

Hu Fang
**Wu Yongfang,
the Hunger
Artist**

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e-flux journal #16 — may 2010 Hu Fang
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The Hunger Artist reappeared on our radar several years after his original performance, when some old photographs of the event were posted on the *Tianya* virtual community website, causing an unexpected storm of controversy. Staring directly into the camera, the severely emaciated Wu Yongfang sits upright, naked except for a white loincloth wrapped around his waist like Gandhi, leaving almost nothing to the imagination. As we look in through the iron bars that separate him from the audience, we find that the room in which he sits is as austere as a prisoner's cell, furnished only with a mat and a cot. An exterior view reveals this "prison cell" to be a temporary bamboo hut perched on the roof of a geometrical three-story modern building. The bamboo adds a fashionable flavor of environmental awareness to the modern structure. From the captions that accompany the photos, we learn that the building houses the real estate offices of Company X, which organized and sponsored the event. The temporary hut, designated the "Fasting Room," was designed and constructed especially for the Hunger Artist using recyclable materials. Now, years after the event, Company X has launched a new marketing campaign for its "Free Spirit Leisure Villas," a huge, 5,000-acre luxury waterfront development, which makes use of the Hunger Artist's performance.

The crux of the debate raging online is the following: the Hunger Artist's detractors maintain that although hunger remains a chronic social problem that must be eliminated, the economy of Country Y has been growing steadily and the lives of the people have improved significantly; but if the Hunger Artist persists in displaying images of poverty and backwardness to domestic audiences and to the entire world, is he not building his artistic success on the backs of the disadvantaged? His supporters, on the other hand, maintain that the Hunger Artist's actions demonstrate his immense courage, as he risks his life to shock us into confronting reality.

After several thousand related posts appear on the Internet, people on both sides of the debate begin to suspect something: could this controversy be just a new marketing ploy on the part of the real estate company?

Wu Yongfang responds to questions from the crowd:

I've been planning this event with my curator for a long time. My curator is old friends with Mr. Liang, from Company X's real estate sales department. Mr. Liang has always had strong opinions about culture, and he wanted to support our creative endeavor by providing us with this venue. I think we're going to attract even more

attention and debate by holding the event at a busy commercial center like this.

“Is the purpose of the event to raise awareness about poverty?”

Of course; that goes without saying. But we also want to focus attention on cutting-edge trends in art.

“Ah, so you want to educate the public about performance art!” A light bulb seems to go off in the questioner’s head – in Country Y, any work of art that people don’t understand or don’t like is usually referred to as “performance art.”

I know what you mean by performance art, but I prefer to call what I do “Life Art.” I use my life force as a medium for creative expression – we still don’t know what the final result will be.

“Do you know what your physical limitations are? Are you worried about that? Do the limits of the body define the limits of creativity?”

I’m not worried. You could say that I’m using the creative process to explore the limits of my own willpower.

An endless stream of people surges towards the “prison cell” perched on the roof of Company X’s real estate office. Wu Yongfang gazes out at them, silent and content. The crowds for the last three days have been huge, much bigger than for any of his previous exhibitions.

Wu Yongfang’s favorite time of day is the moment when it gives way to night. The crowds thin out, and dusk overtakes his small cell. It is a time when limitless possibilities emerge. He silently stands up, suddenly unsure of where his body is located in space. A hallucinatory mixture of exhaustion and extreme hunger overtakes him. In the waning light, he seems to see his own seated figure floating before him, like the Zen master Bodhidharma deep in meditation.

He recalls the moment deep into his fast, after starvation had set in, when a rush of warmth suddenly rose up from his *hara*, the seat of his life force. Surging to the top of his head, it assured him that his willpower had been fully roused. His eyes pulse with energy. The audience gazes at him reverently, intensifying the warmth he feels.

The audience’s reverence for the artist is reciprocated by the artist’s desire to illuminate the audience. He first tells them about the difference between therapeutic fasting and Hunger Art. He then stresses the importance of distinguishing between traditional hunger

strikers and contemporary hunger artists. Hunger strikers make their living from fasting in public, he explains; they traditionally appear in social and political venues, carrying out a form of passive resistance. Many hunger strike manifestos that have been passed down through the ages bear witness to this. Hunger artists, on the other hand, do not intend to express resistance of any kind through their public fasting. Rather, they employ the traditional methods of the hunger strike to undertake a contemporary creative process. By reawakening the taste of hunger – something that most people have forgotten, and that arouses a sense of nostalgia, so to speak – hunger artists stimulate and heighten self-awareness, and provoke intense contemplation of the relationship between self and society.

He explains the historical basis of Hunger Art to the crowd:

When I was little, we lived through three years of natural disaster. We ate anything we could find, even weeds and tree roots, until there was nothing left.

A young spectator responds, “Yeah, but at least it was organic food.” It is hard to tell whether he is joking or simply clueless about history.

A teacher leads a group of chattering students forward. They regard the Hunger Artist fearfully. He immediately has a vision of what the curriculum regarding hunger will be like in the future: hunger will no longer be a physical experience; rather, it will have become a memory, used only to evoke the performances of hunger artists. *I realize that in order to reach the pinnacle of my art, I must become completely genuine.*

I hate the idea of performing. That’s why I call myself an Artist of Life.

Despite his explanations, the media insists on using provocative headlines, such as “Hunger Strike at Luxury Development” and “Therapeutic Fasting at Free Spirit Leisure Villas,” when reporting on the event. Of course, the Hunger Artist has no real interest in the relationship between his art and how many units of luxury housing are sold. He only wants to see his audience. He only hopes that as countless spectators fix him with the reverential gaze, he may leave imprinted on their consciousness the image of a true modern day Bodhidharma.

Interestingly, many people are not satisfied with just looking at his body. They also want to stick their noses through the iron bars to try to catch a whiff of his scent. They have concluded that the reason the Hunger Artist smells so

02/05

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Fasting Buddha at Lahore Museum. Image by Yasuo Osakabe.

healthy is that *fasting prevents the consumption of contaminated food.*

After the crowd is done viewing the Hunger Artist, they head downstairs to the real estate office, where they are once more immersed in breathless sales pitches for luxury waterfront housing and the endless headaches of the real estate market.

This mingling of the scents of asceticism and consumerism creates a unique artistic experience.

After completing the first phase of his event, the Hunger Artist announced his intention to continue, and to test his limits to the utmost.

The organizers were somewhat hesitant. They were very happy with the public response so far, but they were also worried that the Hunger Artist might not be physically prepared for the challenge, and that unforeseen problems might arise. The Hunger Artist was steadfast in his demand, however, even as there was also a great deal of public opposition to his continuing his fast. After he underwent a thorough physical examination and signed a renewed waiver of liability in the event of his death, it was finally decided to continue the event.

Within several days, the Hunger Artist felt that he had achieved an unprecedented level of purification. *Maybe in the beginning there was no difference between Hunger Art and hunger strikes. Maybe it was only the process of cultural development that caused them to become two different things. But now, they are being reunited in the crucible of my body to create a new School of Hunger Art.*

In the future, artists of the Hunger School will measure themselves not only by the duration of their hunger, but also by the extent of their social relevance. In this way, the artists will determine whose work is the most powerful.

And few were surprised when a strange new phenomenon emerged: a Hunger Art exhibition was mounted to publicize a real estate development called “Fragrant Garden Villas,” but in this case, the promotional materials sensationalized the fact that the Hunger Artist was a beautiful woman. Members of the public began to question the organizers’ increasingly bold exploitation of human life for commercial gain, and a number of people began to hold protests in front of the building.

As for Wu Yongfang, after prolonged disputes and negotiations, the organizers of his event forcefully requested that he vacate the Fasting Room, and he was transported directly to a local hospital to recuperate. Upon his release from the hospital, he immediately took the organizers to court.

After emerging from the courthouse, the Hunger Artist responds to questions from the media:

I spent two decades of my life preparing for this work of art. Unfortunately, I was deliberately prevented from completing my creative process. How many decades does a person have in one lifetime? We are living on the cusp between old and new eras. My situation highlights the fact that even now, our freedom of expression remains severely limited.

There is something else I want to say. In this new age that lies before us, every single person is going to enjoy full freedom of expression. When I hold my next Hunger Art performance, I hope that this prediction will serve as my final words.

As he speaks, he places a special emphasis on the phrase “my final words,” as if his prediction has already come to pass.

The last time I saw Wu Yongfang was at an entertainment industry event held in memory of Michael Jackson. The theme was “Eternal Life.” Even though it was a memorial, the atmosphere was not at all gloomy; in fact, it was a joyous celebration. When Wu Yongfang made an appearance, he was immediately surrounded by hordes of fans. By this time, he had been acclaimed the godfather of Country Y’s School of Hunger Art. As he stood under the spotlights addressing the crowd, the profound import of what he said affected me deeply:

Michael Jackson had been preparing for his death for a very long time. Why do I say this? He had already experienced the death of his physical body once, twice, countless times. His physical body faded away long ago. It was transfigured into an image. He had been living inside his image for a long time. This final death was merely the realization of his eternal life. It is inevitable that the body will eventually disappear, but the image lives on forever. When his body finally died, I had a sudden realization.

He pauses for a moment under the spotlights, a strange smile appearing on his face.

I realized that he and I have always been comrades in art. We are all comrades . . . in Hunger Art!

Passionately he raises his glass in a toast:

04/05

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Come on, everybody! Let's drink to the
brilliance of our comrades in art!

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Translated from the Chinese by R. B. Baron.
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05/05

Hu Fang is the artistic director and co-founder of Vitamin Creative Space, a project and gallery space dedicated to contemporary art exchange and to analyzing and combining different forms of contemporary cultures. As a novelist and writer, Hu has published a series of novels including *Shopping Utopia*, *Sense Training: Theory and Practise*, and *A Spectator*. His recent publication is a collection of fictional essays called *New Arcades (Survival Club, Sensation Fair, and Shansui)*. His writing has appeared in Chinese and international art/culture magazines since 1996. His curatorial projects include "Through Popular Expression" (2006); "Xu Tan: Loose" (1996); "Zheng Guogu: My Home is Your Museum" (2005); and "Object System: Doing Nothing" (2004). He has been a coordinating editor of *documenta 12 magazines* since 2006. Hu graduated from the Chinese Literature Department of Wuhan University in 1992. He lives and works in Beijing and Guangzhou.

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