

# Beyond Appearances. The Invisible at Work in Chen Zhen's Installation: *Daily Incantations* (1996)

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## Abstract

Our paper will focus on the paradoxical character of a sculptural installation by Chen Zhen entitled *Daily Incantations*, presented for the first time in New York City in 1996. Zhen's art forms an integral part of his life, one which is shared between two worlds: the China he left in 1986, and the Western World where he took part in numerous exhibitions. His art finds its strength by combining fundamental elements of Chinese culture, based on spiritual energy and dematerialization, with elements from Western contemporary art, in order to reconstruct them according to a dialectic process.

The intrinsic duality of this artwork is very close to the nature of contemporary art with its wealth of visual and semantic tensions. The transition from materiality to immateriality, from triviality to a spiritual dimension nurtured by experience makes this installation one of Zhen's most emblematic works. Our paper will focus on its paradoxical character that reveals a rough and direct materiality through radical means so as to induce viewers to go beyond what they actually see.

The mundane character of this installation is apparent: the artist decided to use chamber pots, commonplace objects designed for the collection of human excrement, hung simply on wooden structures. Located in the centre is a large "globe" filled with old worn-out radios, television sets, telephones and other debris of electronic communication. Speakers placed inside each chamber pot emanate sounds typical of the daily ritual washing of such pots by cleaning women. Zhen turns these humdrum objects into bells so as to create a huge musical instrument reminiscent of the *bianzhong*, an ancient Chinese royal percussion instrument.

*Daily Incantations* is a forceful work whose visual strength is served by a simple and accurate creative process. Chen Zhen's plastic language radically questions appearances. The point is to seize these contradictory energy flows strengthen the ever-present tension between the various elements; between the immateriality of the sounds and the rough and uncompromising materiality of the volumes; between the plain alignment of the bells and the disorganised piling up of electronic waste; between the rigidity of the containers and the softness of their content; between the reference to the triviality of nature's needs and the appeal to perceptible transcendence.

The artistic installation should be examined in the depths of its materiality and potentiality: this is a virtual space continuously reaching out toward further metamorphosis. The artist invites viewers to go beyond appearances and together seize this unfolding of reality, which can only exist in the shared experience of looking.

## Introduction

Chen Zhen was a naturalized French artist born in China and who died in 2000. His art formed an integral part of a life shared between two worlds: the China he left in 1986<sup>1</sup>, and the Western World where he took part in numerous exhibitions. His art finds its strength by the combining fundamental elements of Chinese culture based on spiritual energy and dematerialization with elements from Western contemporary art, in order to reconstruct them according to a dialectic process. In Zhen's artistic quest, art, life and medicine are interconnected; and references to Buddhist philosophy and Taoist culture are scattered through his artistic practice as well as his medical work. The key to understanding Zhen's work is through his concept of "trans-experience" which he refers to as a type of "cultural homelessness". His artistic practice developed by using objects that reflected the hybrid nature of contemporary cultural and social life and incorporating them into installations. The latter are part of a process of spatial occupation, where they become sensitive to the invisible physical strength of the exhibition venue and the reactions they produce.

This paper will focus on a sculptural installation entitled *Daily Incantations*, presented for the first time in New York City in 1996. The intrinsic duality of this artwork is very close to the nature of contemporary art with its wealth of visual and semantic tensions. The transition from materiality to immateriality, from triviality to a spiritual

<sup>1</sup> In 1986, after the opening up of China under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, Chen Zhen immigrated to Paris; he studied at the "Ecole des Beaux Arts" and the "Institut des hautes études en arts plastiques", where he also taught from 1993 to 1995. He was then appointed a teacher at the "Ecole des Beaux Arts" of Nancy.



Fig. 1  
*Daily Incantations*,  
 Chen Zhen, 1996  
 Wood, metal, Chinese chamber  
 pots, electric wires, residues of  
 electronic and electrical objects,  
 sound system  
 230×700×350 cm  
 The Dakis Joannou Collection,  
 Athènes. Vue: "Daily Incantations",  
 Deitch Projects, New York, 1996  
 Photo: Tony Powell  
 Courtesy Deitch Projects

dimension nurtured by experience makes this installation one of Zhen's most emblematic works. Our paper will focus on its paradoxical character, one that reveals a rough and direct materiality through radical means so as to induce viewers to go beyond what they actually see.

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*Daily Incantations* was created when he returned to Shanghai in 1993 having spent eight years abroad. Early one morning, near the Hilton hotel, women were engaged in the daily ritual of washing chamber pots in the street. These sounds took him back to the days of the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai. He recalls:

*Every morning on my way to school, I would hear the sounds of chamber pots being washed. Before school actually started I would also hear the 'daily incantations' – that is the obligatory daily reading aloud from Mao Zedong's Little Red Book intended to 'cleanse the soul'. Washing the chamber pots was a daily ritual in the city, and reading incantations from the Little Red Book was part of political indoctrination. This double incantation bringing together the daily ritual on the one hand, and the ritual reading of the 'sacred' writings on the other, created a juxtaposition of sounds symbolizing the complex relation between traditional and contemporary Chinese life.*

(Chen, 2003)

The word *Incantation* points to the ambivalent nature of the sounds perceived. The word does indeed have negative and positive connotations since it refers to both the weaving of spells and verbal charms. It can also mean the *chanting* of a deadly curse. If the first meaning is related to everyday and traditional activities of women in the city, the second meaning is linked to political and ideological coercion.

To make the installation *Daily Incantations* at the Jeffrey Deitch gallery in New York in 1996 (Fig. 2), the artist and his friends collected some 101 chamber pots made in Shanghai. Grouped together the pots they created a set of bells that evoke an ancient Chinese royal percussion instrument, the *bianzhong*. The size of this sculpture is impressive (230×700×350 cm), equivalent to that of the actual instrument.

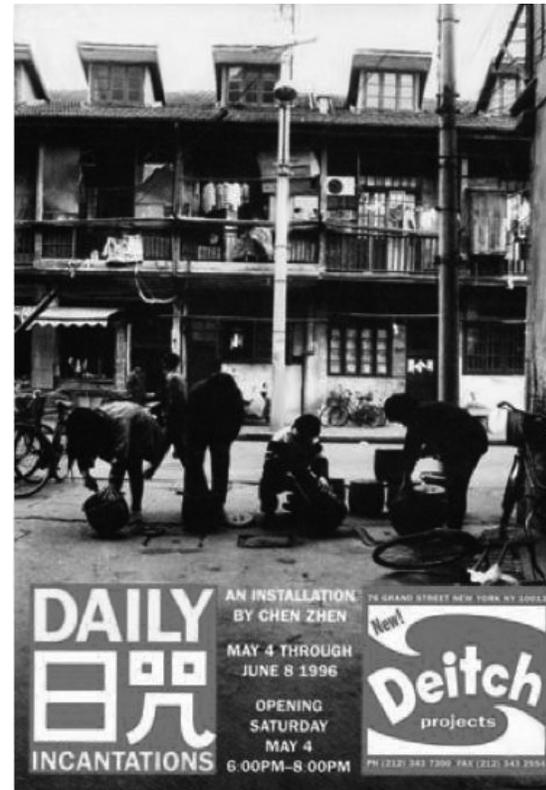


Fig. 2  
*Daily Incantations*  
 Deitch Projects' poster  
 New York, 1996  
 Courtesy of Deitch Projects

The *bianzhong* consists of a set of bronze bells with a circular section (called *fanzhong*), which are hung in a wooden frame and struck with a mallet (Fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> These bells are described as “large bells producing melodic sounds” because of their large size, rich harmonic resonance and wide range of sounds. The pure vibrant tone of each sound is unique and reverberates through space. The *bianzhong* was used in China's ritual and court music. Its cultural relevance is closely linked to its religious function: it constitutes a complex musical body and is regarded as sacred. Bells have a paradoxical function since they are used to both call and reject, they invite people to gather together and pray while keeping at bay the forces of evil and natural and supernatural threats.

This tension between two opposite poles runs throughout Chen Zhen's work. With *Daily Incantations*, he opposes the profane and sacred, the material and spiritual, the individual and community. Here, the harmonic sounds of a chime we expect to hear are replaced by the noises of mundane, repetitive daily chores. Speakers installed inside each of the chamber pots emit the typical sounds of the ritual cleansing of pots that Chinese women traditionally performed every day. Sounds of knocking, scraping, and splashing are superimposed over the muffled hustle and bustle of the city. These gestures are reminiscent of musicians ringing bells; both set of sounds are associated with percussion. The artist brings together two realities that have no relation, the triviality of street life and the elegance of a palace or a temple.

The tension between visual the components belonging to the unconnected worlds is fruitful. The 101 traditional chamber pots that a western mind will instinctively appreciate for their aesthetic beauty – before becoming aware of their hygienic function – are hung in wooden frames. They encircle a very large sphere filled with old radios, TV sets, telephones and other debris of electronic communication. While we are

<sup>2</sup> Fig 2: *bianzhong* excavated from the Marquis Yi of Zeng's tomb, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, kept in the Museum of Hubei province. The chime is imposing: the largest rack is almost eight meters long, the shorter about three meters, its total weight is seven tons, including the 65 bronze bells which constitute the whole structure. The bells cover five octaves and a half and produce twelve semitones; according to their angle, and whether they are played from the front or back of the set, they produce different sounds. Extraordinarily, they bear more than 2.800 inscriptions describing how the *bianzhong* might be played, an invaluable testimony to the development and history of Chinese music.



Fig. 3  
*Bianzhong*, tomb Marquis Yi of Zeng, buried in 433 BCE  
Tomb discovered in 1977 in Leigudun near Suixian today called Suizhou North of Hubei province  
Museum of Hubei Province

initially attracted to the imposing and majestic shape of the “chime”, we are startled when we discover the heap of waste.

The sounds emanating from the installation are puzzling. One is tempted to press their ears against the outer surface of the pots to meet this invisible and intimate world but the central structure, made of debris from the modern world, is in our way and prevents us from doing so. The contrast between the recycled objects of this peculiar *bianzhong* and the lifeless silent waste of the globe is extreme. Chen Zhen reinvents the chamber pots inasmuch as these once commonplace objects symbolize an “ancient culture” and have become obsolete in modern Shanghai of today. Nowadays, chamber pots are being slowly discarded in urban areas. Chen Zhen brings the ancestral vibrant memory of the traditional pots face-to-face with that of ubiquitous present-day computers displayed here as electronic waste. The juxtaposed life cycles are also dissimilar: pots are looked after, cleaned and potentially transformed into musical instruments, whereas electronic waste is piling up and suffocating the planet. The artist thus questions the objects and their role as a medium and “invader” in the globalization process.

Chen Zhen enjoys generating misunderstandings and has had to face numerous controversies about his artwork where the mundane character of his installation has often been stressed – the commonplace objects he uses were indeed initially meant for the collection of human excrement.

In 2000, the year Chen Zhen died, the Chinese embassy opposed the installation being featured in the exhibition “La Voix du Dragon” at the Cité de la Villette in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The fact the artist created a traditional set of bells using chamber pots to replace the bronze bells was simply unacceptable. Mrs Hou Xiaghua, then Cultural Advisor at the Chinese Embassy in Paris declared “I am shocked, Chinese people find this irreverent”, before adding rather less diplomatically “These chamber pots (...) are just crap”.<sup>4</sup>

3 Exhibition of November 21, 2000 – February 25, 2001. “La voix du dragon. Trésors archéologiques et art campanaire de la Chine ancienne”. La cité de la musique, La Villette, Paris.

4 *Le Journal des Arts*, n° 116, December 1, 2000. “For the Chinese embassy, Chen Zhen is not welcome. As a contemporary counterpoint to *La voix du Dragon*, Chen Zhen’s sculpture *Daily Incantations* was removed to another part of the Grande Halle de la Villette. The embassy of the People’s Republic of China was appalled to see Chen Zhen create a traditional chime where bronze bells were replaced by wood chamber pots,” Emma Lavigne, the music museum curator, explained. “We had to move the installation, otherwise the exhibition would not have taken place”, she added.

This incident clearly highlights the paradoxical character of the work, which exploits the object’s dual nature. For most people in China, it is an ordinary ugly, everyday object. The artist said “In New York, Chinese visitors reacted by saying that it was horrible. To them the pots smelled foul and it was a shame to display them in an art gallery”. Likewise many Western visitors, after perceiving them as “ancient beautiful Chinese objects”, also changed their minds when they became aware of their initial function. However, to certain Chinese, the chamber pot is emblematic of the renewal of generations. As they feel attached to the forces of heredity, they are happy in the knowledge that the chamber pot “is passed on to sons and grandsons”. In addition, traditional Chinese medicine makes use of the calcareous deposit found on the inner surface of the pot. This precious matter is supposed to reduce a fever or calm hot flushes. This reversal linked to the use of the “incriminated” substance for medical purposes reinforces Chen Zhen’s critical approach.

For him, the use of a found object is not merely one of aesthetic choice. He is also interested in, the many layers of their history as well as their political, economic, social and cultural connotations. The object is closely linked to the concepts of “Western World” and “modernization”, and to the principle of “the old being replaced by the new”. The nature of the object and the experience people have had with it are essential, as well as its translation into different cultural contexts. He told Nehuma Guralnik:<sup>5</sup>

*When I take a hundred chamber pots from Shanghai to New York City, or when I record the sounds of cash registers and Chinese abacus and mix them together as a contemporary music or prayer, (...) all of that reveals the many possibilities of the collected object. How can we ignore what happens when these possibilities lying behind every daily object are brought together with the profusion of contextual factors present in the different venues? This is the thrill of creation!*

(Chen, 2003)<sup>6</sup>

Chen Zhen’s work is not based on an ordinary idea of the ready-made object but rather a matter of awareness. Although his approach is akin

5 Exhibition curator at the Tel Aviv museum.

6 Correspondence between Nehuma Guralnik and Chen Zhen, Tel Aviv, February 8, 1998.

to a contemporary practice which tends to dignify objects of the everyday world, he transforms them by drawing upon their specific properties. This process of dematerialization is sustained by the – hitherto unsuspected – physical and phenomenal properties of those “unworthy” objects that the artist brings to light through a complex strategy. In his correspondence with the artist, Nehuma Guralnik noted “By taking daily objects out of their usual context, Chen Zhen strips them from their materiality and highlights their relationship with people and their cultural history. By dematerializing them as consumer goods he assigns a new metaphorical role value to these objects. Therefore, the chair or bed, before being purchased at a flea market or salvaged from a dump, had almost reached the end of its life cycle as a consumer good, and is brought back to a new spiritual life”. He continues, thanks to the transformations carried out by Chen Zhen,

*the spirituality and soul of the object are revived. The chair is given a new role, that of a drum, almost a fetish object through which, in addition to the previously mentioned metaphoric reference, a process of sanctification of the natural cycle, of total recycling and of entropy is operated.*

(Chen, 2003)

The concept of “post object” is recurrent in Chen Zhen’s work. He gives new life to everyday objects that are not reprocessed and therefore keep their original aspect. Whereas an object is normally produced, consumed, thrown away, salvaged, displayed, preserved or cast off, here it is offered a new destiny and reintroduced into new life cycles through an artistic process. Chen Zhen says

*how fond [he is] of all kind of transformations, not only because they directly concern some aspects of reality, but also because they give us the opportunity to reveal, either indirectly or through metaphors, the essence of what is beyond objective reality.*

(Chen, 2003)

His work opens onto new horizons extending beyond the reality of things. The artist has managed to transform ordinary material so as to

question and shake up our understanding of images, objects and consumer society. He emancipates mundane objects from their everyday constraints by displaying them in a place where time seems to stand still so ordinary reality expands, so to speak, giving rise to an infinite number of possibilities.

The transformation gives the chamber pot an opportunity of a new life cycle. According to Chen Zhen, “Objects are intended to purify life after their utilisation, sublimate a latent spirit after their circulation through society, provoke a new destiny for themselves when their first life cycle has come to an end”. (Chen, 2003, p. 11)

The chamber pot becomes a bell providing ancestral sounds. The history of China, the history of these women engaged in daily tasks find an echo in a society overwhelmed by overconsumption. The rhythmical sound of striking the pots mingles with the noise of water, surrounding the silent globe filled with contemporary consumer goods that have now been thrown away. Placed next to the accumulated electronic debris, the old pots are bestowed with a fresh power to evoke the past.

A hundred and one bells have been collected, a figure that generally means the end of one cycle and the *beginning* of a new era.<sup>7</sup> This figure is a palindrome and its reversibility is symbolized by the reflected elements of the artistic space: the suspended bells and the globe are next to each other and mutually send and receive their energy flows as image is to mirror. Both worlds question each other and reflect on one and another, in every sense of the word: actively thinking and sending back the other’s reflected image.

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There is no human representation in Chen Zhen’s work but installations always include evocative objects such as tools, household or electronic appliances, clothes, furniture (chamber pots, chairs, beds, tables), newspapers, etc. All objects used in everyday life. The *quotidian*, from the Latin word *quotidie*, meaning “every day”, points to what is diurnal;

<sup>7</sup> The figure 101 means the end of a cycle. For example the Taipei 101 tower (Taiwan) with 101 floors refers to the new century that was beginning at the time of construction.

“what happens every day and recurs everyday” Georges Perec wrote, “the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the habitual (...)”. (Perec, 1989, p. 11) Like Chen Zhen, the French writer has stressed the importance of banal things and urged us to question, “that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us, and that we usually fail to put into words (...)”. For him, the point is to try to understand “what is underneath, the infraordinary, the background noise, our quotidian existence, each and every instant of it”. (Perec, 1979, p. 4)

The chamber pots testify to the body’s transformation of food into waste. Here, the quotidian in question is usually hidden, confined to the domestic space. It should go unnoticed since it concerns something so intimate that it falls within the realm of a secret – from the Latin *secretus*, meaning “excluded” – to be kept out of sight. There in the museum, in broad daylight, Chen Zhen displays containers meant to receive impure matter coming from various body orifices: spit, blood, urine, excrement. Waste matter eliminated from the body causes disgust. The initial reaction, akin to repugnance, is first and foremost psychological; it may have a more moral signification that could extend to aversion to and rejection of the symbolic object. With soiled objects, one looks away and keeps at a distance.

Chen Zhen believed in the ability of art to filter into all spheres of daily life and to find relevant connections with human concerns. The chamber pots are the guardian of an age-old memory, but they also bear witness to the transformations of a rapidly evolving society. Chen Zhen’s critical approach to the principles of consumer society and Western capitalism goes hand in hand with his strong desire to change the world and improve the human condition. His purpose is to go beyond the first interpretation of the object, which should not be limited to a mere and insignificant “thing”. He resists a reality that was described by Raoul Vaneigem when he wrote that “the common sense of consumer society has brought the old expression *one must see things as they are* to its logical conclusion: whichever way you look, you see nothing but things”. (Vaneigem, 1992, p. 41)

For Chen Zhen, “found objects are living creatures. The meaning of the transformation occurring through my work also stems from my interest for issues regarding the human body and mind”. (Chen, 2003)

The chamber pot is an extension of the body through the agency of everyday gestures. The human body is the pivotal element of Chen Zhen’s work and is closely connected with his personal experience as he suffered from a rare, incurable disease – autoimmune haemolytic anaemia – from which he eventually died in 2000 aged 45. As early as 1992, he wanted to become a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. His condition both fostered and hampered his project. To better fight against the inevitable outcome<sup>8</sup>, he decided to consider recovery a “creative process”.

As in traditional Chinese medicine, his work mixes philosophy and practice. The spirit that shapes his installations and sculptures is rooted in the bipolar dialectic of Yin and Yang. He likes to bring together two things that were heretofore worlds apart. “If something is sour,” he said to Eleanor Heartney, “you mix it with something sweet. This is a typical Chinese contradiction, as Yin and Yang”.<sup>9</sup> (Uslip and Zur, 2003, p. 15–16) He often refers to the “six roots” of Buddhist philosophy, namely eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The six types of consciousness are dependent on the sensory information they convey.

Chen Zhen regards the artist as a therapist, and declares he is “concerned with the diagnosis of the world’s diseases”, and wants “to reconcile man and the world”. His approach aims to spiritually bring life back to objects that both testify to and suffer from the society we live in. The philosophical dimension of *Daily Incantations* is reflected through the resonance of two essential vital activities: the first, rooted in materiality – the daily cleansing of chamber pots – refers us to the other, the immaterial quest whose purpose is “cleansing yourself and cleansing the world...” Duality is constantly at work in the artist’s work. The infinitesimal is always connected to the infinitely great. Like Shitao, a famous Taoist monk and painter who saw what is most superficial and familiar as the real way into the deepest mysteries<sup>10</sup> (1984, p. 22), Chen

8 Chen Zhen died in 2000 and was buried at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. In 2003, his close relations created an association for the promotion of the artist’s heritage and philosophy: the ADAC (friends of Chen Zhen Association).

9 Interviews between Chen Zhen and Eleanor Heartney in 1997.

10 “No matter how far you go, how high you climb, you must begin with a single step”.

Zhen uses material potentialities that are immediately visible to provide opportunities for deeper metamorphosis.

Chen Zhen's works constantly question the world, following a cross-cultural way of thinking that links spirituality and technology, the material and immaterial. Central to his artistic practice is the sharing of knowledge and skills in the field of art, medicine, ecology, politics and cultural identity between the two worlds he belonged to. Chen Zhen was born in Shanghai in 1955 and raised in a family of doctors who spoke English and French. From a very early age he showed an interest in the relations between traditional Chinese philosophy – in those days forbidden – and Western culture. In 1986, he took exile in Paris. Chen Zhen was a genuine world citizen who could work either in New York, Shanghai or his adopted city Paris.

Sharing one's culture and experience with others nurtured Chen Zhen's artistic project. He sheds light on the in-between and interval where the relationship between contemporary art and life could find a fresh start. His strategy is driven by a wish to bring together artists and the communities in which they live, to help them work with each other and better understand their differences and similarities. The concept of "in-between" is essential to his creative process. It means the following between two cultures, two worlds or two places, a pristine space still exists that allows new opportunities for developing bonds, connections and encounters.

During the course of his work, Chen Zhen built a genuine life project and thought pattern that he called "transexperience". This bears no relation with the experience of travelling, accessible to anyone who travels throughout the world, which he believed to be "superficial and banal after all". "Transexperience" is rather a "spiritual loneliness and internalization of successive life experiences". The point is to adapt oneself, to multiply experiences and pay close attention to what is happening. This concept can be experienced by immersing oneself into life, mixing with other people and identifying oneself with them. The purpose is to "become a kind of *cultural homeless*, belonging to nobody but possessing everything. This type of experience is a world in its own right".<sup>11</sup> (Chen, 2003)

To be constantly on the move is of the essence, as this Chinese proverb

11 Correspondence between Nehama Guralnik and Chen Zhen, Tel Aviv, February 8, 1998.

quoted by Chen Zhen says: "Mobility offers people chances to survive, while trees will die if moved to another place".<sup>12</sup> (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 150) He explained this mode of thinking and art practice as follows:

*Transexperience consists of a double intersection. The first is the intersection between my experience of old things and my experience of new ones; the second is the intersection between my own experience in connection and the experience of others, of everyone else – for instance with Westerners. Nothing is self-contained, nothing is fixed. To immerse oneself in life, to adapt to changing circumstances, to blend and identify oneself with others. This is the strategy of water. Transparent, changeable, moving, penetrating; it runs through all experiences, continents, people (...)*

(Rosenberg, 2003)

It should be noted that the concept of "transexperience" originates from the time he was compelled to stay in Tibet in 1983, just before leaving China. His meeting with Tibetan monks clearly factored in his subsequent art work. He says he had been so emotionally and spiritually affected by their way of life and praying, that their spirit would live inside of him forever. He came away very much impressed by the simplicity of Tibetan life, one of a continuous daily ritual:

*Tibetans face extremely harsh natural conditions and their physical life is closely tied to their religious and spiritual beliefs. This results in outstanding stamina and quietness, a way of life impervious to the attraction of material things.*

(Heartney, 2000, p. 25)

Chen Zhen endeavoured to incorporate "greater vision and daily incantations" into his way of seeing the world and the creative process. The progression of his disease prompted him to make a subject and a philosophy of his life experience in order to turn it into an open, ever-active work. He strove to depict the conflicts between humans, nature and consumer society within a wider perspective. His aim was to thoroughly examine human activities while safeguarding a visual vocabulary and a way of thinking that were truly his own.

12 Transexperience, a conversation between Chen Zhen and Zhu Xian.

*Daily Incantations* has a powerful aesthetic dimension because of the simplicity of the installation and visual language. The mass of chamber pots is impressive because of the quiet strength surrounding the chaotic globe. The pots are hermetically closed as if waiting to be struck. Contradictory energy flows strengthen the ever-present tension between the various elements; between the immateriality of the sounds and the rough and uncompromising materiality of the volumes; between the plain alignment of the bells and the disorganised piling up of electronic waste; between the rigidity of the containers and the softness of their content; between the reference to the triviality of nature's needs and the appeal to perceptible transcendence.

The anchoring in triviality is essential if the work is to open onto new dimensions. The radical nature of the installation requires going beyond appearances and better sharing the invisible elements. Catherine Francblin's remark about the works of Wim Delvoye, a contemporary visual artist, is quite relevant. She notes that "the more a work appeals to the physical world, the stronger its metaphysical shock wave". (Francblin, 2002) Beyond appearances, what becomes of these daily trivial objects whose physical and phenomenal potential is implied? The work, questioned in its very materiality, is a space calling for further metamorphosis.

Chamber pots are like vaults full of images and thus constitute an active memorial. Bells are like reliquaries; what is dropped inside is waiting for a visibility that until now has been hidden. The perception of these objects should not be limited to their density, permanence and resistance to being anything but what they are. According to Dominique Viart "All things exist as they are perceived, thought, dreamt, there is no object world". (Viart, 2005) To apprehend this installation, observers should be receptive, let their senses be stimulated to have the opportunity to perceive images waiting to be seen and hence be given meaning. Maurice Merleau-Ponty said "The visible rests upon a total visibility that is to be recreated and that liberates the phantoms captive in it". (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 30)

The receptiveness of the work requires a subtle attitude in which intuition plays a major part. The etymology of the word *Intuition* strangely returns us to the eye in that it comes from the Latin word *in-tueri* meaning "looking closely inward", "to keep an eye on", that is to protect. The

translation of *Intuition* into Chinese includes the concept of perception, similar to an attraction between a person and the contemplated object. Cyrille Javary, a specialist of the *Yi Jing*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, says that for the ancient Chinese, "the look was a ray sent out by the eye to strike the object before being sent back (like the radar of a bat). This leads to the beautiful saying "Chi-Ze's beauty is in the eye of her beholder. (Chi-Ze was the most beautiful woman in Chinese history)".<sup>13</sup>

Like the artist at work, observers do not see what they are looking at but rather "the way a thing looked at is co-present with them and the way they are co-present with this thing". (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 30) The word "appearance" reveals its ambiguity. It no longer refers to an illusion, to something that conceals and mystifies. It goes back to its Latin origin when *apparere* meant "presence". Being able to see what is present is central to the question of the "visible".<sup>14</sup> Presence refers to what exists here and now; "what is before me", hence "what is impending, urgent", what is obvious and can be perceived through the senses.<sup>15</sup> It echoes a will to exist intensely; it is a strength that deeply affects observers and invites them to share in a tangible experience.

The visibility of the work depends on the connection that can be established with observers. Without any desire to see, there is no image. Marie-José Mondzain indicates that the strength of the visible comes from "its ability to veil, build a gap between what is to be seen and the object of desire". (Mondzain, 2002, p. 38) The image must make the invisible – or "unseen" for Jean-Luc Marion (2007) – visible. The distinction between "unseen" and "invisible" is essential here because it conveys the idea of an image waiting to be seen, and hence be given a meaning. The observer plays an active part.

The wish to capture this indistinct and enigmatic visibility is a forceful argument for our purpose. The artistic installation *Daily Incantations* highlights the gap between the world and us and produces signs that allow us to communicate with it. Chen Zhen wished to work in the

13 Cyrille Javary, *Une histoire de regard*, interviews by Patrice van Eersel, (available online). <http://www.nouvellescles.com/article> [Accessed on March 23, 2009].

14 Until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the French word "visible" meant "able to see".

15 The word *Praesens* as understood by Emile Benveniste.

space between things, in this apparent void in which, when seen from another viewpoint, turns out to be an interval of plenitude and harmony. Chen Zhen remained faithful to the philosophical sources that enrich his work; he was aware that what occurs in images is what lies in the interval, in the space between things, in what lies “in-between” and eludes us.

As Georges Didi-Hubermann points out, “an image is no mere reproduction of things, but rather the gap between things, an interval made visible”. (2000, p. 144) Chen Zhen brings representation into play by intervening between images and things, between usual objects and the use he makes of them. Capturing meaningful moments of everyday life urges him to ponder on the nature of objects and to encourage thinking by creating metaphoric tensions. What occurs in images is what lies in the in-between space, in the interval. From a Taoist perspective, the genuine energy of our Universe does not reside in elements but rather in relationships. He adds:

*The in-between space is invisible, intangible, and immaterial: movements, shifts, exchanges and transformations that result in a dynamic process of change and evolution.*

(Chen, 2003)

The “Median Void”<sup>16</sup> is a dynamic and active notion that attracts and galvanizes the flow of energy according to the *Ying* and *Yang* principles of alternation and *complementarity*. François Chen explains “The Void allows things that are already *full* to eventually reach their full potential”. (Cheng, 1991, p. 56)

The installation endlessly demonstrates its strength; its appearance is meant to spread out constantly and cannot appear immobile. What is unfinished is by no means unaccomplished; any settled form would

16 In China, the concept of Void appeared as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in the *Book of Changes*, one of the oldest books of Chinese philosophy. This concept is not exclusively used by Taoists but also by Confucians. It will become a pivotal theme for the main masters of Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism from the 9<sup>th</sup> century on.

be threatened by inertia if it were not constantly transformed by the creative energy that gives it life. The notion of the unaccomplished is a fundamental principle specific to any creative process that opens up the artwork so that it eventually reaches its full potential. Nothing is fixed. *Nothing is accomplished*.<sup>17</sup> The movement seems continuous and unfinished. The interval allows the emergence of the image which, as soon as it has appeared, tends to vanish into an endlessly continuous flow.

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*Daily Incantations* is a forceful work whose visual strength is served by a simple and accurate creative process. It reflects the artist’s experience and his open and generous vision. Just as the lotus is deeply rooted in mud, the stem developing through the dark waters and then majestically blooming above the water, Chen Zhen’s work is a metaphor for transformation. The dialogue between the invisible dark spaces and the visible light occurs thanks to the symbolic strength of the lotus; its bright corolla comes out of the shadow and sludge to bloom in the daylight. *Daily Incantations* is nurtured by the many forces at work in its hidden depths. What is “at last seen” reveals the underground forces suddenly rising up. The point is to seize this emergence, this unfolding of reality, which can only exist in the shared experience of looking.

17 John Cage, *Manifesto*, 1952.

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