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January 2008, Frank Fu interview

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Frank Fu: performance view

An Interview with Frank Fu, by Charles Schultz

At 24 years old, Frank Fu may be one of the most ambitious young artists of today's contemporary art scene. A native of China, Frank received a scholarship to attend university in Auckland, New Zealand. Uninterested in object creation, he turned to performance art and since graduating he has participated in numerous international Biennials, including the Sydney Biennial, Venice, and Auckland, as well as the recent Documenta 12. I met Frank in New York City while he was in residence doing a five-day performance at the first ever Asian Contemporary Art Fair.

WM: What made you want to go to school in Auckland?

Frank Fu: When you come to a fork in the path, take it!

WM: What inspired you to begin making performance art? What would you describe as your roots?

FF: Something in the air. Back a few years ago at University I was not interested in producing things, rather I preferred doing actions. Simply because I like running around, rather than been captured in the boring classroom and making objects like everyone else. I found it was more fun and I was good at doing it.

My roots? Yum Cha Club – the conceptual engine for Frank Fu. I often go to different Yam Cha places with the Background Boy. Meanwhile eating, we talk about things, ideas, projects and people we like and dislike. We've been meeting for two years now.

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WM: *Who is the 'background boy'?*

FF: He is the father of two. He has a Zen cat. He makes great coffees. He always says to me: "Suffer, you little piece of shit!", and he is a truly good friend.

WM: *How do you come to create your performances? Are they planned in advance, spontaneous, a mixture of both?*

FF: I always have fresh ideas in my mind. I just feel it once the right one is coming.

There are three aspects to the second part of the question.

(1) Good execution requires the right strategy and must be well planned. But, as we all know, performances and happenings involve chance. I can only plan certain aspects. Everything else is spontaneous. In other words, surprise is crucial for both viewers and me.

(2) Everyday life can be spontaneous. And sometimes it's too spontaneous. Therefore, there is a limit to spontaneity in my practice. Otherwise my actions will become indistinguishable from everyday life. Or, everyday life can be habitual. And sometimes it's too habitual. Therefore, there is a limit to habit in my practice. Otherwise my actions will become indistinguishable from everyday life.

(3) I like rock 'n' roll because it's full of free spirit and energy. Indeed, that is the true nature of performance art, and that is the true nature of art. That is Frank Fu – Just Roll Up! The Confidence Man!

WM: *You say that 'free spirit' and 'energy' form the true nature of performance art, but one can't ignore the strong sense of discipline it takes to carry out many of your performances. How do you balance your energetic free spirited nature with such grounded discipline?*

FF: Ah! The FU effect. To me, there is only one thing – make it work!

WM: *You use props very sparingly, often taking advantage of what's available on site, but there are also props, like your bell, that you seem to use in nearly all your performances. What is the significance of this bell for you? Where did it come from?*

FF: It's like how Bob Dylan always carries his light bulb wherever he goes. Well, I carry my bell. I love my bell. It wakes me up.

Perhaps it could have come from anywhere, yet the bell is a citizen of the world, always traveling around with his master.

WM: *How did you decide to begin doing, what I would call "Guerrilla Performances", such as your speech at the Christchurch Biennale?*

FF: I just did it! I didn't think my actions were "Guerrilla Performances" until one day someone said so.

WM: *Were your performances at Documenta and Venice also done without an official invitation?*

FF: Yes, indeed! As Daniel Palmer, the Australian art critic in his review of the 52nd Venice Biennale in *Frieze* Issue 109 wrote: "At this year's Venice Biennale an Asian performance artist crawled along the avenue in the Giardini that leads up to the British, French and German pavilions. He was dressed in white, wearing a dog collar around his neck, and he sported a text on his jacket that read: 'I love Venice Biennale and Venice Biennale loves me.' Yet my searching through piles of press releases failed to uncover any reference to the event."

WM: *Have you ever not completed a performance?*

FF: We will see!

WM: *What was the most challenging performance you've accomplished?*

FF: For me, every performance I've done is the most challenging one, because I know that I'm only as good as my last project.

WM: *What lessons have you learned during your performances?*

FF: People want more and more. In other words – What's next Frank?

WM: *In your performance at the Asian Contemporary Art Fair you were covered in pins with red heads that gave the impression you'd been sold a thousand times over, yet those same red pins must have poked your skin and been painful, so the symbol of a sale became associated with physical pain and with the idea of the human as a work of art. On the last day you had yourself sealed into a crate by the curators of the exhibition and wheeled out of the exhibition hall. It seems like you are drawing many things together, the artist, the curator, the artwork, the buyer, into one performance. How do you see the relationship between all these different facets of the art world and how do they affect the art you make?*

FF: Yes, it was very painful, and indeed, itchy! Just like the relation between artists, white cubes and dealers.

The politics of the art world is always an interesting field of engagement for an artist like me. In recent years the real men and women, the real stars, have been curators, directors, and critics. Everything today is “Net Working” or “Hot Gossip”. That is what makes the art world go around. I’m sure that I am not the first person to draw these different facets together into art works, but I am the first person to speak out for myself – Become who you are!

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Charlie Schultz was born in 1982 and raised on an equestrian farm in central Pennsylvania. He graduated from Bard College in 2005 and currently lives and works in New York City. schultzsea@gmail.com

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