

# Body and Space: The Beijing East Village as a Site of Performance

## Abstract

The 1990s marked an important decade in the evolution of Chinese experimental art (*shiyan yishu*<sup>1</sup>) as well as the emergence of new contemporary art scenes throughout the nation's leading cities. During this time, transitions in China's visual art discourse was mainly catalyzed by the rapid transformations experienced in the social, economic, and political spheres. The city was a prime space for the practice of experimental art, as it housed numerous exhibition bases and leading art academies. However, amidst the rapid urbanization and economic growth in China's major cities, artists had to look to subpar spaces for affordable living. The Beijing East Village, originally named Dashanzhuang, was an impoverished village located on the east fringe of the national capital and became the home for a group of artists from 1992 to 1994. With the exception of Rong Rong<sup>2</sup>, a self-taught photographer, most of the artists were once students at top art academies and entered the village upon "giving up their paintbrushes". They saw the village as both a degenerate counterpart to the vivacious and unaffordable city center and a place of refuge away from a rigidly structured Chinese society. In search of new modes of expression, the Beijing East Village was where the first instances of performance art took place in all of China. These artists worked collectively to realize works that reflected individual experiences within a larger contemporary social context. This paper examines the short-lived Beijing East Village within its socio-political, historical, artistic, and autobiographical contexts, in order to gain insight into emergence of alternative communities in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and during the height of China's urbanization efforts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Research on the contemporary Chinese art scenes during the late eighties and nineties, mainly those happening in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai.

<sup>2</sup> A major source of research came from the detailed photo documentations by Rong Rong and written interviews with the artists of this collective.

<sup>3</sup> Main themes and objectives.