

*Comment***Corps de Chine: The Work of Ma Liuming***Anne Lettrée*

In 2002, at the Shanghai Biennale, which she attended to publicize French artists' work, the gallery-owner Anne Lettrée was fascinated to discover the vitality of young Chinese artists. Since that date she has made around ten trips to the People's Republic and set up contacts with more than 150 artists from all disciplines (painters, sculptors, photographers, etc.)

Her meeting with Ma Liuming, who lives in Beijing and whose early work dates back 15 years or so, resulted in a show in Paris, in the Anne Lettrée gallery, in 2003. With the title 'Corps de Chine – Acte I' it was the start of a series of events around gender and sexuality – or sexing – themes that are at the same time central and concealed in Chinese civilization.

Ma Liuming was born in 1969 in Huangshi, Hubei province. He had a traditional education, then joined a community in East Village in the suburbs of Beijing, which brought together underground artists known for their experimental performances and photos. He was charged with pornographic activities and thrown into jail by the authorities, and the artists' colony was dispersed. Since then he has restarted his activities even more enthusiastically in a China too preoccupied with its economic issues to censor and keep a watch on the artists who were previously seen as dissidents. Ma Liuming is part of an avant-garde which has broken completely with the conventions of Chinese art. Sexuality is among his concerns and fantasies, as is everything that was long banned in his country.

Enjoying a certain freedom of expression, due in part to the recognition he has achieved – especially abroad – and regardless of the medium adopted (filmed performance, photos, paintings), Ma Liuming has made sex difference the focal point of his art and is carrying out research into personal identity that takes in wider social and societal considerations. By exposing himself in all his physical ambivalence he is attempting to confront the taboos lying heavy on sex and the rigidity of relations between men and women. Chinese men are at the top of the social pyramid. Symbols

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Figure 1. *Walking the Great Wall* (1998), images from filmed performance.

of strength and power, they are the supreme reference compared with women, who are often erased, even subjugated, and whose horizons are still bounded by the family and motherhood, which is controlled because of demographic restrictions.

However, Ma Liuming's work on androgyny tends to abolish those differences which have consequences for the whole of society. He showcased the theme in a 1998 performance entitled *Walking the Great Wall* (a film cut up into single images) in which he moves naked and with feline grace along the Great Wall, contrasting and combining strength with fragility, immensity with the finite, submission with freedom, and demonstrating a kind of glorious third sex, a state of nature transcending genders (Figure 1).

Indeed the artist makes himself his chief medium of expression, adopting different identities that dissolve dimorphism. He has invented for himself a dual-sexed double that he uses, particularly in his performances, to express the sexual ambiguity of individuals, matching the complementarity of *yin* and *yang*. This twofold character created for the occasion is called Fen-Ma Liuming, a composite name that indicates the doubling of the person (*'fen'* means cut, separate, in Chinese) embodied by the artist with his man's body and his woman's face which is quite alluring. Curiously, Chinese onomastics are androgynous too: names (always without the title Mr, Mrs or Miss) do not indicate sex. First names are images that do not necessarily carry the masculine for a man and the feminine for a woman. Robes and makeup play an important part in these shows, in which the artist adopts and appropriates for himself the icons that are most saturated in femininity; the 'performer' introduces confusion by making both sexes coexist in a seemingly playful way, though it is disturbing for some spectators, who see the exhibition of the painted male, perverted by his closeness to the female element, as an insult to masculinity. Nevertheless he is following a certain tradition, since in the countryside it is men who still today play women's parts in dramatic performances. In singing and opera women's voices used to be sung by men whose *tessitura* is never low.

In fact Ma Liuming is attempting on the one hand to show that a male–female mix exists in the very tissue of every individual, and on the other to foreground codes of femininity, of which bound feet were for a long time the most extreme symbol. Some have tried to idealize it by invoking a legend that tells of a prince who so loved a young woman that he wished to keep her just for himself and had not found any other way but to have her feet bound, that is, to tie her to him to protect her from the outside world. In our day Chinese women still undergo symbolic imprisonment of their being and their body, even in motherhood.

This last aspect fascinates Ma Liuming. In a series of large-scale paintings entitled 'Baby' (2001–2) and all with different numbers, he showed himself as a sort of mutant with an outsize head, an ageless being from outer space, half child half adult, half man half woman, sucking the breast of an imaginary mother, sitting up like a baby or lying in the position of an infant about to have its nappy changed (Figure 2). Women's position in China is based on codes that throw a particular light on the very notion of maternal instinct, since many girl babies are still being abandoned, mainly outside the towns, with boy children still being favoured. Unwittingly, the latter have concentrated in them female and male, man and woman. Family planning grants men a status; sons have all the rights since they are supposed to care for

the aged parents; they are patriarchs in embryo. By contrast, their sex can immediately present girls with a risk of death. Boys have all the power, men's and women's. And so androgyny exists fundamentally, unconsciously, in a society that is nevertheless very macho. In addition children, who bear enormous responsibilities towards their family, are asked to be adults before being children, which Ma Liuming expresses too in his strange canvases with their pinkish tints (normally connoting female), that are sham idyllic and have a plastic ambiguity since they also look like photos. In the 'baby' series Ma Liuming is trying to rehabilitate both the female and gender confusion: not only does he show a suckling infant, he places a question mark over the sexual identity of the character, who stares at the viewers and demands their attention.

Of course he is not the only one to tackle these subjects, which young women artists treat in a more personal way. This is the case for Chen Lingnyang, who goes further back and refers to questions around birth. She took photos of herself, of her most female part, during her menstrual period, and called them: '12 months in flowers' (2001). The photos, which are never shocking but rather poetic, and are achieved using mirrors, with a reflected image, are each given the sign of a flower (orchid, camellia, peony) which accompanies them and gives its name to the twelve chapters. In this way Chen Lingyang turns the defilement connected with menstruation into poetry, but a poetry that also refers to the problematic and restricted motherhood of women in China. She paints a portrait of private femaleness, of the pain of the women who cannot bear children as they wish.

Ma Liuming in his own way helps women to reveal themselves as women, to speak out about their femaleness, but he is more in the 'demonstrative' area and tries to identify certain types of oppression imposed on both women and men, because the latter are indirectly victims, as they are everywhere else, of the divisions between the sexes that they still encourage. Ma Liuming is rebelling against a situation, a vision, which he contrasts with the primal harmony between the sexes symbolized by the androgyne, to whom he does not hesitate to lend his own features. This is why his performances should be seen from two angles. On one hand they are attempts to return to the primal androgyny, to revive a mythology of origins which the grand scenes of his progress along the Great Wall provide with a kind of ideal, timeless screen; on the other hand they are a reflection on gender and sexual difference, which structure Chinese society in a crucial way.

Ma Liuming's 'babies' in their atmosphere of sadness have to remain sexually indeterminate. These ambiguous works are linked, complementary to the perform-



Figure 2. Single painting from the series 'Baby' (2001–2).

ances and photos which cannot allow us to forget the artist's biological sex: in them he appears naked, fostering paradox. He comes on with his long hair, his youthful body, his angelic face and suddenly takes off his clothes, so contrasting appearance with reality. In any case the androgyny he cultivates for artistic and aesthetic ends is present in Chinese men, whose virility includes the female even while it rejects women. It is one of the contradictions in Chinese society, which is also finding it difficult to challenge coercive sexual models. However, many artists have started to reject them in order to explore new avenues, new codes, through which women will be able to achieve greater dignity and the female will assume a certain prestige.

Anne Lettrée with Nicole G. Albert
Paris

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell