

6-2020

WASHING THE RIVER IN RELATION TO INTERPELLATION, THEATRICALITY AND SPECTATORSHIP

Patricia Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd>



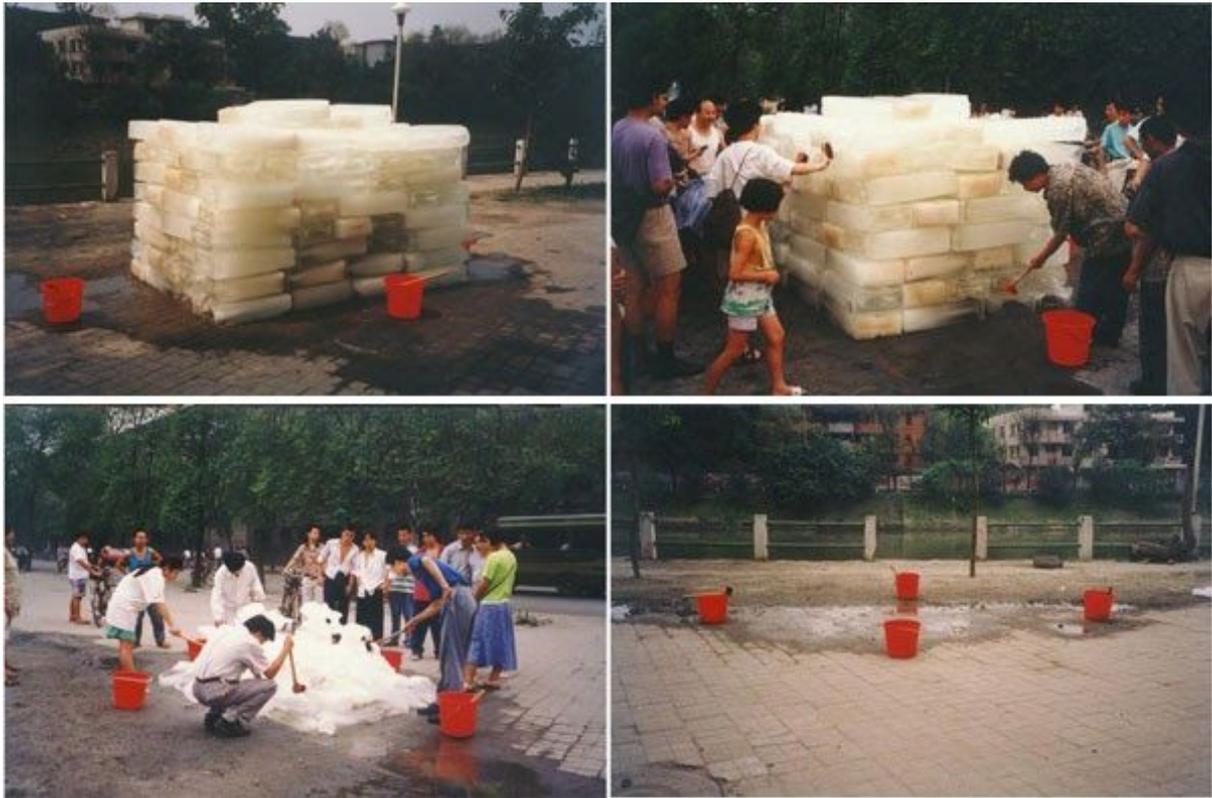
Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Interactive Arts Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Patricia, "WASHING THE RIVER IN RELATION TO INTERPELLATION, THEATRICALITY AND SPECTATORSHIP" (2020). *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 1073.
<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1073>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Graduate Studies at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

WASHING THE RIVER IN RELATION TO INTERPELLATION, THEATRICALITY
AND SPECTATORSHIP



Washing River, 1995, performance, Funan River, Chengdu, China, by Yin Xiuzhen

Patricia Miller

Art 617

Dr. Jane Chin Davidson

17 February 2019

In 1995, artist Yin Xiuzhen from Beijing, China, created a performance piece titled *Washing the River in Chengdu, China*, as part of a public art event created by Betsy Damon. Betsy is an American ecofeminist artist and founder of the nonprofit organization called *Keepers of the Waters*, which encourages international art, science, and community projects for the understanding of living water systems. The public art installations for this event sought to raise awareness of environmental destruction brought upon by industrialization. ‘*Washing the River*’ was a ten cubic meter structure made by water from the heavily polluted Funan River that was frozen into several large blocks of ice, and then stacked closely together representing one huge sculpture. Onlookers were then invited to wash the blocks of ice with brushes and mops, symbolically cleansing the dirty water, while the ice slowly melted and returned to the river. In this essay I will discuss how *Washing the River* uses interpellation, theatricality, and spectatorship to effectively spread water pollution and environmental protection awareness through community participation.

As we live and breathe in our individual, distinguishable, and irreplaceable physical being, we are subjects. A lowercase “s” subject has two meanings: a free subjectivity, the author of and responsible for his actions; and a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission, “So be it.” An uppercase “S” Subject is he who interpellates his subject, and is through himself, for himself, “I am that I am.”¹ Ideology can interpellate the subject. Man is ideological by nature. “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”² It is one’s ‘world outlook’. The illusion of the imagination does not correspond to reality. The participants in *Washing the River* were interpellated as subjects through ethical

¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” tr. Ben Brewster, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1970). pp. 171-179

² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” tr. Ben Brewster, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1970). pp. 162

ideology. Their ethical ideology was expressed through their actions of duty, which in this case has taken the form of cleaning. The collective virtues of a good community are directly incorporated in the living attitudes of its participants.³ It is our duty as human beings to take responsibility for our actions and try to correct the negative effects of industrialization on our environment in order to make this world a better place for now and future generations. The way interpellation happens in this piece is that the local (subject) is hailed (interpellated) or recruited by the artist, artwork, cause, or ideology (Subject), transforming them into subjects that are then subjected and freely surrender or submit to the Subject through participation. The artwork needs someone to actively participate in the performance in order for it to be effective in its cause, or to even exist as a performative artwork.

Performative art is theatrical by nature. Both theater and performance art require the action of presenting one's living body in front of an audience of one or several living bodies. There is no theater without spectators, and according to Jacques Ranciere in "The Emancipated Spectator", spectatorship is a bad thing, because it is just passively looking without knowing or doing anything.⁴ During the first river washing performance in Chengdu, 1995, a onlooker asked Yin if they could take a block of ice home with them to keep their fruit cool and to put in their drinks.⁵ In the mid 1990s performance art was unknown, and this concept of environmental protection was new and unfamiliar in China. In "Theater for pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" Bertolt Brecht states, "Great areas of ideology are destroyed when capitalism concentrates on external action, dissolves everything into processes, abandons the hero as the vehicle for everything and mankind as the measure, and

³ Jacques Ranciere, "The Emancipated Spectator," *ArtForum* (March, 2007). pp. 272

⁴ Jacques Ranciere, "The Emancipated Spectator," *ArtForum* (March, 2007). pp.271-272

⁵ Monica Tan, "Chinese Artist Makes Waves and Ice to Highlight Environmental Pollution," Australia Culture Blog, Dark Mofo (2014)

thereby smashes the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel.”⁶ I believe Yin’s motivation for creating *Washing the River* is from realizing that people, as spectators in society, are watching the theater of this materialistic spectacle put on by capitalist industrialization; completely oblivious to the damage these factories have done to our environment health, and therefore not doing anything about it. Yin brings these wrong doings from the background to the foreground through her work, so that their actions will be subjected to criticism. Her intent is to wake people up, so that they become aware; and to activate their inner hero, so hopefully changes can be made. “The concept of theater has been associated with the idea of the living community as a performing body instead of an apparatus of forms and rules.”⁷

According to Brecht, the new form of theater can instruct. It can demand external action, and not just provide introspective psychology. The spectator is no longer allowed to just spectate or submit to the experience uncritically without practical consequences, i.e. empathy.⁸ The schoolmaster’s lessons and exercises, in the pedagogical process, are aimed at continuously reducing the gap between knowledge and ignorance, and making anybody equal to everybody. The goal is to turn passive viewers into eager and active learners; not through teaching, but through them becoming an active participant. Yin creates awareness not by spreading knowledge, but by interpellating onlookers to educate themselves by physically interacting with the sculpture; not alone, as an individual, but as a collective, a member of a

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” “Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel,” and “On Experimental Theatre,” *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (NY: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 69-77, 130-6, 157-9.

⁷ Jacques Ranciere, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *ArtForum* (March, 2007). Pp. 274

⁸ Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” “Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel,” and “On Experimental Theatre,” *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (NY: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 69-77, 130-6, 157-9.

community. They begin to see, feel, and understand through their action, and it is not until then that they will know what has to be done.

What makes *Washing the River* so effective is its strange appearance. The visual of a huge random mass of ice, in any city, is enough to grab anyone's attention; yet alone the visual of people literally washing ice. It interpellates the onlooker or spectator of any age, race, gender, or social class, and demands immediate investigation. Yin has successfully made this heavy universal content fun to learn about. According to Brecht, in terms of theater this performance artwork would be considered experimental theatrical art, which is defined by two functions: entertainment and instruction. "If there was no amusement to be had from learning then theater's whole structure would be unfit for teaching."⁹ *Washing the River's* accuracy and vagueness also helps. The more obvious something is, the less people are interested in it, or feel the need to understand and/or investigate it. Since 1995, when Yin first debuted *Washing the River*, the discontent over water and air pollution has grown rapidly in China. Yin says, "Everyone has to breathe the air and drink the water. And these days the problem has become very serious, so every person in China is familiar with this issue... Even the government is paying attention."¹⁰ After finding out the concept behind *Washing the River*, people cannot help but feel something, and want to participate.

The overall effectiveness of *Washing the River* in spreading the awareness of water pollution and environmental protection through community participation is why it is still an ongoing project. "Great passion or great events have to be shown which influence the fate of

⁹ Bertolt Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," "Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel," and "On Experimental Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (NY: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 69-77, 130-6, 157-9.

¹⁰ Monica Tan, "Chinese Artist Makes Waves and Ice to Highlight Environmental Pollution," Australia Culture Blog, Dark Mofo (2014)

nations.”¹¹ Yin works with local universities and river authorities to analyse and assess the pollution and heavy-metal levels in different rivers around the world. As a result she has re-staged *Washing the River* along riverbanks in multiple locations, such as the Upper Georges River in Sydney, Australia, in 2010, the Derwent River in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2014, and the Pesanggrahan River in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2017. Since there are environmental concerns and global issues everywhere in the world, with some places much worse than others, this performance piece continues to remain relevant.

¹¹ Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” “Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel,” and “On Experimental Theatre,” *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (NY: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 69-77, 130-6, 157-9.