

# *Amanda Heng - "S/HE: PERFORMANCE ART"*

*first presented in 1994*

## *The Germinative Stage*

When I started thinking about the performance in 1993, I was concerned with working out the confusion within me, an inner conflict that had resulted from having to deal with the clash in values between Western and Eastern ideological cultures in my everyday experience. I had intended it to be an ongoing process to investigate the cause of this conflict.

## *The background to S/HE and conflicts behind S/HE*

I was educated and brought up with traditional Chinese values. It was a shock when I found it was not effective in Singapore, my hometown, where English is the favoured lingua franca. The long history of British colonization in Singapore, the emerging status of Singapore as an international entrepot, and a rule dominated by English-speaking, English-educated native policy-makers led to the prominence of English and Western culture in Singapore. The feeling of displacement and helplessness struck a note when the Chinese medium schools and Chinese university were suddenly shut down in the 1970s. Graduates of Chinese medium schools seemed second-rated and irrelevant as the better jobs required a competent command of English. The question of where to belong, where to go, what to do and how to be a useful and contributing member of society became not only an existential quest but one that is painfully real and disturbing.

## *The Motivation in S/HE*

I was searching for an understanding of the various economic, political and cultural implications of this conflict and how they contributed to the construction of identity. At that time, I was confronted with the problem of having to embrace only one culture and reject the other completely. I was locked into this "either-or" mind-set with a strong belief in monolithic thinking, which I realised later, was culture's own way of impacting on my conscious and subconscious decisions on self-identity.

Another important concern was the question of being a woman and her position in the cultural and political context of Singapore. The history of Women's Movement and Western Feminist Theory had prompted further my investigation into how power was embossed onto these influences that constantly impose themselves on us, in the process of shaping our identity. There was an attempt to look for alternative directions: What if I reject both influences? Were there possibilities of a new language? A new thinking? I chose thence to communicate these inquiries in my performance by making symbolic marks on my face and articulating it in front of the mirror, as a way to show how language was deconstructed to its simplest phonemes and strokes and used to form meaningless marks on the face in the attempt to find a new expression.

## *Evolution of S/HE and Discoveries*

When S/HE was performed again in 1995 and 1996, the work took on new meanings. I have discovered that the differences in these two cultures can be advantageous for me. They are rich resources for ideas. I have learned how I could embrace these two streams of thought and make them my strengths. This realisation gave me great confidence in appropriating language, text, symbols and images from real life, my personal memories and everyday experience. I worked with these materials, giving space for exploration, combing text with movement, sound and objects and allowing changes until I recognised and concluded a personal message from these elements for me. Soon, the image evolved. I had my covered, walking and searching for the audience with a stick in one hand and a lantern in the other in the full blast of Chinese classical music and Western choir playing simultaneously in the background.

Sometimes, these elements challenged or commented on one another; for example, in my use of baking dough to wipe away the marks on my face as I recited the Confucious sayings: "When you are at home, obey your father; When you are married, obey your husband; When your husband died, obey your son." I then threw away the dough with great force as a symbolic and visual rejection of these traditionally accepted roles for a Chinese woman as a subservient subject to the men in her life.

The choice of using my body and personal experience as materials for a direct communication with the audience in a live performance was a conscious deliberate choice. The audience was either seated or standing around the performance space whilst the performance took place. I wanted them to have a direct 'live' experience. They have to watch closely and respond spontaneously when approached. The attention from the audience and the exchange of energy were important elements in the work.

The frequent use of domestic objects such as washing detergents, dough, colourful toy alphabets was also strategic. My intention was to bring about the experience of the self -discovery of a woman from the private sphere into the public. I was excited to be able to stretch my mind in redefining "Woman" in my own terms. I found new strength for articulating my confidence.

### *Conclusion*

The scars from history cannot be erased. However, each performance I do helps me find a new acceptance and meaning of the conflicts for myself, giving me a tremendous feeling of empowerment.

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Photo: "*Self Portrait 1996*", by Ayano Shibata

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