

# Chen Zhen

## *Short-circuits*



## Chen Zhen *Short-circuits*

15 October 2020 – 21 February 2021

Curated by Vicente Todolí

### Cultural Mediation

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### Public Program

The exhibition is accompanied by a series of events that allow visitors to learn more about some of the themes of the show and of Chen Zhen's work:

**November 5, 2020 and January 14, 2021** | Activation of the artwork

*Jue Chang, Dancing Body – Drumming Mind (The Last Song)*, 2000  
with a dance and percussion performance

**November 26, 2020** | Itinerant lecture inside the exhibition  
with Marco Scotini, curator

**December 10, 2020** | Digital conversation between Alexandra Munroe,  
curator and art historian, and Vicente Todolí

During the exhibition, audio, video and text contents around the show  
and the Public Program will be available to the public.

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## Chen Zhen

Chen Zhen (Shanghai, 1955 – Paris, 2000) is one of the major figures of the art scene to have overcome the diversity between Eastern and Western aesthetics since the late 1980s, influencing an entire generation of artists. Born in Shanghai in the mid-1950s, he was raised in a family of doctors living in the city's French Concession neighborhood during the Cultural Revolution in China. Chen Zhen graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Shanghai School of Fine Arts and Crafts in 1973 and, few years later, in 1978, studied at the Shanghai Drama Institute where he specialized in set design and became a lecturer in 1982.



Chen Zhen in  
Pourrières, 1990

In 1986 the artist moved to Paris, France, where he remained for most of his life. There he furthered his studies, first at the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts*, and, in 1989, at the *Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques*, where he worked as an assistant professor

from 1993. His decision to settle in France was a major challenge for Chen Zhen, as he faced financial problems and a culture shock that would have a profound impact on his production.

In this context, his practice, which was initially oriented towards painting, progressively developed towards the creation of installations. Combining objects from everyday life, such as beds, chairs, tables and cradles,

Chen Zhen brought life to compositions that divest these elements of their original function. An emblematic work is *Un monde accroché / détaché* (1990), made of 99 found objects of daily use, which Chen Zhen hung on branches and tree trunks in a scorched forest as part of the historic exhibition “Chine demain pour hier” in Pourrières, France. From when he arrived in Paris—where he lived until 2000, the year he died—Chen Zhen often challenged himself to find a visual synthesis that would transcend linguistic and cultural specificities, uniting his training with his life and work experience in different cities and contexts (Shanghai, Paris and New York).

Chen Zhen's artistic poetics, which ranged from international politics to a more intimate and personal view of human life, organically integrates the aesthetic of his homeland with those of the places with which he came in contact. From this perspective, a key concept to understand his artistic practice is that of *transexperiences*. The term, coined by Chen Zhen himself, «effectively and profoundly synthesizes the different experiences lived through when you leave the land of your birth and move from one place to another.» This idea, which reflects Chen Zhen's way of living and practice—distinguished by the fluid and constant shifts between Eastern and Western thought—is a condition of existence, an artistic concept. In his own words, it refers «to the fact of immersing oneself in life, of merging and identifying with others. [...] Today, as the 21st century dawns, I believe that art will be able to reveal its greatest vigor in the intertwining of contacts, exchanges, misunderstandings and conflicts between one people and another, people and society, people and mother nature, people and science and technology, one continent and another, one ethnic group and another.»

Chen Zhen's oeuvre was marked by his personal suffering from an autoimmune disease: at 25 he was diagnosed with a form of hemolytic anemia. Struck by the news, he spent three months in Tibet sharing with monks a simple



*Un monde accroché / détaché*, 1990  
Found objects  
1000 m<sup>2</sup> approx.  
Installation view,  
Pourrières, 1990  
Courtesy GALLERIA  
CONTINUA  
Photo Chen Zhen

lifestyle, free from the need of material possessions. This experience, which deepened his perception of the value of time, led him to focus his research on the different approaches of Eastern and Western medicine. His renewed awareness of the human body emerges in several works that investigate the body's physical elements, including internal organs, and it is reflected in his words: «As an artist, my dream is to become a doctor. Making art is about looking at yourself, examining yourself and how you see the world.» The assimilation of this condition as an integral part of his being comes forth in his works through themes such as voluntary exile and traditional

Chinese medicine as a metaphor for the controversial and at times paradoxical interdependence between interiority and externality, and between the individual and the community.

A reflection on the complexity of the global scene during the closing years of the 20th century—when the concepts of globalization and multiculturalism began to emerge—lies at the heart of one of Chen Zhen's most iconic works, *Joe Chang – Fifty Strokes to Each* (1998), presented at the 1999 Venice Biennale curated by Harald Szeemann. For this installation, the artist created huge “drums” that recall an ancient Chinese musical instrument. On several occasions the work has been animated by collective action: a group of Tibetan monks was invited to sing peace prayers, while the audience was encouraged to interact with the installation and to play percussions. Another outstanding work is the installation *Precipitous Parturition* (1999) with which Chen Zhen participated in “Cities on the Move,” a large traveling group exhibition curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist that reflected on the urbanization of Asian metropolises. Chen Zhen's work, composed of hundreds of bicycle wheels

and inner tubes, reminds of a 20-meter-long dragon, whose belly is covered with black plastic toy cars. As with other installations, in *Precipitous Parturition* the artist uses physical and bodily processes as a metaphor for historical change: the transformation of Chinese industry, which has made a strong surge towards creating a global economy, leaving behind its traditional craft production. Like this installation, which demonstrates the artist's strong sensitivity to the formal aspect and physical dimension of the artwork, Chen Zhen's works touch on profound aspects linked to humanity and the contradictions of contemporary society's values.

*Precipitous Parturition*,  
1999  
Installation view,  
Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York, 2018  
© Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York  
Photo David Heald



# The Exhibition

“Short-circuits” is conceived as an immersive exploration of Chen Zhen’s artistic research and brings together more than 20 large installations realized between 1991 and 2000. The exhibition presents works created by assembling everyday objects, like beds, chairs, newspapers and clothes, with assorted materials, such as wood, clay, water, fabrics and glass, thereby displaying Chen Zhen’s personal vision of the human experience in all its complexity.



*Fu Dao / Fu Dao, Upside-down Buddha / Arrival at Good Fortune, 1997 (detail)*  
Metal, bamboo, Buddha statues, found objects  
500 x 800 x 650 cm approx.  
Courtesy GALLERIA CONTINUA

papers and clothes, with assorted materials, such as wood, clay, water, fabrics and glass, thereby displaying Chen Zhen’s personal vision of the human experience in all its complexity.

The title “Short-circuits”—a concept on which Chen Zhen based his creative method—is a reference to the many interpretations that arise from the encounters of ideas with juxtaposed elements in the artist’s works, such as tradition and modernity, center and periphery, spirituality and consumerism.

The heterogeneity of contexts distinctive of Chen Zhen’s practice is brought to life within the Navate at Pirelli HangarBicocca, where a wide selection of his works is featured. “Short-circuit,” “transexperiences” and “in situ” were important expressions and concepts to the artist and they guide the visitor through the exhibition narrative. The unprecedented dialogue created among the installations in the show emphasizes the topical nature of the themes explored by Chen Zhen, activating new connections between the works.

## 1 *Jue Chang, Dancing Body – Drumming Mind (The Last Song), 2000*

The monumental installation is composed of beds, chairs and stools whose surfaces are covered in cowhide. The complex composition, which suggests a large percussion instrument, spans through an area measuring 18 x 14 meters. Created by Chen Zhen using elements from different places and contexts, it forms what he called a “relational installation” expressing his interest in the transformation processes that underlie the relations between both objects and people. Connected to the care we take of our body and spirit, *Jue Chang, Dancing Body – Drumming Mind (The Last Song)* can be activated by dancers who brush their hands across and drum on the leather surfaces, resembling the movements used in Chinese massage.

*Jue Chang, Dancing Body – Drumming Mind (The Last Song), 2000*  
Beds, chairs, cowhide, wood, metal, string, rope  
244 x 1800 x 1400 cm  
Courtesy PINAULT COLLECTION  
Photo Ela Bialkowska



The work is among the few realized by the artist that have a performative approach and, as evoked in the title, the human body is an essential element. The sound produced is closely linked to an action inherent to an individual and spiritual dimension.

## 2 *Éruption future*, 1992

*Éruption future*, 1992  
Bauxite (20 t), aluminum bathtub, water, light box, aluminum bar (1 t), aluminum objects  
120 × 800 × 1500 cm approx.  
Private collection, Paris  
Photo Éric Angels

Presented at Pirelli HangarBicocca for the first time since 1992, this work was originally conceived for Chen Zhen's solo exhibition at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. It consists of an aluminum block weighing 1 ton, alongside a container filled with water and with several objects of the same material as well as a lightbox featuring the image of metallic wastes before being transformed through a melting process. The three elements are positioned in a crater formed by 20 tons of bauxite that Chen Zhen found in an soon-to-be



closed bauxite mine. *Éruption future* is emblematic of the artist's reflections on the cyclical transformation of objects, it «describes the back-and-forth of industrial products in relation to their natural source. It is from this reddish crater that they come, and to it that they return. The “withdrawal” of the object is part and parcel of an ongoing cycle of birth, experience and death.»

## 3 *La Voie du sommeil – Sleeping Tao*, 1992

Presented at MAGASIN – Centre national d'art contemporain de Grenoble in 1992, the installation is formed of metal bed-like structures. Their composition is a reference to the *kang*, a traditional oven-bed used in the North of China that has an upper surface heated by coal during the winter months, on which the body lies. On top of each structure, the artist placed three lightboxes that show mountains of waste evocative of rocky landscapes, ironically hinting at an environment that is anything but natural. As Chen Zhen commented, the installation appears as «a sort of therapeutic “meditation wall” that symbolizes the three phases of Taoism: the cyclical mutation of matter, the importance of belief, the redeeming power of memory» (these three expressions are shown on each lightbox). The work includes several everyday objects—such as stoves, books and metal objects, each type placed respectively in the three structures—which seem to imply the presence of man, whose body is alluded to by the idea of empty beds. The strong red light creates a profound, meditative atmosphere, recalling fire and contrasting with the white light in the three lightboxes. In *La Voie du sommeil – Sleeping Tao*, Chen Zhen investigates

the relationship between desire, consumer society, and nature reflecting on the complexity of the global scenario at the end of the 20th century.

#### **4** *Perseverance of Regeneration, 1999*

Focusing on his investigation into the relationship between nature and the consumer-based dynamics of global society, in this work Chen Zhen presents a wrecked car whose body, invaded by thousands of toy cars, symbolizes the fast-moving and relentless changes that took place in China during the last decades of the 20th century. *Perseverance of Regeneration* places emphasis on the artist's concerns regarding the environmental threat originated by the growing mass-production and the exploitation of the planet's resources.

The elements employed in this work also convey a central concept in Chen Zhen's practice, that of the "after-object": in the artist's opinion, objects are inextricably linked to processes of information and promotion. By choosing manufactured goods that are often ordinary or dismissed, Chen Zhen attempts to rise above the dematerialization in contemporary society, and to give the object a new material nature by relating it to different contexts and meanings.

#### **5** *Fu Dao / Fu Dao, Upside-down Buddha / Arrival at Good Fortune, 1997*

Through his practice, Chen Zhen ponders on the contradictions of life in China, where an increasingly consumer lifestyle exists alongside religious traditions (such as Buddhism), and the aspiration for detachment from material goods. This installation takes the form of a Buddhist temple; the metal structure approximately 3 meters high provides support for dense bamboo branches on which everyday objects are hung, such as car parts, a bicycle, and electronic elements. The work has its origin in an intuition that the artist had in a restaurant in Shanghai: having seen the sign of the term *fu* (happiness, good fortune) upside-down, Chen Zhen realized that the ideograms of *fu dao* (fortune upside-down) are homophonous with those of *fu dao* (the arrival of good fortune). The double connotation, which also means "upside-down Buddha," was literally interpreted by the artist who included in the work a number of overturned figurines of the Buddha.

Like other works in the exhibition, the installation expands on an immersive scale, encompassing the presence of the visitor, who is invited to pass through it. *Fu Dao / Fu Dao, Upside-down Buddha / Arrival at Good Fortune* thus subverts the spatial categories of top and bottom, thereby alluding to the proliferation of products and the values related to the contemporary world.

#### **6** *Le Produit naturel / Le Produit artificiel, 1991*

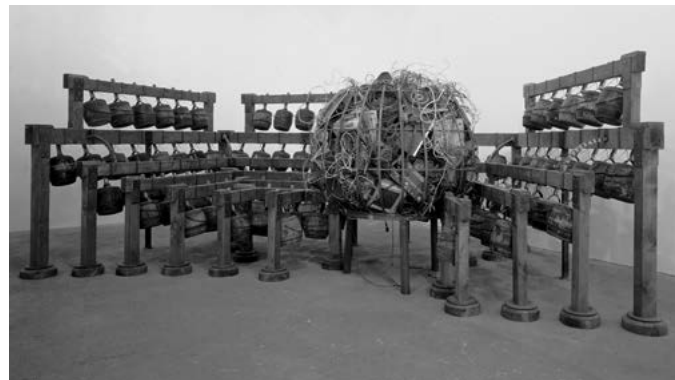
The work is formed by a metal cuboid in which 1,400 red plastic roses are planted, whose stems are embedded in



2 cubic meters of cow dung on the other side of the structure. This work highlights the constant dyad of nature and product recurrent in Chen Zhen's work, emphasizing the relationship between the idea of beauty embodied by the flowers and the artificiality of the material of which they are made, hinting at the contradictory concept of value pursued by society. The object is emblematic of what meanings and intentions are attributed to. Commenting on the ready-made, Chen Zhen said: «My work conveys a union, a meeting between natural materials and found objects. It is not just a question of inserting objects in institutional contexts, but of stimulating a sympathetic relationship with them.»

## 7 *Daily Incantations*, 1996

*Daily Incantations* is composed of 101 chamber pots arranged in rows on a large semi-circular wooden structure that resembles an ancient Chinese musical instrument called *bianzhong*. Signifying the allegory of the modern world and the waste that it produces, at its center the structure has a large sphere made from curved metal bars, that contains electric wires and parts of electronic devices. The idea of the work originated during one of the first trips the artist made back to Shanghai in 1996, after spending a number of years in the West, when one day at dawn he came across several women washing chamber pots close to one of the city's well-known hotels. This image appeared familiar to Chen Zhen in connection with his experience as a schoolboy, and he associated this repetitive job with the reading of Mao's *Little Red Book*, which was a significant part of his life at that time. According to the artist, this traditional practice, repeated manually each day on an



*Daily Incantations*, 1996  
Installation view, Deitch  
Projects, New York, 1996  
Courtesy GALLERIA  
CONTINUA  
Photo Tom Powell

object—a chamber pot—destined to become obsolete, generates a contradiction with the idea of modern society and its influence on the actions, rhythms, and lifestyles of each individual: «My personal experience during China's Cultural Revolution: every morning, I made my way to school to the sounds of the washing of chamber pots, followed by the communal reading of Mao's *Little Red Book*. It was a sort of double daily incantation founded on the duality between a traditional daily activity and political pressure, even a mental insensibility.»

## 8 *Nightly Imprecations*, 1999

This work creates a visual, sonic, and conceptual counterpoint to *Daily Incantations* (1996). Composed of three parts, the installation alludes to the life of the contemporary man and his relationship with the surrounding environment. At one end is a traditional wooden Chinese bed in which numbered polystyrene balls are whirled in the air by a fan. At the other end, a bed whose mattress



is covered by a yellow sheet is fitted with metal spikes that bring to mind acupuncture curative treatments. The central section of the work features a structure in the form of an inverted pyramid, from which traditional Chinese chamber pots hang. Similar to *Daily Incantations*, *Nightly Imprecations* is characterized by sounds resembling the noise produced by rinsing chamber pots. Both works refer to the cyclical nature of daily life, in which daytime hours are dedicated to productive activities and nighttime hours are devoted to a meditative, suspended dimension.

### **9** *Le Chemin / Le Radeau de l'écriture, 1991*

A section of old railway sleepers, marked with red letters engraved in the wood, lies on a bed of white stones, resembling a raft. Piles of newspapers and used books are compressed between the sleepers to create a dense block of materials. The installation brings together different elements, such as language, and means of both mass communication and transport, which together allude to the industrial transformation and modernization of the contemporary world. The elements of the work symbolize a journey through different cultures, which is a characteristic metaphor in Chen Zhen's profound reflection on his existential condition as a link between the East and West.

### **10** *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body (Serpent), 2000*

This work is one of a set of 12 pieces in which crystal elements representing the primary organs of the human body are displayed on medical tables made of iron and glass. Each element corresponds to a sign of the Chinese zodiac symbolized by an animal. When placed on these "diagnostic tables" like samples for scientific study, the crystal pieces remind a still life composition; they refract the light while also reflecting the surrounding environment, generating an exchange between what is inside the body and what is outside. Chen Zhen's formalization of the body resembles a harmonious landscape in which all components are essential elements of a more complex organism: the fragility and purity of the glass implies an unstable condition which, in the artist's personal experience, relates to his state of health.

### **11** *Lumière Innocente, 1999*

The suspended installation is composed by a child's bed made of iron, wrapped in plastic tubes through which light flows. The title recalls the innocence of life in its embryonic state: the work, characterized by light and transparency, by fluctuating in space appears like a reference point. The plastic tubes—those used in the medical field—are intertwined to create a covering while also evoking the fragility of the human body. The idea of a shell is also present in other works, to depict the osmosis between the interior and exterior, and therefore assimilating the artwork to an organic element.

## 12 *Crystal Gazing*, 1999

Shaped like a large waterdrop, the central element of *Crystal Gazing* is supported by a wooden frame, thus appearing to be in suspension. Inside the composition is a crystal ball enclosing a physiological saline solution that is reminiscent of fragility, diagnosis, and cure.

The black beads in the work are a direct reference to the abacus, the ancient Chinese instrument used to count, and to *fózhū*—Buddhist rosary beads—thereby bringing out the nature of the two opposing but complementary

*Crystal Gazing*, 1999  
Chinese abacus  
beads, Buddhist  
rosary beads,  
wood, metal, glass,  
physiological solution  
250 × 150 × 145 cm  
Private collection  
Photo Maurizio Elia



aspects of existence: the material and the spiritual. By combining objects with strong symbolic values, Chen Zhen hints at the mysterious origin of life to generate new meanings: «A contradictory space of our reality is created, both material and spiritual. Inside this space, a laboratory test-tube filled with physiological saline solution becomes a divinatory crystal ball. This purified transparent core reflects its environment and subverts our perception of reality.»

## 13 *Black Broom*, 2000

Suspended from the ceiling at 4 meters high, this work appears as an over-dimensioned broom. Inserted in the tip of each black tubular element, like the tubes used for drips in hospitals, is a needle that almost touches the floor. If the broom were to be gently swung like a pendulum, the needles would scratch the floor, evoking the inevitability of time. *Black Broom* also hints at vulnerability and illness, prompted by Chen Zhen's own condition: the son of a couple of doctors, in the last years of his life the artist acted on his wish to undertake the same profession aiming at curing the "human spirit."

**14** *My Diary in a Shaker Village, 1996*

**15** *Opening of Closed Center, 1997*

The 27 drawings of *My Diary in a Shaker Village* form the daily diary of the highly significant period experienced by Chen Zhen in July 1996 when he stayed in a Shaker village in Maine, a religious community closely related to Puritan Calvinism. Despite of the proscription on the use of images in Shaker culture, the artist used portraits as a means to build a relationship with the villagers and endeavor to understand their spiritual world. The project relates to Chen Zhen's theoretical concept of "transexperiences" built on three fundamental levels: *residence*, manifested in the relationship with a new place; *resonance*, or the ability to fully enter in relation with this new condition; *resistance*, or to stay faithful to one's original culture.

The drawings were framed and presented for the first time in 1997 together with *Opening of Closed Center* (1997). This second work is a structure in the form of a temple, whose perimeter is bounded by ancient perforated panels taken from Chinese windows. The only opening on the outside gives a glimpse of items of furniture and decorations from both China and the Shaker village: vases, stacked on the ground and suspended to form a sort of altar, surround a wooden rocking chair made by the Shakers that is also suspended.

The work has a sacred atmosphere, and the dialogue with *My Diary in a Shaker Village* that takes place in the exhibition space is a continuation of Chen Zhen's reflection on the relationship between materiality and spirituality, about which he states: «the essential meaning of this experience would be to re-discover the natural quality of

a human being. [...] [*Opening of Closed Center*] interrogates: what is the meaning for contemporary man of "sitting" in such a disturbing world? [...] The idea of "sitting" comes from the Buddhist and Zen tradition: sitting in the "sphere," sitting against the wall, sitting for seeing and thinking nothing.»

**16** *Purification Room, 2000*

The work is a room in which the walls and all the objects are coated with a layer of monochrome clay. Using the organic process of sedimentation, Chen Zhen employs clay, a natural element, as a substance able to purify the world and preserve the present. Conceived in the year of Chen Zhen's passing away, *Purification Room* is the last and most impressive work of a series realized since 1991 with the same technique. As highlighted by Xu Min, the artist's wife and long-life collaborator, with this work Chen Zhen created an aseptic world beneath a layer of earth and dust, whose constituent elements infuse their healing energy through the process of transfusion and the fact of being covered. This theme was a constant presence in the artist's practice, which investigated whether man can be cleansed, and the world purified.

**17** *Round Table, 1995*

Originally exhibited outside the building of the United Nations Office in Geneva, the work is shaped as a large round wooden table with some of the main themes of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights engraved at its

center. To portray the member states, 29 chairs of different type and origin are suspended around the tabletop, and thus lose their original function. With this work Chen Zhen has given concrete form to the central dimension of his poetics concerning everyday objects, which he describes as follows: «The metaphor of the round table was not addressed only to the operational capabilities and the scope of power but also to the various problems of inequality that exist in mankind's development. The round table has two sorts of implications. On the one hand, it comes from the Chinese "festive meal," which infers unity, harmony and dialogue; on the other, it is also connected to international "round tables," which entail discussions, negotiations, political compromises, and power commitments.»

## 18 *Six Roots Enfance / Garçon – Childhood / Boy*, 2000

This work is part of a more complex work of 7 installations that represent 6 allegories. The first part of its title derives from the Buddhist expression "six roots," which indicates the body's sensory abilities: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and knowledge. These skills of perception provide Chen Zhen with a cue to create a metaphor for the different attitudes and temperaments that the individual develops in the phases of life—birth, childhood, conflict, suffering, memory, death, and rebirth—thus investigating some of the contradictory aspects of the human spirit. In particular, to symbolize childhood and youth the artist features the wreck of a boat, overturned and suspended, covered with plastic toy soldiers suggestive of the marine encrustations that form on boat hulls.



*Six Roots Enfance / Garçon – Childhood / Boy*, 2000 (detail)  
Wooden boat, plastic toy soldiers and tanks, metal  
173 × 382 × 150 cm  
Courtesy GALLERIA CONTINUA  
Photo Ela Bialkowska

## 19 *The Voice of Migrators*, 1995

The sphere is a recurrent feature in Chen Zhen's work and often a means to explore questions related to globalization and the transformations inherent in social change. *The Voice of Migrators* appears like a large globe covered with clothes that have been woven and knotted together. Loudspeakers, like "craters" on the surface of the sphere, transmit the experiences of migrants in France in different languages, responding to Chen Zhen's questions about their condition in a foreign country.

Like a sort of mobile archive, the work epitomizes man's presence on Earth in its dimension of geographical and political belonging, and interprets individual identity as part of a universal culture.

## **20** *Le Bureau de change, 1996/2004*

Conceived by Chen Zhen in 1996 and realized in 2004 for the Pančevo Art Biennial in Serbia, the work appears to be a public restroom, a place that was still common in Shanghai until the early 1980s. Chen Zhen uses the architectural features of the space and associates it with a currency exchange office, relating the use of a public toilet with the social connotation of money and financial transactions.

## **21** *Obsession de longévité, 1995*

The installation consists of two environments in which the concept of suffering inherent to life and the desire to prolong it coincide. One section of the installation is a bare bedroom furnished with an acupuncture mattress. This connects via a narrow passage to a room, a kind of laboratory, in which objects and drawings related to traditional Chinese medicine are laid out to suggest an environment whose function is healing. The work expresses Chen Zhen's vision that closely relates artistic creation with healing, relating the function of the artist to that of the doctor.

In Chen Zhen's words, «The work is a combination of an acupuncture bed and a workshop for making talis-

mans, representing a wish to re-establish oneself and for longevity. It is also an encounter between humor, the power/limits of science, and the power of divination/destiny. Buddhists say "to heal yourself, you have to first save others".»

## **22** *Prayer Wheel – "Money Makes the Mare Go" (Chinese Slang), 1997*

The origin of this work dates back to the artist's experience in Tibet, where he spent a few months after learning of his illness. The work looks like a huge paper-lined covering, a refuge, an organically shaped shell accessible to visitors. Inside there is a vertical structure similar to a prayer wheel—a rotating cylinder traditionally used in Tibetan Buddhism—formed here by many Chinese abacuses and calculators. By entering and pushing the prayer wheel, visitors activate the repetitive and obsessive sound of cash machines. Through the circular movement of its structure, the abacus conveys the concepts of spirituality and transformation. Yet as a calculation tool, it gives rotation a different meaning: in a capitalist society, the idea of value takes on a monetary association linked to quantity rather than being an inner condition.

Chen Zhen described the dynamics underlying the work as follows: «*Prayer Wheel* refers to my time in Tibet, where I lived for three months before leaving my country, China. Here, the wheel takes on a new, metaphorical meaning. Capitalism is becoming a global religion, and everyone cultivates the magnificent dream of economic well-being.»

## 23 *Le Rite suspendu / mouillé*, 1991

*Le Rite suspendu / mouillé* consists of 4 large vertical metal structures that form a three-dimensional tableau containing disused objects of different kinds, including old frames collected by the artist during his time at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris, where he studied. As he said: «I collected all the objects I found and immersed them, keeping them hung up, in a mixture of pigment and water, a sort of pictorial medium. I wanted to bring back the invisible forces intrinsic to the place, in order to recall my art school experiences—those in China as well as in France.» The work symbolizes the moment during which Chen Zhen abandoned painting at the time he moved to France, signifying for the artist «a self-portrait, a self-criticism, a self-reflection.»

*Le Rite suspendu / mouillé*, 1991  
Metal, wood, glass,  
Plexiglas, black and  
red acrylic paint,  
red pigment powder,  
water, objects  
280 × 800 × 700 cm  
Private collection,  
Courtesy de Sarthe  
Gallery, Hong Kong  
Photo Ela Bialkowska



## 24 *Jardin-Lavoir*, 2000

Chen Zhen composed a “meditative garden” by turning 11 beds into water containers filled with everyday objects like old television sets, used clothing, cooking implements, books, and children’s toys. Passing through a hydraulic plant, the water drips slowly onto what the artist considers commodities representative of today’s society, thus becoming a symbol of purification. As Chen Zhen explains: «*Jardin-Lavoir* treats water as the spirit of the place by transforming the site into a “garden of purification.” The bed-basins are a metaphor of the human body and the materialization of man’s life. They become a place of perennial washing and natural therapy.»

*Jardin-Lavoir*, 2000  
Beds, metal, wood,  
water, hydraulic system,  
objects  
350 × 2000 × 1800 cm  
approx.  
Courtesy GALLERIA  
CONTINUA  
Photo Nestor Kim



## Selected Exhibitions

Chen Zhen's work has been presented in many renowned institutions, including: Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2015); Musée Guimet, Paris (2010); Mart, Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Rovereto (2008); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2007); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2003–04); PAC – Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea di Milano, Milan (2003); MoMA PS1, New York (2003); Serpentine Gallery, London (2001); GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin (2000); Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb (2000); Cimaïse & Portique, Albi (2000); Tel Aviv Museum of Art (1998); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1994); MAGASIN – Centre national d'art contemporain, Grenoble (1992). He has participated in major group shows, including those at: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao / SFMOMA San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2018); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2017); Yuz Museum, Shanghai (2014); ARC – Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (2009, 2000–01); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2007–08); Fundació Miró, Barcelona (2004); ICA Boston (1998); Palace of Nations, Geneva (1995); Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (1994); The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1993); Couvent des Minimes, Pourrières (1990). Chen Zhen also participated in numerous international events, including: Venice Biennale (2009, 2007, 1999); Guangzhou Triennial (2006); Yokohama Triennale (2005); Valencia Biennale (2003, 2001); Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane (1999–2000); Johannesburg Biennale (1997); Lyon Biennale, Gwangju Biennale (1997); Shanghai Biennale (1996).

This publication accompanies the exhibition “Short-circuits” by Chen Zhen

### Lenders

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