



Silent Hunter

Golboo Amani asks Chun Hua Catherine Dong about compliance and aggression in *Husbands and I*.

"Art is only thing I want to stay true to.
Art is only thing I can never betray."



Golboo: When you talk about your own practice you talk about your body as a place of disturbance and as a place for examination. How does silence play in to this?

Chun Hua Catherine: Silence plays a very important role in my performances. Because of language barriers, I often feel more comfortable listening than speaking. That is why I prefer to use actions rather than words to speak out. My silent actions do not speak to the silencing of people, but rather to the idea that silence is a sound that needs to be heard. Silence is meditation that needs to be read, a "ding," a sound to catch attention, a way of making things public, bringing shadow to light and stimulating public reflection and debate about the key issues of our time. Silence is the intervention of a crowd that needs to be seen. Silent doesn't mean voiceless; if we don't speak out, it doesn't mean we don't care. Actually, this silent group of people is what I call the Silent Participant. It is

a term used to describe Asians living in the West who are often accused of having no opinions, of being indifferent to politics and sticking to their own ethnic groups. The silent participants are groups of visible minorities, often invisible but needing to be understood. I often think my art is political. In *Husbands and I*, do the participants know the work that you are doing? How do you approach these people and ask them for their photograph?

The *Husbands and I* project started last year. I wear my traditional Chinese dress and ask white males walking down streets to pose for a photo with me. Normally I don't explain much about the work, but when they ask, I explain more. It is not that I don't want to explain much to them, it is that they are too busy to listen. I approach these men with a smile, and say, "Excuse me, can I have a photo with you?" Eight or nine out of ten men will say yes. If they are a little hesitant, I introduce myself

and my photography and inform them that this is part of an art project that explores intimacy between two strangers in public space. After we take the photos, I ask them to leave an email address in order to be mailed a copy of photos. Some people give me their email address, some don't. Those who do receive their photos with a thank you letter, asking them to visit my blog if they want to know more about the project and me. I haven't got any offensive emails yet. I guess they are happy about the photos. Sometimes I felt like I had taken advantage of them, but when you look at the photos, they all have smiles on their faces, they enjoyed the moment we spent together. My actions are silent, subversive and sweet, but I regard it as another way of attacking. I use honey to kill more flies, rather than a fly-swatter which often causes frustration and anger. That was me before, an angry silent participant, but now I changed my strategy. I catch

them, play them, challenge them, and mock the culture and morality that empowers them. I am the hunter, but I perform like the prey.

What inspired this piece?

It is my own experience as an immigrant that inspired me to do this performance. I came to Canada eight years ago; being a so-called Third World woman, I didn't have much freedom to choose how and where I wanted to live. I see marriage as a way of fulfilling the yearning for change. I regarded the whole process of immigration like a marriage, and myself like a mail order bride. I married Canada, suddenly transforming myself from Chinese to Canadian or Chinese-Canadian. Yet, my Canadian national identity is not constructed by Canadian culture—its history or this beautiful landscape—it is constructed by the white males who are around me. Privileged white males have such symbolic meaning; they are a status, they are the majority, they are in power, and they are the ones that control politics and the economy. The white males in this performance are very important. An Asian young woman posing herself beside these white males, I seem to perfectly fit within the stereotypes.

But you've also taken this project to a new level, with an advertisement.

Yes, I have advertised myself. In a way

it is still part of the *Husbands and I*, but a little bit different. I moved from exploring intimacy between two strangers in public spaces to an exploration of intimacy in their private space. I advertise myself as an exotic, compliant and artistic Asian girl looking for A WHITE HUSBAND, who would like to take me to his home for a day as his mail order bride. A couple of days ago I went downtown, still wearing the traditional red Chinese dress, and handed my advertising postcards to various white males. It was so interesting to watch their reactions. Some people asked me if it was for real, some people looked at me from head to toe with surprise, most people turned their heads staring at me with strange smiles. The best reaction I received that day was from a man named Andrew. He gifted back the post card I gave him, having written a message on the back, "You are too beautiful, too nice and too good to sell yourself for anything!" He included his email and phone number.

So that compliant exotic woman that you're advertising, is that you? The real you?

I think exotic is a good word to describe myself for this project. I advertised myself through the white male's point of view. I was a compliant traditional Asian woman. I think I am still like that in a certain way; it is part of who I am, but I'm also constantly seeking

a new self. I consider myself a binary system, a contradictory alliance, but I don't deliberately try to find balance between the two poles. Sometimes I just let them fight with each other, as if I am on the outside watching the battle. I think it is the struggle that makes me so real, so true. Not only to myself, but to my art and to people around me.

Chun Hua Catherine Dong is a multimedia artist working in performance, video and interactive installations. She is interested in how performance blurs boundaries between normal and abnormal behaviors in our everyday lives, and how new media technologies move from the desktop to the body to provide an invitation to free performance from traditional experience. chunhuacatherinedong.wordpress.com

Golboo Amani, a graduate of Emily Carr University, is an interdisciplinary artist working with photography, installation, and performance. With a focus on process and research, her practice fits within the discourse of knowledge production and distribution, using the Internet and search engine results to highlight ways in which language and gestures become dominant tools of informing and imagining the world.



Above: *Silent Participant* (2010). Dong invited viewers to search her with a boom microphone. Sensors embedded in flowers on her dress created sharp noises on contact.