his criticism of West-centrism and points to the opportunities afforded by "a New Internationalism".[49] The slow performance of decomposition and deconstruction is, then, a metaphor for the demise of a dominant system as well.

Another figurative interpretation appears in the symbiosis of medicine and food, mentioned in Huang's first note to *The Pharmacy*: "Medicine and food are from the same source – the origin, the cause."[50] If rice is the Chinese medicine taken by an Italian museum, it currently sits uncomfortably in its stomach without working through its system. The undigested rice-medicine is the cause of the museum's pain and sickness but, if it could be absorbed by the museum-body, it would provide nourishment, implying that engaging with foreign art has the potential to result in a healthy existence. Elsewhere, too, Huang makes a correlation between art, medicine and food when he comments in an interview on "the 'Food Chain' between artists and their works".[51] Referring to *108 Cards*, he equates the components from the Western avant-garde and those from Li Shizhen's book of Chinese herbal medicines to "substances" that become interdependent organisms in his artwork.[52] Each 'ingredient' feeds the other in a constant, cyclical process. By interpreting these foodstuffs in different cultures and eras, Huang produces something akin to a plate of fusion gastronomy and his art may be experienced as a universal panacea for the palate.

Furthermore, Huang's familiarity with the *Bencao Gangmu* means that he would have been aware of its inclusion of culinary remedies and recipes in addition to its classifications of medical preparations. Indeed, its author, recognising the importance of nutritional health, collected recipes from all over China, spoke to chefs and cooks and

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Huang, The Pharmacy, 42.

51 Huang Yong Ping quoted in Ya-Ling Chen: Dada is Dead, Beware of the Fire! An Interview with Huang Yong Ping. In: *Tout-fait* 2 (2003). https://www.toutfait.com/dada-is-dead-beware-of-the-firean-interview-with-huang-yong-ping/ (23.2.2023).

52 See Huang quoted in Chen, Dada is Dead.

gathered popular knowledge. Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett note that, of the 1,898 drugs and 11,096 prescriptions in Li Shizhen's tome, many of the 8,161 that he claims to have collected personally demonstrate "his appreciation and flair for fine foods".[53] He even compiled them under a new rubric, 'Appended recipes', which had not previously been a feature of *materia medica* since, from the Yuan period (1279–1368 CE), culinary recipes tended to be entries within the main body of *materia dietetica*.[54] Clearly, Li, like Huang, was not averse to modifying established categorisations and to producing innovative juxtapositions. Given that the interpermeability of culinary and medical discourses dates further back than Li's pre-modern work, to both ancient China and ancient Greece,[55] Huang's codifying of food with medical significance has very strong historical roots. This is demonstrated also by that fact that foods were assigned both a flavour and a *qi* within a framework that brought together astronomical, political, ritual and medical knowledge from at least the seventh century onward.[56] Both then and now, it is believed that the five flavours – pungent, sweet, salty, sour and bitter – are able to stimulate different movements within the body, while the *qi* have the thermostatic powers of heating, neutralizing or cooling.[57] Huang draws on this general, culture-specific knowledge about the medicinal properties of food when creating *Indigestible Object*, but his food chain, like for *108 Cards*, goes beyond the consumption of native ingredients to include alien foodstuffs, suggesting that his art needs to feed on both sources for a healthy metabolism.

An Independent Practitioner

Huang Yong Ping's contestation of cultural, artistic and institutional boundaries operates in parallel to his rejection of disciplinary classifications, particularly those of medicine and art. His strategies of transgression and subversion from inside the art institution are integral to his conceptual art and they are also characteristic of the international conceptual art movement at the end of the twentieth century. Where he carves out an

53 Vivienne Lo, Penelope Barrett: Cooking Up Fine Remedies. On the Culinary Aesthetic in Sixteenth-Century Chinese *Materia Medica*. In: *Medical History* 49 (2005), 395-422, 396.

54 See ibid., 398.

55 See ibid., 397, 420.

56 See ibid., 397.

57 See ibid.

independent path from it is in his manner of engaging with the world around him as he reflects on issues of globalization, the crossing of borders and cultural divergences. He achieves this, paradoxically, by incorporating in his artworks seemingly 'exotic', Eastern features which, not simply infused with new meanings, are themselves transformed as they coexist alongside Western influences and references. For Huang, like for other Chinese diasporic artists as Gao Minglu notes, his artworks convey his transitional identity in an age of transnational modernity.[58] Gone is the preoccupation in the 1970s and 1980s with modernization that gave rise to prolonged debates about the confrontation between East and West, whether in art or in society more generally, and to the conceptualization of an inward-looking Chinese modernity.[59] With new audiences and markets abroad, contemporary Chinese artists have sought "to develop a common and reliable vocabulary […] that might be unfamiliar but which is derived from their own deep personal experience",[60] and it is certainly apparent that Huang, in the installations studied above, offers a true expression of his subjectivity and his background while living and working in a transnational context. His intermingling of antagonistic semiotic and artistic systems results in an initial, anticipated impression of aesthetic dislocation in the viewer, but this gradually dissolves into a recognition of hidden kinships and material linkages through which new cultural interpretations may be transferred. Unforeseen frictions and fictions are produced when these Western and Eastern elements rub up against each other and both are affected by their contact. Whether characterised as belonging to the in-between or hybrid, in general terms, or recalling more specifically Homi Bhabha's third space[61] or Gao Minglu's post-orientalism,[62] Huang Yong Ping's works stimulate connections between the local and the global, tradition and modernity, art and life that are malleable and reconcilable. Such connections, as we have seen, give birth to diverse and rich artworks rather than to the homogenization that we might expect from globalization. By not

58 See Gao, Toward a Transnational Modernity, 15.

59 Huang challenged Chinese art's almost obsessive concern with the influences of Western modernity, most notably, in his 'damp series' – a collection of installations involving Chinese and Western texts which were destroyed in washing machines or concrete mixers – and in his interview with the curator Hou Hanru in 1992. See Huang Yong Ping: To Beat the West with the East and to Beat the East with the West. Interview with Hou Hanru, August 1992. Cited in Hou, Change is the Rule, 14.

60 Gao, Toward a Transnational Modernity, 28.

61 See Homi Bhabha: The Third Space. In: Jonathan Rutherford (ed.): *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London 1990, 207-221.

62 See Gao, Toward a Transnational Modernity, 34.

abandoning Chinese materials, images and symbols, Huang and other Chinese artists overseas, such as Chen Zhen and Shen Yuan (who also moved to Paris) or Wu Shan Zhuan (in Hamburg) or Xu Bing and Zhang Jianjun (in New York), contribute to a shift in the international art market from its domination by the West to a greater alignment with the East. More surprising still, this is achieved from within the system since they inhabit important centres for the production, circulation and consumption of international art. His (and their) strategy of evoking Chinese icons and imagery serves, ultimately, to globalize the country's culture rather than to exoticize it.

A further defining feature of Huang Yong Ping's personal vision that distinguishes him from the contemporary Chinese conceptual art movement concerns his belief in art's ability to heal, to act as the elixir of a new life that is unencumbered by constricting socio-political and art historical discourses. Chen Zhen practised reflexology as an alternative to narcotic analgesics and Daoist body purification to relieve the symptoms of his haemolytic auto-immune anaemia and viewed his exhibitions as "the result of a long reflection on therapy and medication through the work of art".[63] Unlike Chen, Huang did not consider his art as a means of direct self-care or self-examination but as a way of introducing modern audiences, whether native or foreign, to traditional Chinese medicine. Contrasting different periods within the same culture has, therefore, the potential to generate knowledge exchange about medical practices, new encounters with the ancient, and journeys into the unknown. With his choice of a Ming dynasty (1368–1644) medical text for *108 Cards*, a reign under which the genre reached its apogee in China's medical history,[64] Huang recognised its important contribution to scientific observation in the ancient world and sought to reaffirm it in the present. Although the *Bencao Gangmu* includes 1,109 block-print illustrations,[65] the artist re-utilizes only extracts of its text, leaving the usual purposes of the graphics – aiding the theoretical understanding of treatment and distinguishing the appearance of medicines – to the assortment of contemporary Western images, which have a different function in the artwork, namely, to create temporal and spatial disjunctions and discontinuities.

63 Chen Zhen quoted in an interview with Alessandra Pace, Giovanni Maria Pace: In Praise of Black Magic. In: Jérôme Sans (ed.): *Chen Zhen. The Discussions.* Paris 2003, 211-225, 215. The artist, whose parents and siblings were doctors, had battled against his debilitating condition from the age of 25 and eventually died from it in 2000.

64 See Shumin Wang, Gabriel Fuentes: Chinese Medical Illustration. Chronologies and Categories. In: Vivienne Lo et al. (eds.): *Imagining Chinese Medicine*. Leiden 2018, 29-50, 35.

65 See ibid., 36.

Considering further the role of illustrations in Chinese pharmacopeia, there is the long-established tradition of including icons of divination, especially those relying on auspicious signs to not only depict conditions and treatments but also to suggest efficacious remedies or practitioners. If we consider just one example from the 18th Century, the *Yuzuan yizong jinjian* (*Imperially Commissioned Golden Mirror of Medical Learning*), published in 1742, images of boys at play and Daoist iconography convey propitious symbolic meanings and appear in just under 30% of the text's illustrations (141 out of 484 images).[66] As Yi-Li Wu explains, boys were chosen in preference to girls in Chinese visual culture due to the higher cultural value placed on them as the future head of the patrilineal family. In the *Golden Mirror's* pox pictures, boys are seen playing with pets or toys and holding lucky objects and, often, the name of the object produced a lucky pun: "fish" (*yu* 魚) evoked "abundance", while "vase" (*ping* 瓶) suggested "harmony" or "peace".[67] The insertion of images of Daoist figures or objects with Daoist associations was another way of denoting good fortune and was founded on the belief that Daoist immortals and other divinities had access to secret remedies and could bestow good health. They also possessed transcendental powers of healing so depictions of "the Daoist immortal served as a useful metaphor for the male physician's erudite skills" which was a particularly important image to project in the event of a royal patient receiving an erroneous diagnosis or not being cured, failures that could have resulted in a charge of treason.[68] The medical illustration, transformed into "an auspicious talisman" in the past,[69] still carries its meaning and purpose as a divinatory sign in Huang's artworks studied here, with the close relationship between divination, medicine and art shifting only slightly in the movement between different cultural contexts. He reminds his native audience of the fact that divination remains at the heart of Chinese vernacular practices, since there is no definite boundary between medicine, astrology and religion, while simultaneously recalling to his foreign audience the tendency to regard some western avant-garde artists, like Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp, as shamans and spirit mediums.[70] Indeed, fortunate dates for key occasions,

66 See Yi-Li Wu: The Gendered Medical Iconography of the *Golden Mirror, Yuzuan Yizong Jinjian* 御纂醫宗金鑑, 1742. In: Vivienne Lo et al., Imagining Chinese Medicine, 111-132, 123.

67 Wu, The Gendered Medical Iconography, 117 and 124.

68 Ibid., 128.

69 Ibid., 127.

70 See Tsong-Zung Chang: Beyond the Middle Kingdom. An Insider's View. In: Gao Minglu et al., Inside Out, 67-75, 68.

such as marriages, are still selected in China according to calculations of the relationships formed by the Five Agents – wood, fire, earth, metal and water.[71] The fortune of newborns can be foretold by consulting their birth charts and major events, including death, can be predicted astrologically. Also, the popular rise of Buddhism and Daoism in late twentieth and twenty-first century China has led to "a grass-roots revival of the plural ways in which people […] have understood and dealt with illness, spiritual and psychological crises, old age and death".[72] In the past, the healing arts combined with divination to give the most propitious days for collecting and preparing ingredients and for performing various medical procedures, as well as to analyse diseases and unexplained illnesses or ailments that did not respond to orthodox medical treatment. Various calendrical and numerical schemes were used to locate the source of an illness and its prognosis. China, as Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim states, is often referred to as the "land of divination" and Huang ensures that we recognise that fact and the role of art in contributing to our understanding of transmissions of medical knowledge.[73] Elisabeth Hsu identifies three mutually occurring pathways by which Chinese medical knowledge passes from one generation to the next within the country – secret, personal and standardised.[74] Taking this into account, it is apparent that Huang focuses on the first pathway in his installations: the hidden or forgotten medical texts, illustrations and artefacts that accompany individual and normative experiences of illness, treatment and healing. He seems to want to modify the medical language that is commonly attributed to being Chinese, that speaks of the 'mythical' practices of meditation, acupuncture, Qigong and the physiological processes of *yin* and *yang*, the Five Agents and the humours, in order to acknowledge that they comprise another strand of common, curative discourse because they are part of everyday life.

71 Rather than being understood as five concrete substances, these are categories referring to the fundamental ingredients of the universe into which all phenomena can be classified.

72 Vivienne Lo, Chris Berry, Guo Liping: Introduction. In: Vivienne Lo et al. (eds.): *Film and the Chinese Medical Humanities*. London, New York 2020, 1-8, 2.

73 See Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim: A Tibetan Image of Divination. Some Contextual Remarks. In: Vivienne Lo et al., Imagining Chinese Medicine, 430-440, 431.

74 See Elisabeth Hsu: *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*. Cambridge 2004, 1.

Conclusion

At first sight, the employment of Chinese texts, objects and icons in *108 Cards*, *The Pharmacy* and *Indigestible Object* appears to highlight the cultural divergences between East and West, reinforcing essentialist notions of each, especially that of a remote and monolithic China, and maintaining boundaries between them. However, the intermingling of classifications and categories arising out of the encounters between 'Western elements' and 'Eastern elements', and between medicine and art, leads to a rejection of this traditional narrative of bifurcation and suggests that there is a more complex interplay between old and new systems of cultural and medical knowledge. Huang Yong Ping's installations convey an understanding of China's medical past and illustrate the way in which it might contribute to contemporary knowledge. Although discontinuities certainly persist, since the artist is not attempting to translate or adapt elements cross-culturally and "western expectations of the oriental" are reoriented toward the unexpected,[75] there is not the radical rupture that we may have perceived upon initial impression. The artist uses the contradistinction of Western science and Chinese traditional knowledge to expose overlaps and commonalities and, in a similar way, he dismantles the binaries of art and science by bringing them into a visual relationship so that they are no longer necessarily treated as discrete disciplines. Moreover, he has expanded the range of objects displayed in art institutions that would not formerly have been associated with either traditional art history or medical history, and by directing attention to such objects he is occupied more with their transcendental qualities rather than with their mundane meanings. All this would suggest that Huang Yong Ping's installations participate in the creation of a new form of art (and knowledge) making that contests classifications and conventions. He reveals that the visual culture of Chinese medicine offers a possible corrective to West-centric histories of science and international art and to reductive comparisons between East and West that hold no value in our age of transnational modernity. Art, for Huang, is a form of medicine: It has the power to heal only if it is itself first healed, cured of the diseases of dangerous dogmas, conservative discourses and divisive dichotomies. Such diseases are, to borrow the words of Foucault, "at one and the same time disorder – the existence of a perilous otherness within the human body, at the very heart of life".[76] Huang's

75 Hou Hanru: Strategies of Survival in the Third Space. A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s. In: Gao Minglu et al., Inside Out, 183-189, 185.

76 Foucault, Preface, xxiv.

artworks represent the "limit-experience" of this Other,[77] in its various cultural, political and historical manifestations, that succeeds in disrupting the order of things.

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77 Ibid.