

Writing on the Wall

A site-specific live performance of Tai Chi by voluntary participants arranged in a single line along the demarcation of the former Berlin Wall. Using human bodies in fluid, Chinese-calligraphy-like movement, the Tai Chi becomes a form of 'writing' on the former Wall.

This project is inspired by the political, economic and cultural changes in China and Germany in 1989 and after. While East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania moved towards democracy in 1989, China killed pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square. To date, China remains a country ruled by a single party that denies its citizens basic human rights and freedom of speech, executes dissidents and imprisons numerous liberal thinkers, including 2010 Nobel peace-prize winner Liu Xiaobo and artist Ai Weiwei for speaking out on such issues.

In this context, the performance of a non-violent traditional Chinese practice on a site that marks the collapse of communism and the reunification of Germany in 1989 invites remembrance of that year's key world events. It may also symbolise hope for non-violent resolution of conflicts and freedom of expression and from political persecution in countries with oppressive regimes in the future.

Description

Led by several Tai Chi masters, over 150 participants recruited from local communities in Berlin will perform Tai Chi. They will be arranged in a single line along the cobblestone path that demarcates the former Wall, starting near the remnants of the Wall in Potsdamer Platz, extending along Ebertstrasse towards Brandenburger Gate, ending near the Holocaust Memorial (Image 1). Wearing white tops and black trousers, the performers will form a half-kilometre human meridian moving fluidly in meditative, synchronous motion (Image 2).

Why Tai Chi?

Tai Chi is used in this project because of its peaceful nature and its pre-communist origin.

Developed from traditional martial arts in China centuries ago, Tai Chi focuses on non-violent, defensive movements. It was influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, underpinned by the concept of using meditative breathing and body movements to maintain the balance of internal opposing forces (Yin and Yang) and the flow of vital energy (Qi) along meridians (linear channels). With its fluid movements resembling ballet in slow motion, Tai Chi is still practiced widely in China as a form of exercise and meditation, often in large groups in urban public parks.

The black and white clothing worn by the participants will offer both visual unity and a visual form of dialectic opposites - suggesting the black-white Yin/Yang symbol, communism past (East Germany) and present (China), absence and presence (former Wall and cobblestone path), division/unification.

Why Potsdamer Platz?

Potsdamer Platz is an iconic historical site that could be seen to symbolise division and re-unification, trauma and healing.

After the clearance of bomb-damaged buildings post-World War Two and the construction of the Wall in 1961, the once busy Potsdamer Platz was physically divided in two and became a desolate wasteland (Image 3). Redevelopment began after the Wall fell in 1989, transforming the wasteland where the Berlin Wall once stood into a vibrant site filled by prominent new buildings for entertainment, shopping, hotels and culture. It is Berlin's most striking example of the urban renewal in the 1990s that contributed to turning the city into the 'New Berlin' (Image 4). However, remnants of the Wall are still present and displayed within the square, and the location of the former Wall is demarcated by a narrow row of 2 cobblestones inset across pavements and roads running throughout the city, providing a memento of its past (Images 5 & 6). Given its rich political history, symbolic meaning, and popularity as a site for tourists, business and local people today, Potsdamer Platz is an ideal location for this project.

Potsdamer Platz is also a site that could signify trauma and healing. In traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts, meridians are invisible lines or channels between specific points in the body, along which the energy or Qi of the psychophysical system is believed to flow. When this energy is interrupted, imbalance or illness occurs. In a similar way, the city of Berlin can be likened to a social body, whose flow of energy (migration, communication, information) was severely interrupted by the construction of the Wall, resulting in a giant 'wound' – the wasteland around the once vibrant Potsdamer Platz. The subsequent fall of the Wall enabled the flow of energy to be re-established, and psychophysical healing to occur. The cobblestone path that demarcates the former Wall can therefore be likened to both a scar and a seemingly invisible yet subtly visible meridian, through which positive energy can flow again.

Furthermore, the start and end points of the performance could signify the chronological progression of healing – from the fall of the Wall in 1989, to the redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz throughout the 1990s, and the completion of the Holocaust Museum in 2005.

Why 'Writing on the Wall'?

'Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz are the most blatant expression of how the Wall put a stop to Berlin's urban development. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, new densely-populated quarters rose phoenix-like from the ashes of the old border wasteland' - wall text for Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz, Exhibition of Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Berlin, 2009 (Image 7). This 'writing' on the Wall is a point of departure, physically and metaphorically, for the performance.

The Tai Chi performance can be akin to a form of 'writing' on the former Wall. A once solid and divisive structure is thus re-inscribed using people in gentle, meditative motion.

In addition, 'the wall' can refer not only to the Berlin Wall, but also to the Great Wall of China, the country from which Tai Chi originates. While the Berlin Wall and communism fell in East Germany in 1989, the Great Wall and communism still stand in China today.

'Writing on the wall' is also an expression commonly used in the English language to suggest a portent of doom. In this context, the project hopes to highlight the importance of remembering the past to ensure that no 'writing on the wall' is ignored in the future.

Complementary element: Video

I also propose to screen an existing video work to complement the live performance. Entitled *Good Morning Shanghai*, it is a montage of Tai Chi and other morning exercises practised by Shanghai people in an urban public park, under the watchful eyes of a statue of Marx and Engel (Image 8). It will offer the people of Berlin an example of how Tai Chi is often performed in public spaces in China as an integral part of their daily routine. A full-screen clip of this video can be seen at: http://ericfong.com/works/index.php?project_id=4&work_id=107

Biography

Eric Fong is a visual artist based in London. He was born in Hong Kong and educated in Canada and the UK, where he gained an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Informed by his experience of migration across continents over the last few decades and former career as a medical doctor, Fong's art practice explores issues relating to politics of identity and difference, the body, health and disability. He is particularly interested in social engagement, and his recent works have developed from collaboration with people of diverse ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds.

Fong's work has been exhibited across the UK and internationally, including EAST International 2004, Norwich; APT Gallery, London; International 3 Gallery and Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester; Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto; Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest; and numerous international short film festivals. Fong was awarded a prize by Victoria Miro at *Creekside Open 2007*, APT Gallery and a visual arts grant by Arts Council England in 2008.

One of his films is in the Arts Council England Collection.

Brief CV

Selected Exhibitions

- 2011 *Time is Love* International Video Art Exhibition, Sint-Lukas Gallery, Brussels, Belgium; Kulter Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Espace apART, Guangzhou, China
Saltburn Film Festival, Saltburn by the Sea, UK
- 2009 *Seeing Beyond*, APT Gallery, London, UK (solo exhibition)
Seeing Beyond, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, UK (solo exhibition)
Final Cut short film screenings, Komedia, Brighton Festival, Brighton, UK
- 2008 *Experimental Shorts*, Tenderpixel Gallery, London, UK
Video Art screening, Art-Claims-Impulse Gallery, Berlin, Germany
Gstaadfilm Festival, Gstaad, Switzerland
700IS International Experimental Film & Video Festival, Egilsstadir, Iceland
Elixir screening programme, Stroud Valley Artspace, Stroud, UK
- 2007 *Creekside Open* (prize awarded by Victoria Miro), APT Gallery, London, UK
Buffalo 07, Black & Asian Film Festival, London, UK
Slack Video, Hull International Short Film Festival, Hull, UK
Behind Closed Doors, The Lightbox Gallery and Museum, Woking, UK
East End Film Festival, Genesis Cinema, London, UK
Future Shorts Film Festival, London, UK
Saison Video, Lille, France
- 2006 *Cinacity*, Brighton Film Festival, Brighton, UK
Field of Vision, Beijing New Art Projects, 798 Art District, Beijing, China
Gstaadfilm Festival, Gstaad, Switzerland
Unnatural Selection, Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery, Shrewsbury, UK
Body Navigation international contemporary arts festival, Elagin Island Gallery, St. Petersburg
- 2005 *VAD Video and Digital Arts International Festival*, Girona, Spain
Super Shorts Film Festival (touring), London, Manchester, Glasgow and other cities, UK
Imaginaría International Short Film Festival, Conversano, Italy
Simultan International Video/sound Festival, Timisoara, Romania
After Hiroshima, Brunei Gallery, School of African & Oriental Studies, London UK
Video Showcase, Angell Gallery, Toronto, Canada
Big Screen programme, Cornerhouse/BBC, Exchange Square, Manchester, UK
- 2004 *EAST International 2004*, Norwich Gallery, Norwich, UK
Pilot:1 International Art Forum, Old Limehouse Town Hall, London, UK
Breathe, live art events at Bow Festival and other locations in London, UK
- 2003 *Remembering the Present*, Centre for Arts Education, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK
Brief Encounters International Short Film Festival, DepicT! competition, Bristol, UK
Shot by the Sea Digital Film Festival, Heritage Museum, Hastings, UK
- 2002 *Majority Rules*, Free Gallery, Glasgow, UK
Digitized Bodies/ Virtual Spectacles, Mestna Galerija (City Gallery), Ljubljana, Slovenia
Atoms in the Family, International 3 Gallery, Manchester, UK
- 2001 *Phantoms*, The Old Operating Theatre, Museum & Herb Garret, London, UK (solo exhibition)
Digitized Bodies/Virtual Spectacles, Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, Hungary

Education

- 2001 M.A. in Fine Art, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK
2000 B.F.A. (Honours), York University, Toronto, Canada

Collections

Arts Council England, UK
The Lightbox Gallery & Museum, Woking, UK

Awards

- 2008 Arts Council England – visual arts grant
2007 Creekside Open exhibition prize (awarded by Victoria Miro), London, UK

Image 1

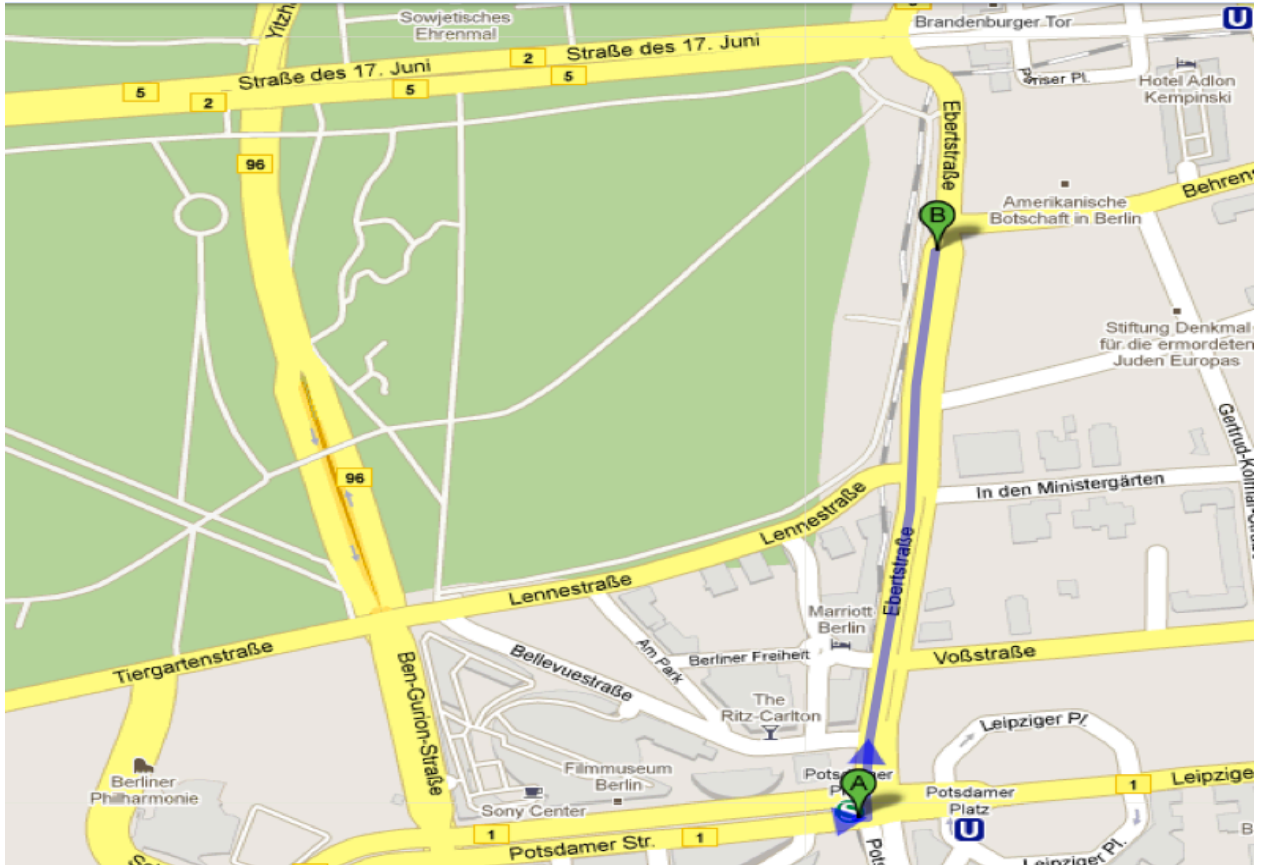


Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Stone marking of former Berlin Wall

Image 6



Image 7



Image 8

