Twelve Ideas Left in Hong Kong, 1996, sound installation, "Out of the White Cube", 1996

《1996 丢给香港的十二个主意》（声音装置）1996

Secret-divulging
Installation
Beijing, 1995

《泄密》（环境装置）1995
Every day since 1995 Song Dong has used a calligraphy brush dipped in water to write a diary on a block of stone. Evaporating brushstrokes are methodically painted one on top of the other, over and over again, on the same impactive surface. The text appears momentarily before vanishing and being replaced by the next fluid characters. In a recent publication Song Dong refers to Writing diary with water as an ongoing ‘private and personal event’, a description that points to the essence of much of his practice. The artist sets aside time each day to think about life and living, and to let such thoughts dissolve through the water that flows from his brush. The contemplative nature of this process transforms it into an act of meditation.

Song Dong has practised calligraphy since childhood; his water diary project had its origins in those early days, when Song’s father encouraged him to ‘write’ in water on stone because the family could not afford ink and paper. His intent as an artist is fundamentally iconoclastic — to disrupt categories, media hierarchies and bureaucratic as well as aesthetic expectations — and yet these ‘political’ goals are achieved more often than not through works of art that are uncommonly intimate.

Diaries serve a number of purposes, from keeping track of appointments to the documentation of events over time. They can be used to trigger memories or to reflect on ideas, emotions and reactions. The defining character of a diary, however, must surely be its self-confessional and innately private nature; diaries contain information relating to an individual — information that is written down rather than shared. Nevertheless with conventional diarising there is an inherent chance of disclosure, an awareness, on some level, that another person may at some time read what is initially written in secret. History is partly made of such discoveries. As Song says, ‘You might not think about this generally but during the diary writing process consider that someone else might be reading this someday. Since considering this I stopped writing a traditional diary’.

Song Dong is not prepared to take the risk. Through his invisible journal, the artist continues to engage in the process of diary-keeping, comfortable in the knowledge that his thoughts will not be revealed. His diary can never be read. It can never offer up its contents, except to the writer, through the screen of his own memory. What is written cannot be retrieved. The words literally and metaphorically disappear.
Song Dong confirms that he writes in the water diary every day. If little has happened, he will record that there is nothing much to write. If he has been travelling, he will document the journey. Song Dong’s description of the way the diary evolved indicates the central and deliberate role the work plays in his life. ‘After a while this stone slowly became a part of me. That means I could say anything to it and be unscrupulous. That act became a part of life and it made me more relaxed.’

When the project was shown in Berlin, the artist invited visitors to participate by writing in water on one of twelve stone slabs laid out as an ephemeral visitors’ book. During a residency in London in 2000, he adapted the opening performance for the exhibition to specifically incorporate an element of time, perhaps related to the weeks he had spent away from his home in Beijing. Writing the time with water was, paradoxically, a calculated attempt to capture the transience of the moment, as Song Dong scribed the time by hour, minute and second for the duration of the event. Similarly, he marked the beginning of the new millennium by water-writing every second of the first hour of the year 2000 for each of 24 time zones.

In an hour-long performance that took place in the Lhasa River, Tibet, in 1996, Song Dong systematically stamped the ‘sacred’ water with an arched wooden seal carved with the character for water. As Norman Bryson has pointed out, the seal left no trace and consequently its power as an ideograph was instantly dispersed. The authority of the art work resides instead in Song Dong’s ‘central gesture’, a heroic and futile gesture that recalls those innumerable small acts through which an individual attempts to construct and regulate a relationship with the world. Thirty-six serial photographs record Song Dong’s performance in Tibet. The artist views the photographs as objects without ‘space, sound, touching, taste, time, temperature, experience and emotion’, but he also believes that they do ‘very little damage to the original idea’.

Although Writing diary with water has had an extended life as a performance, a small series of just four photographs is the only tangible remnant. The creation of what one critic has termed ‘unsaleable and unexhibitable’ works and the lack of evidence relating to the performances, has been queried by viewers uncertain of the meaning of such intense, disciplined and time-consuming interventions.

Song Dong has been a significant figure in the development of Chinese conceptual art since the early 1990s. His practice incorporates performance, photography, projection, video and installation. Of his conceptual approach he has said, ‘As I understand it, the time is over when artistic styles are defined by medium, method and paradigm. When I make use of these, the only thing that I have in mind is whether they fit my ideas.’

Song Dong’s performances usually involve the repetitive and occasionally arduous carrying out of an everyday act such as writing, cooking or breathing. The ritualisation of this action and/or intention transforms the activity into a work of art. Edible penjing 2000 consists of landscapes fashioned out of fish heads, chicken feet, beef and mashed potato, which are then eaten by visitors to the exhibition. In Breathing 1996, compelling images show the artist breathing onto the icy surfaces of Tiantanmen Square and Houhai Lake (Back Sea), a large pond in the old quarter of Beijing. This two-part performance was Song Dong’s tribute to the June Fourth Movement, the wave of pro-democracy sentiment that culminated in violent clashes in Tiantanmen Square, leaving what writer Wu Hung has called a ‘painful wound in China’s national psyche’. After 40 minutes lying face down on the ground, the artist’s warm breath had formed a circle of ice on the surface of the Square, but it left no trace on the Back Sea, as ‘the frozen pond absorbed Song Dong’s breath into its very existence.’

Song Dong’s determination to limit the documentation reinforces the ‘private and personal’ nature of his practice and the context in which it has evolved. He is a middle-school art teacher, who lives in a small, single-room apartment with his wife Yin Xiuzhen, herself also an artist. Like other Chinese artists of his generation, he has been forced by political and financial circumstances to employ inexpensive materials, to produce small-scale work that can easily be reconfigured or displayed, and to cultivate a solitary, meditative way of working in which signification is achieved primarily through the idea itself. Apart from photographs and videos, the works exist purely in time, and in the imagination. It is through sharing in the ‘imagining’ of the artist’s experience that it becomes possible for the viewer to contemplate the poetry and significance of Song Dong’s work.

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Song Dong

"Leaving The message with water" 2000. Hannover
Many works of post–Cultural Revolution art depict Tiananmen and try to demystify this most sacred symbol of Communist China. Some of them, such as Wang Jinsong’s Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen (1990), refashion a socialist realistic masterpiece into a fake stage set. Others, like the anonymous June (1994) (fig. 5.1), evoke absurdity: the female exhibitionist and the crippled man on the motorcar have no relation either to each other or to the place. In both cases, however, Tiananmen’s towering silhouette fills the pictures’ backgrounds, and the reduction of the foreground heightens the disharmony between the solemn monument and the disillusioned crowd. Both works, therefore, follow the basic strategy of political pop to invert Maoist symbolism while satirizing contemporary life. Song Dong’s Breathing, a performance project he carried out in front of Tiananmen in 1996 (pl. 5), shares the iconoclastic intent of these works but also distinguishes itself from them. First, the artist shifts his focus from Tiananmen to Tiananmen Square—the vast ground before the sacred monument; second, the performance is presented as the artist’s direct engagement with the square; and third, while political pop rejects idealism and heroism in favor of irony and absurdity, Song Dong’s project is deeply moving.

It was New Year’s Eve, 1996. Holiday lights outlined the familiar contour of Tiananmen in the distance; the temperature was minus nine degrees centigrade (about sixteen degrees Fahrenheit). Song Dong lay motionless face down in the deserted Tiananmen Square, breathing onto the pavement for forty minutes. A thin layer of ice gradually formed on the ground before his mouth, which seemed to increase in thickness and solidity with each breath. When he left the square, the ice was still shimmering like an elusive islet in an ocean of concrete. It disappeared before the next morning, leaving no visible trace.

By shifting his focus from Tiananmen to Tiananmen Square, Song Dong departs from the formula of blaspheming a famous icon. The target of demystification in his work becomes much more complex, involving not just symbols but also an actual space, where real historical events take place. To comprehend Song Dong’s project we must thus understand the history and the myth of Tiananmen Square. Many Westerners perhaps only learned its name after the June Fourth Democratic Movement in
1989, but to every Chinese, from a commoner to the country's paramount leader, the square had always been the center of political attention and tension. A series of mass movements taking place there have become landmarks in modern Chinese history: the demonstration on May 4, 1919, protesting the Treaty of Versailles, which handed over Chinese lands to Japan; the patriotic march on March 18, 1926; the demonstration on December 9, 1935, which started the resistance movement against the Japanese invasion; the anti-autocratic movement during the Civil War on May 20, 1947; the mass memorial to the former prime minister Zhou Enlai on April 5, 1976; and finally the 1989 student uprising.

Parallel to these grassroots movements runs another sequence of "demonstrations" mobilized by authorities to display power: the Victory March in 1960 by the Allied Army celebrating their occupation of Beijing;
General Zhang Xun’s grand ritual in June 1917 to commemorate his restoration of the imperial order; the establishment of the puppet regime under Japanese patronage; the parade celebrating the recapture of Beijing by the Republican troops; the founding of Communist China on October 1, 1949; and more recently, the elaborate National Day parades after the People’s Liberation Army bloodwashed the square in 1989. As these two chains of events are tied to Tiananmen Square, everything there partakes of the fate of the state and its one billion people. Correspondingly, the square partakes of every event and consequently keeps changing its meaning.

The meaning of a “square” in contemporary China is political: it is always conjoined with a “platform” for the leaders to review mass assemblies. Among all the platforms none is more privileged then Tiananmen, the stand of the country’s paramount leader. Logically, there must be a square—in fact the square—of unmatchable status for the public. Shortly after the establishment of the PRC, Mao ordered a new square built in front of Tiananmen, a square “big enough to hold an assembly of one billion.” Mao’s ambition was never realized. Despite all efforts, the new square completed in 1959 could only (1) hold 400,000 people, and, rather ironically, it was only after the chairman’s death that the square was further expanded to hold 600,000. But either way, this was quite enough for the Chinese government to boast that Tiananmen Square was the largest square in the world.

Meetings between the people and Chairman Mao in the square took the form of endless celebration parades, when the enormous square was covered with revolutionary masses. As seen from Tiananmen’s balcony, a half million men and women must have formed a vast ocean; on its surface red flags and slogans waved and floated. Looking up from the square, anyone in this crowd would hardly be able to make out the chairman’s tiny silhouette in the remote distance. Yet they cried out with joy and excitement, because the chairman was there above Tiananmen looking at them (fig. 5.2). For more than two decades such rituals continued year after year; the endless pageants in the square presented a disguised reality of a contented people cheering their leaders. Then, in 1976, everything suddenly changed: the chairman died; Tiananmen was empty; the heated Cultural Revolution had turned into a nightmare; it seemed that the Gang of Four was about to seize power. From all directions people came to the square, of their own will and to express their own will. When they tried to speak out, and prove they were “the people,” they were arrested and beaten.

This was the mass mourning for Premier Zhou Enlai, who died in January 1976. Zhou, who seemed to have become the only hope for rationality and peace, was condemned, and people were prohibited from mourning him. All the anxiety, frustration, disillusionment, and anguish that had troubled Beijing residents for more than a decade, merged into shared grief, and from this shared feeling a grassroots movement began to take shape. On March 23, a single wreath of white paper, the traditional symbol of mourning, was placed at the foot of the Monument to the People’s Heroes at the center of the square. The government’s prohibition
only brought more wreaths, people, and finally the protest on April 4, the day of the Qingming Festival (the day for holding memorial services for the dead in traditional China). Without an organizer or plan, one hundred thousand people came on this and the following days, covering the square with white paper flowers. Then, on the night of April 5, the bulbous lights around the square suddenly flashed on the demonstrators. Armed police rushed into the square, beating the demonstrators and taking them away. Before dawn the stains of blood on the square were carefully cleansed. The meaning of the square, however, was never the same.

The June Fourth Movement in 1989 repeated the sequence of events in the 1976 demonstration, starting with mass mourning for a hero (this time Premier Hu Yaobang) and ending with bloodshed. The 1989 demonstration, however, was of greater magnitude (two hundred thousand people joined the demonstration on a single day) and a clearer ideological agenda (“democracy” and “freedom” were the most frequent catchwords). It also left a much more painful wound in China’s national psyche, and its memory still haunts Chinese people, including many intellectuals and artists.

Song Dong’s *Breathing* can be viewed as a tribute to this memory, but it also offers hope. In a strange way, it reminds me of another performance staged by the experimental artist Wei Guangqing in 1988 before the June Fourth Movement (fig. 5.3). Titled *Suicide Project No. 1*, the artist swathed himself in white bandages to look like a wounded man and lay across railroad tracks. As I have suggested in a previous article, this and other incidents in the late eighties indicated a particular psychological state of young Chinese dissidents, the feeling that only by self-sacrifice could they actively influence the future.4 Lying on the ground in a similar gesture, Song Dong is no longer staging a real or pretend suicide in *Breathing*. Instead he tries to inject life into the deserted square, thereby bringing us back to those brief moments in history when the square was transformed into a “living place.” It reminds us that in 1996 the square still remained an unfeeling monolith. *Breathing* not only represents a continuing effort to challenge this monolithic power but also demonstrates the extreme difficulty of making any change: all Song Dong’s effort produced was a tiny pool of ice, which disappeared before the next morning.
Breathing is a two-part project. Part Two took place on the frozen Back Sea—a large pond in the old quarter of Beijing (fig. 5.4). A summary of the project provided by the artist highlights the intended parallels and differences:

Part One: Tiananmen Square, temperature minus 9 degrees centigrade. Breathing onto the ground for about 40 minutes, producing ice on the cement surface of the square.

Part Two: frozen Back Sea, temperature minus 8 degrees centigrade. Breathing onto the ice for about 40 minutes, ice remaining as ice.

As my italics suggest, what is important is not the change in location but the differing results of the same action performed in similar climatic conditions: the artist could actually produce ice by breathing onto the cement ground, but on the frozen Back Sea his action had no effect. These different results seem to imply different relationships between the artist and these places. In Tiananmen Square this relationship is antagonistic, and hence Song Dong’s effort, no matter how small, was effective and meaningful. His relationship with the Back Sea is naturally harmonious, and the frozen pond absorbed Song Dong’s breath into its very existence.
Jump

16' video/performance
1999 Tian An Men