

Blood and Hair: Human bodily materials in the works of Wenda Gu

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Introduction

The employment of “body” in art emerged as an experimental category in China in the 1980s. It was a radical response to the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s, when society was forced to abandon and renounce its then existing culture, leaving only traces to redevelop a new artistic culture. Influence from the West brought Chinese art from strict socialist realism to conceptual practices and modernist experimentations. Later, bodily materials became the medium of body art, and opened a new form of art in the socio-political field (Zhou, 2015).

Wenda Gu, a contemporary Chinese artist and pioneer, inspired by the United Nations and the utopian goal of human unification, remarks how he was encouraged to explore and reestablish cultural identity in the global community. Gu viewed human body materials as “highly charged with cultural and political significance and taboos”, containing “enormous myths and meanings” (Zhou, 2015, p. 93). Through examining examples of the artist’s artwork, this essay explores how Gu’s manipulation of human bodily materials convey subtle and powerful messages about gender, sexuality, class, age, religion, and cultural identity and promote Gu’s controversial ideologies.

Oedipus Refound: The Origins of Death

Among Gu's well-known controversial creations, *The Enigma of Blood* in the Oedipus Refound series (2004, Figure 1) immediately catches one's attention. The work dates back to 1989 and was declared by Gu as depicting "the physical cycles of conception, birth and death" (Lutfy, 1996, p. 49). The exhibition consisted of 500 used menstrual tampons and napkins from sixty women from sixteen countries that were placed in glass coffins, each with proclamations taken from their woman donators. In this artwork, Gu incorporated and transited ideologies from the East to the West with the use of a prominent taboo, as he explored the beginning of life and death through a woman's lower stratum. While menstruation and menstrual blood might be deemed a taboo or topic to explore and discuss in the West, the theme of menstruation continues to be hidden with superstitions in the East. For example, some Chinese associate menstrual blood with pain and death, believing will bring misfortune to anyone in contact with it (Sridhar, 2016).

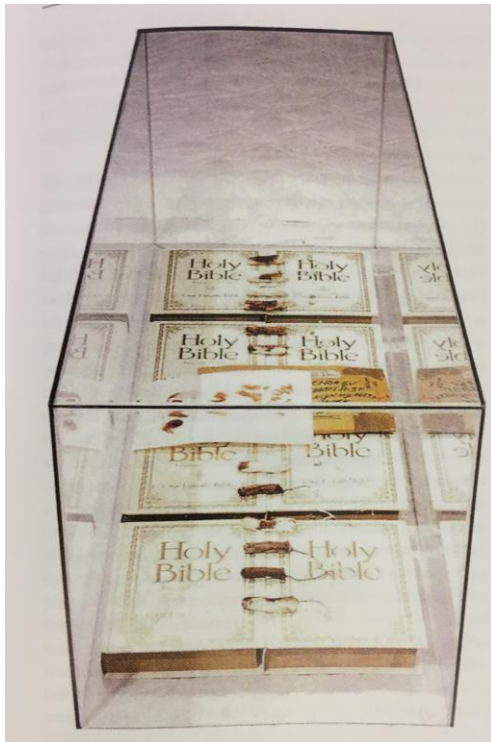


Figure 1: Gu Wenda, The Enigma of Blood (2004). Four glass boxes containing menstrual blood (Zhou, 2015, p. 95).

Gu's menstrual art in *The Enigma of Blood* evoked much controversy as it touched upon an extremely sensitive area in both Eastern and Western societies. It became a battleground of contemporary ideology and politics. According to a Sing Tao Daily journalist, Chen Huiying, the use of menstrual blood was unsettling to the public; the art produced a sense of discomfort for female viewers as it promoted the use of extremely private parts (Zhou, 2015). Consequently, looking at it seemed to be a glance into the privacy of other women. For men, the work was disturbing since, traditionally, menstrual blood was completely alienated from their everyday life. Instead of observing the proclamation written by the female donors, most men avoided the artwork. With respect to these responses, Zhou (2015) a Chinese contemporary art critic, argued that the "analysis of materials" in *The Enigma of Blood* proved to be an "analysis of culture" (p. 91). Instead of being received as an ordinary component of humanity's biological composition, the menstrual blood was rather construed as a man-made symbol of religion and culture. This is furthermore demonstrated in that the exhibition was rejected by many museums due to its "disturbing nature" (Li, 2008, p. 47). The menstrual blood challenges the viewers' courage to see what society endeavors to sublimate on our thoughts and beliefs. However, the seemingly negative reactions are evidence of humanity's failure to rid themselves of the denigration of the human body.

Moreover, the installation glass offered only a single lane of communication between the viewer and the artworks (Zhang, 2015). As seen in Figure 1, one could examine the menstrual blood through the glass, while the odor could not be detected. Gu attempted to immediately challenge the eyes of the viewer, yet he also distanced the blood from the subject with a transparent wall. The metaphorical meaning of menstrual blood was weakened as a result. Still, he succeeded in displaying what society has endeavored to oppress, hide or deny regarding the fetishism for the origins of life.

Oedipus Refound: The Origins of Life

Gu produced another contentious art piece utilizing corporeal materials with significant effect. While *The Enigma of Blood* utilized menstrual blood and emphasized the termination of life, *The Myth of Birth Materials* (1993, Figure 2) implied the aftermath of pregnancy and explores the birth of potential life. In this work, the placenta, and placenta powder in particular, was used to narrate Gu's concern with the polarized cultures of the United States and China. Specifically, whereas the released placenta was typically disposed of in the former, it was kept as a tonic medicine in the latter (Wang, Chen, & Xie, 1999).



Figure 2: Enigma of Birth in jars series from Oedipus Refound series, New York, USA, 1993 (Gu, 1993).

The work consisted of four jars of dried, powdered human placenta, classified as normal, abnormal, aborted and stillborn babies. Compared with the former artworks, this installation seems to be more minimalist with regards to the environment and appearance, perhaps marking a significant moment of emotional revelation for the artist. Gu, inspired by the Oedipus's story of man's knowledge and ignorance, attempted to reflect his reading in his work through the guise of sexuality and taboos (Angel, 2004). Unlike his menstrual piece, which generated hostility between the East and West, *The Myth of Birth Materials* was considered differently in the two regions. In the West, the audience felt puzzled and uncomfortable with the displays containing placenta. However, in the East, especially China and Korea, viewers might have disregarded the use of placenta as it has been used in tonic medicine for centuries (Wang et al., 1999).

Infused with personal and emotional experience of the consciousness of each woman and infant, the artistic work made of placenta as seen in Figure 2 presents an excellent cultural and geographic opportunity for Gu to interact with people. Referring to the Duchampian notion of the “ready-made”, each physical object has its own meaning beyond the visual, and the meaning of human bodily substances reminds one of oneself, thus relating to all humanity (Evnine, 2013, p. 407). However, according to art critic Bessire (2003), the universal significance of these bodily materials supersedes their connection of the individuals from which they were derived. Specifically, when looking at the artworks, viewers did not envision the individuals who donated the placenta. With the absence of the originating body, the bodily materials were presented rather as media from nature. Perhaps Gu was aware of this significance and hence, he deemphasized individuals to highlight the universal meaning of the bodily materials. With this in mind, Gu made statements on the anthropological meaning of different cultures and racial identities in his works. For example, art historian Elinor Gadon’s (1991) interpretation of the Oedipus Refound series seems to reflect Bessire’s claim:

“My own analysis of the symbols suggest that the earliest rituals may have honored women’s menstruation... perhaps only a man outside the gender polemics of Western culture could transform the symbolism of the menstruation into a universal statement about the sanctity of life” (para 3).

The possession of universality by getting rid of individuality encourages debate around Gu’s work, turning such phenomena as placenta and menstruation into totems that can “transcend the potential narrow-mindedness of human consciousness” (Bessire, 2003, p. 19).

Gu’s *The Myth of Birth Materials* directly confronted a new challenging cultural environment, so some would describe it as “resistance” (Zhou, 2015, p. 123). With an extensive background of Christianity and Catholicism, the Western society approached it, justifiably, in a hostile and resistant manner. The religious influence that has ruled over the West for decades, rather than the socialist ideology, caused such response. The provocation of a cultural controversy nevertheless emphasizes the theme of the conflict between knowledge and ignorance in the story of Oedipus.

United Nations - Poland Monument: Hospitalized History Museum

The controversy regarding Gu's artwork did not end after the Oedipus Refound series and continued in the early works of the United Nations project in 1993 with *Poland Monument: Hospitalized History Museum* (1993, Figure 3). The installation featured white sheets and metal beds taken from a local psychiatric institution. Hair cuttings collected from barbershops was mingled around the room, serving to evoke memories of the Nazi Holocaust (Zhang, 2015). In this artwork, the scattered hair and the repulsive atmosphere were supposedly not directed at Poland but intended to highlight how our historical backgrounds were built upon mentally ill individuals (Mehugh, 1997). However, unlike his former artworks, the installment lasted only for a day; it was closed immediately by the Jewish community in Lodz.



*Figure 3: United Nations—
Poland Monument:
Hospitalized History
Museum, Lodz, Poland,
1993.(Zhang, 2015, p. 96).*

The installation reminded viewers of the lives throughout the Holocaust as the human hair spread across the hospital-like museum provoked visuals of the heads and bodies of the massacred during the Nazi period (Zhang, 2015). Gu attempted to challenge post-Nazi victims to see whether they had courage to face the memories aroused by the hair, and to what extent the audience could tolerate the oppressive feelings induced by the installment in the social, political and symbolical realms.

The shorn hair exhibited in the Polish monument also forces us to re-evaluate our body parts. It has often been said in Chinese that “toufa chang, jianshi duan (頭髮長見識短)”, which means those who have long hair have short vision. This captures the insignificant status of hair for our body when compared with other significant parts of our head, such as the eyes, which generate knowledge and wisdom; hair adds nothing to our head but consumes energy like a parasite. The viewpoint is similar in Western societies and has been symbolically described by theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, p. 21): Sweat, hair, urine etc. are regarded as “the lower bodily stratum”, whereas the head and eyes are part of “the higher bodily stratum”. Viewed in this light, Gu’s utilization of hair and menstrual blood in his installations acquired an appropriated focal point: He attempted to make us reconsider our relations with “the lower bodily stratum” and “the higher bodily stratum”. It is these fundamental bodily materials that break apart the boundaries between ourselves and in his words, “deconstructs and abstracts the human bodily materials from the normal system of the body” (Bianpoen, 2003, p. 10). Ultimately, this rebellious spirit displayed in the materials and themes of Gu’s art has been expressed throughout his United Nation series to construct a utopia free from all boundaries and demarcations.

Metamorphoses: Manipulation of Hair as an Ideology

Besides the large-scale monuments installed in exhibitions, Gu has also produced smaller independent works made of elements of human hair to express his political agendas. One such work was *Metamorphoses* (2004, Figure 4), consisting of three large suspended panels bearing unreadable letters fashioned out of human hair, a material common to all human beings but not usually stumbled across in the work of art. Cheng (1987), an art critic, argues that through the manipulation of human hair, Gu abandoned the traditional artistic representation of ink as a medium to create art. Zhou (2015) also states the art displayed becomes a mirror of the “subject” as the use of human bodily materials does not create any visual illusions; as a result, the beholders would “encounter” themselves and appreciate the art internally rather than externally” (p. 144). In contrast, non-human materials such as ink act as a gap that obscures the reality between the audience and art.



Figure 4: Gu Wenda, Metamorphoses (2004), three panels, each 2 x 1.2m (Cateforis, 2008, p. 10).



Figure 5: Gu Wenda, Detail of Metamorphoses, right panel. Photo by Robert Hickerson (2004) (Cateforis, 2008, p. 21).

A sense of revulsion is induced when a close-up scale of *Metamorphoses* is shown to inspect the glue-stiffened strands of hair (Figure 5). In most cultures, hair is seen as an attractive feature on the human body but disgusting when detached from the body. Philosophers Kristeva and Roudiez (1982) indicate that hair, along with other corporal waste objects created from the body, is abject because it is “something rejected from which one does not “part” but psychologically linked to the body that formed it” (p. 19). Hence, the boundary between an individual and the rejected object disrupts our mentality to maintain a secure sense of materiality. As stated by Gu in an interview, the overall reaction to his work ranged from repulsion to puzzling enquiries and eventually, “it is us” (Bianpoen, 2003, p. 30). Thus the artwork opens enigmatic complexes from looking outside the objective universe to looking into an abject form of “ourselves.” In *Metamorphoses*, the blended hair that constituted the pseudo-scripts was made to evoke the possibility of human unification through biological means. Likewise, the miswritten languages symbolize misunderstanding as our basis of knowledge concerning the material world (Zhou, 2015).

Additionally, hair is a signifier of individuality, a corporal material composed of an individual’s distinct DNA identities. Unlike traditional ink from charcoal powder, hair serves as a cultural signifier throughout history. It is believed to be spiritually linked to the person who produced it, particularly in Victorian jewelries or Japanese Buddhist embroideries (Cateforis, 2008). Unlike non-human materials, biological substances contain cultural and political significance of each individual (Gu, 2003, as cited in Zhou, 2015). Hence, Gu’s use of hair could be seen as an extension of the boundaries of arts to generate more ideas open to interpretation. Consequently, it could also encourage interaction with the audience, as the appreciation of art becomes more active and stimulating.

Overall, the utilization of hair in *Metamorphoses* encouraged the audience to discover their common grounds in humanity with others; rather than existing as a distanced, passive object to be judged, the artwork attained subjectivity. Modern Chinese literature professor Zhang (2015) also states that the strive for harmony while utilizing human hair is unquestionably the

greatest element integrated into Gu's artworks. Zhang notes that along with the presence of those evocative and suggestive writings, this silent persona of hair attempted to interact directly with the audience. Hence, it can be concluded that the utopian goal of human unification Gu attempted to establish was a new form of embodiment and communication connecting life, body and knowledge.

Wenda Gu's use of human bodily materials undoubtedly generates a novel interaction between the audience and his controversial artworks. This interaction is characterized by the elimination of visual illusions created by artificial materials that extended the space of interpretation, and the emotional connections with the audience through transforming body parts into universal truths. Along these lines, the artworks ultimately lead us to re-examine our human anatomy and existence beyond issues of religion and society. I believe it is a courageous act to build a utopia opposing the modern internationalized world as these ideas elicit contemporary debates and criticism. Nonetheless, the use of body materials became an understandable and necessary phase for his synthesis of culture. For these reasons, it can be concluded that the use of human bodily materials encompasses a large role in conveying the provocative ideas of Wenda Gu.

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