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Chun Hua Catherine Dong's *The Warrior:* Choosing Resilience

Joëlle Dubé

Introduction

Dressed in matching camo pants, t-shirt and cap, Chun Hua Catherine Dong's face is entirely covered in deer hide she has painstakingly glued onto her face prior to the performance. Over the course of 2.5 hours, the China-born and Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal-based artist sits atop a bright yellow scaffolding, towering over the audience of the Harold J. Miossi Art Gallery, in San Luis Obispo, California in 2017. An assistant slowly pushes the scaffolding around the space as the performance unfolds. Dong imperceptibly moves as she travels across space in yoga poses: slouching over the edge of the scaffolding, lying on her side and on her back, holding the tree, the corpse, and the easy yoga poses. Already viewed as a meditative practice, the yoga poses are deliberately performed in the slowest way possible, as if to make way for the expansive and generous temporality of self-care. The slowness of her movement can also be attributed to her being completely deprived of sight. Conscientious of not falling over the edge, or making any rushed movements, Dong embraces the almost forced meditative state in which she finds herself.

At one point during the slow-paced performance, the assistant strategically positions the scaffolding right underneath the skylight. There, the artist takes on the yoga posture of The Warrior I, as hinted by the title of the performance: both her hands are enjoined over her head, stretched toward the sky, all the weight of her body rests on her left leg, while her right leg is in extension. Her shadow is disproportionately projected onto the bare white walls of the gallery, multiplying and monumentalizing her gesture. A foundational pose of yoga āsana, the Warrior I symbolizes power and strength (Sarbacker 2021, 195). According to Yoga Basics, an educational yoga website, the one who adopts any of the Warrior poses (there are five variations) embodies “the auspicious and heroic energy of a warrior” (Yoga Basics). Additionally, Warrior I is said to be conducive to overcoming life's challenges (Yoga Basics). While this is meant to be experienced by the one *performing* the pose, witnessing it invites a slow, meditative introspection on the part of the viewers too.

Adopting the Warrior I pose can also be read as a caring and reparative act. In the article “The Body as Infrastructure,” authors Luis Andueza et al. argue that the human body can be perceived as an ongoingly reconfigured lively infrastructure. They ask “how we might ensure the love, care and repair that is

necessary to sustain our fleshy forms when confronted with the violence of capitalist abstraction” (Andueza et al. 2021, 800) so tightly enmeshed with the logic of imposed resilience, I might add. In indulging in acts of self-care—through positive, reparative, and sustainable gestures and actions—Dong offers to the viewers a critical strategy to transfigure inescapable violence. As a voyage into the inner self, yoga is all about making peace with one’s body and mind, which can, in turn, allow one to mediate troubling situations with more clarity. To care for others, we need to care for ourselves. That is the argument put forward by the artist when she comments: “I care about myself because I matter, if I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters.” What Dong suggests is a reverberating expansion of care in concentric circles (outwards from the self), as a strategy for self-resilience.

In introducing *The Warrior* performance, the organizers of the Inverse Performance Art Festival comment on how Dong “is interested in grappling with ways of using and enacting self-care as an act of resilience. She seeks to relate sustainable gestures or actions that can transform balance without inhibiting balance itself” (Inverse). Not only does this strategy help come to grasp with external violence, but it also offers a way of transforming such violence, without engaging with it directly; that is, without representing or depicting it. International relations scholars Brad Evans and Julian Reid speak to a deep sense of powerlessness associated with imposed resilience on neoliberal subjects when writing that: “To be resilient, the subject must disavow any belief in the possibility to secure itself from the insecure sediment of existence, accepting instead an understanding of life as a permanent process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which appear outside its control” (Evans and Reid 2014, 68). The artist’s body becomes a site of subversion and satire where violence is appropriated, transfigured, and processed (Dong). It is in this sense of transformation that self-care appears as a feminist strategy of radical resilience and of adaptation to troubling externalities. Chosen resilience anchored in care, as put forward by Dong, stands as an empowering stance rather than a constricting one.

Biography

Chun Hua Catherine Dong (she/they) is a Chinese-born Tiohtià:ke/ Montréal-based multimedia artist. Dong received an MFA at Intermedia from Concordia University and a BFA at Visual Art from Emily Carr University Art & Design in Canada. Dong has exhibited their works at The Musée d’Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne in France, Quebec City Biennial, The International Digital Art Biennial Montreal (BIAN), MOMENTA | Biennale de l’image, Kaunas Biennial, Canadian Cultural Centre Paris, Foundation PHI for Contemporary Art, The Aine Art Museum in Tornio, Bury Art Museum in Manchester, Museo de la Cancillería in Mexico City, Art Gallery of Hamilton, The Rooms Museum, Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, DongGang Museum of Photography in South Korea, He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, Hubei

Museum of Fine Art in China, Art Museum at University of Toronto, Varley Art Gallery of Markham, and others.

Dong has performed in many international performance art festivals, such as Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival in Chicago, 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto, ENCUESTRO Performance in Santiago, The Great American Performance Art in New York, Place des Arts in Montréal, Infr'Action in Venice, Dublin Live Art Festival in Dublin, Experimental Action/ Performance Art in Houston, Internationales Festival für Performance in Mannheim, Inverse Performance Art Festival in California, Miami Performance International Festival, Nuit Blanches in Montréal, Visualeyez Performance Festival in Edmonton, M:ST Performance Art Festival in Calgary, and many public art galleries and spaces in Europe and North and South America. Dong's video work has been screened in Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, UK, USA, and more. Among many other grants and awards, Dong was the recipient of the Franklin Furnace Award for performance art in New York in 2014, listed the "10 Artists Who Are Reinventing History" by Canadian Art in 2017, and was named "The Artist of the Year" at the DongGang International Photo Festival in South Korea in 2018. Dong was also a finalist for Contemporary Art Award at Le Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (Prix en art actuel du MNBAQ) 2020, and awarded with Cultural Diversity in Visual Arts Award by the Conseil des arts de Montréal in 2021.

Joëlle Dubé is a member of *Essé's* editorial committee and is also pursuing an interdisciplinary doctorate in humanities at Concordia University. She is studying contemporary Indigenous art and, in her work, she seeks to rearticulate the relationship between current and future life.

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