

Performing the Bride: Sexuality and the Environment in Kong Ning's Marriage Series

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ABSTRACT

Performing the Bride: Sexuality and the Environment in Kong Ning's Marriage Series

Amelia Wong-Mersereau

This thesis examines the public performance art practice of Beijing-based artist Kong Ning (b. 1958). Since 2013, Kong has been producing large-scale bridal gowns for an ongoing project she calls her “‘marriage series’ art performances.” Each dress in the series is made of a collection of symbolic materials: orange cones, 3M facemasks, eggs, plastic inflatables, leaves, even found detritus. She performs a peripatetic ritual in cities across the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and around the world. For the most part, these take place in front of significant monuments such as the Beijing National Stadium (2016) or more recently the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2017) and the Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland (2018). Once on site, Kong embodies her role as the bride of the earth, marrying herself to the sky in an expression of love for the planet and environmental advocacy. This thesis argues that beyond reading her performances as acts of protest against environmental degradation, Kong asserts a unique proposition around human to nonhuman relationality. As a woman artist over the age of 60, she represents a marginalised identity which she places at the forefront in her performance art series. In this way, Kong expresses a radical form of relationality that intersects marriage and sexuality in a feminist ecological critique. To demonstrate my argument, I conduct an analysis of Kong’s *Marry the Blue Sky* (2014-2015) and *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* (2016) among other performances in the series, using theories of gender, sexuality, and ecofeminism. The many tensions around Kong’s performance practice, including the sociopolitical context of the PRC and its strict regulation of activist art, make for a compelling case study that is deeply relevant to contemporary discourses in the field of art history.

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INTRODUCTION

As the People's Republic of China (PRC) becomes the largest economic power in the world, estimated to replace the United States in the next fifteen years,¹ it is also home to some of the most polluted cities. In 2013, Beijing scored a 755 on the World Health Organization's (WHO) scale measuring pollution. According to the WHO, "a score above 500 [on this scale is] more than 20 times the level of particulate matter in the air deemed safe."² That same year, Chinese contemporary artist Kong Ning (b. 1958) began designing elaborate bridal gowns for a project called "'marriage series' art performances."³ By marrying herself to the sky in this ongoing public art series, Kong's goal is to raise awareness around the environmental crisis and express her love for nature. Viewed in the context of current discourses of the Anthropocene and posthumanism, this seemingly innocuous gesture fundamentally challenges our fixed understanding of the human and nonhuman worlds and proposes a rethinking of our relationship to the planet.

Each of the large-scale wedding dresses in Kong's marriage performance series is made of collected materials: orange and red cones, 3M facemasks, eggs, plastic inflatables, leaves, even found detritus.⁴ Many of them consist of a gown and veil or headdress, often followed by a train. The length of the train varies between performances, with more modest gowns being three meters long and larger statement pieces having multiple trains measuring up to forty meters. There are

1 Kishore Mahbubani, "What China Threat?" *Harper's Magazine*, February 2019, <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/02/what-china-threat/>.

2 Edward Wong, "On a Scale of 0 to 500, Beijing's Air Quality Tops 'Crazy Bad' at 755," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/science/earth/beijing-air-pollution-off-the-charts.html>.

3 Chi Hua, *Bride of the Earth*, trans. Wang Chiying (Beijing: New World Press, 2018), 56.

4 These materials may be directly appliquéd onto ready-made dresses or in other cases Kong may be constructing the gowns or elements of them from scratch and incorporating these materials.

over thirty gowns in Kong's marriage performance series and each one is arguably a high fashion garment in its own right.⁵

In December 2015, Kong performed *Marry the Blue Sky* outside the China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters in Beijing [fig. 1]. Photographs from this performance show the top of the building completely obscured by a thick grey smog. Kong arrived on site in an entirely white wedding dress made of 999 3M face masks.⁶ The artist refers to herself as “the bride of the universe and a child of nature.”⁷ Each face mask is hand sewn to the wedding dress and train, which is made of a white netting material and is fixed to the artist's head, gathering at the top in a cluster of fabric. The dress is floor length with a traditionally feminine A-line silhouette. Details like the structural mock neck and sleeveless translucent bodice lend a modern flair to its design. The bodice reveals opaque ribbing and two cups beneath a sheer layer to cover the wearer's breasts. Here the dress appears to fit awkwardly, since Kong's bra underneath the dress is visibly lower than where the white cups rest. While *Marry the Blue Sky* reveals more of the artist's body than other dresses in her series, for the most part, Kong is obscured. Her face is covered almost entirely by the 3M mask on her mouth and nose, and the train attached to her head drapes over her bare arms and shoulders. From behind, it looks as though some undefined frilly mass is wandering

⁵ Ibid., 102. This information conflicts with some reporting which states that there are over sixty gowns. See Elaine Yau, “Fabulous frocks: Chinese artist takes fashion to its extremes with wearable art for a cause – ‘maybe people say I’m crazy’,” *South China Morning Post*, January 7, 2020, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/article/3044797/weight-world-her-shoulders-chinese-artist-takes-fashion>.

⁶ As with many other artworks made before the global pandemic of COVID-19, the meaning of Kong's work has become temporarily coloured. The facemask is now ubiquitous, though it was already common in the PRC to protect individuals against air pollution. Kong's use of facemasks in *Marry the Blue Sky* and other performances may be shocking to audiences for reasons other than what the artist may have intended. It can be read as the conspicuous display of a material that is in serious need, a hot commodity, and if Kong had conceptualized this work today it may have been difficult or perhaps impossible to procure the necessary materials.

⁷ Hua, 105.

through Beijing's busy streets [fig. 2]. The performance is documented in photographs which show Kong gazing upward in search of her groom, "blue sky."⁸

Importantly, this is not the only time Kong has performed *Marry the Blue Sky*. Photographs from October 2014 depict Kong performing a piece by the same name at the Beijing Exhibition Center [fig. 3]. In this version, the dress is also made of 999 3M face masks, but the upper bodice is constructed differently and the train is several meters longer. The gown's neckline is ruffled and has three-quarter length bell sleeves made out of more masks. The length of the train undoubtedly adds to the weight of the dress, making it more challenging for Kong to walk in. It is still fixed to her head but this time she looks like a gift, as the train accumulates into a kind of flourishing bow of white fabric atop her head. Despite these differences, the dress appears to be virtually the same as the one performed a year later in 2015, which begs the question: was this 2014 version of *Marry the Blue Sky* modified for its performance at the CCTV? If so, why? Due to the lack of research and writing around Kong it is difficult to answer these questions with certainty.

Kong's performances are peripatetic rituals between the artist and her environment. They take place in public sites both within and outside the PRC, occurring for the most part in urban settings around significant monuments, such as the Beijing National Stadium (2016) or more recently the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2017) and the Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland (2018). In 2019 she staged performances in multiple countries, uploading photographs to her Instagram account from cities like Vancouver, Mexico, Dusseldorf, and Washington D.C.

⁸ The romantic imagery and love for the planet in Kong's performance series carries over into her painting practice. Works like *Valentine's Day* (2014) and *Dreamland Horse* (date unknown) exemplify Kong's interest in our relationships as humans with the natural and nonhuman world. *Valentine's Day* depicts a clothed woman next to a seemingly naked Kong, surrounded by pink and red rose like flowers, their bodies intertwining with the climbing vines. *Dreamland Horse* shows a female figure adorned with headgear and earrings, riding with and seemingly becoming one with a horse. At times, it is difficult to discern where the bodies end and nature begins in Kong's paintings.

Whether the dress is especially large or uses colourful materials, the artist makes herself highly visible in these spaces. Once on site, Kong performs a marriage to the sky, struggling under the weight of her dress to walk through streets and interact or take photographs with locals and tourists. Since there is no official wedding ceremony, these performances are symbolic, meant as an expression of love, advocacy, and call to action for environmental protection.

The rhetoric in the Chinese press frames Kong as an artist who is “raising awareness” or advocating for the Earth’s protection,⁹ whereas international media sources are more forthcoming about recognizing these performances as protest or activism.¹⁰ Despite her frequent public appeals for environmental protection, Kong is able to practice freely without government censorship.¹¹ This raises several questions, given that the PRC is known for its censorship of artists and activists who may try to deal with subjects such as the 1989 protests at Tiananmen Square, the re-education camps for Turkic-speaking Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang, or the independence of Tibet and Taiwan. Is there an acceptable form of protest art for the PRC when it comes to the environmental crisis?¹² What element of Kong’s art renders her public performances nonthreatening to authorities?

⁹ See “Artist conducts ‘hot wave’ performance art in Jilin,” *Chinadaily.com.cn*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201808/20/WS5b7a385fa310add14f386b25.html>; “Chinese artist appeals for unity against global warming in Poland,” *Chinadaily.com.cn*, December 17, 2018, <http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/17/WS5c174994a3107d4c3a0013da.html>.

¹⁰ See Charlie Gillis, “Why China’s Artists are Making Waves and Getting Away With It,” *Macleans.ca*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/world/why-chinas-artists-are-making-waves-and-getting-away-with-it/#gallery/china-art/slide-6>.

¹¹ In her interview with Studio International, Kong describes more than one encounter with the police during public performances, but only to describe how after their initial impression of her as suspicious, they became accustomed to her performances and would allow her to proceed. Kong Ning, “Kong Ning: ‘Being a Witness Mentally Scared Me,’” interview by Lilly Wei, trans. Catherine Cheng, *Studio International*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/kong-ning-video-interview-artist-activist>.

¹² I credit the art historian Jenny Lin for this line of questioning, which she raised in a personal correspondence with me about my thesis.

Kong's critique of government inaction is overlooked by authorities for two reasons. The first may be that the government is generally disinterested in art that addresses climate change.¹³ Second, Kong's marriage performances are characterized by their zany and eccentric aesthetic. Spectators often believe that Kong is participating in an haute couture fashion shoot rather than an activist gesture.¹⁴ In the "China" episode of the Vice television series *States of Undress*, Kong tells the reporter: "These days people don't understand me, especially in China. People think I'm crazy."¹⁵ It is precisely these elements that allow Kong to insert an even more subversive message besides the explicitly ecocritical one. This thesis argues that beyond reading her performances as acts of protest against environmental degradation, Kong asserts a unique proposition around human to nonhuman relationality.¹⁶ As a woman artist over the age of 60, Kong embodies and performs her gendered and sexual otherness through the marriage series. In this way, she expresses a radical form of relationality that intersects an alternative marriage and sexuality with a feminist ecological critique.

13 In an interview with Chinese contemporary artist Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963), she tells the Guardian that she is not afraid of being persecuted for her ecocritical art, saying: "No, because my work doesn't demand objection to anything in particular. And the Chinese government doesn't consider [sic] pollution to be a sensitive topic. If anything it is our bodies that are sensitive!" Monica Tan, "Chinese artist makes waves, and ice, to highlight environmental pollution," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2014, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/jun/19/chinese-artist-makes-waves-and-ice-to-highlight-environmental-pollution>.

14 Celia Hatton, "China pollution: Colourful anti-smog protest in Beijing," *BBC News*, last modified December 7, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-35024904/china-pollution-colourful-anti-smog-protest-in-beijing>.

15 *States of Undress*, season 1, episode 6, "China," hosted by Haley Gates, executive produced by Al Brown and Nomi Ernst Leidner, aired May 11, 2016, on Viceland. https://www.viceland.com/en_us/video/china/570ea3f1e09fd5e22f74b0a1.

16 We may also think beyond the categories of human and nonhuman to consider a less binaristic and anthropocentric view. See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis will analyze specific works from Kong's marriage performance art series, primarily *Marry the Blue Sky* (2014-2015), *Orange Horns Bride* (2015), and *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* (2016). I have chosen these works because they are some of the more well documented performances in Kong's series and because they best exemplify the themes I have identified across her body of work. Additionally, this particular selection of works highlights a range of tensions at play in Kong's practice. Rather than shy away from these tensions, I believe that thinking through the more fraught elements of her work reveals the complexities of this case study and the challenges in conducting a traditional art historical investigation of a contemporary Chinese artist.

Due to various constraints including time, access (linguistic and physical), and budget, I was unable to interview Kong or see her performances in person. I therefore conduct my visual and performance analysis of her works using photographic and video documentation. I understand "performance" to mean, as Elin Diamond puts it, both "embodied acts [...] witnessed by others" and a "thing done [...] remembered, misremembered."¹⁷ Diamond emphasizes the importance of the "re" in her definition, since a performance can include other previous performances (i.e. gender performance) while creating new meaning and experience. In this way, I also understand performance as Amelia Jones defines it: "the reiterative enactment across time of meaning (including that of the "self" or subject) through embodied gestures, language, and/or modes of signification."¹⁸ These definitions of performance not only foreground the intersection of gender and sexuality in my discussion of Kong's marriage series, but are especially important to my third

¹⁷ Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.

¹⁸ Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds. *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd, 2012), 12.

chapter in which I conduct a transnational comparative analysis with other Asian women performance and body artists.

Working from visual documentation of Kong's performances means that I do not always have access to certain contextual details, such as who was involved in the making or staging of the dress, what exactly the materials are, how long the performance lasted, whether or not it is commissioned, or what the public's reaction was. In terms of the afterlife of the bridal gowns, they appear to all be stored in the artist's house and I have found no evidence that anyone collects them. I rely on information from news articles, the artist's Instagram account, and other websites and blogs which are not always reliable or objective. For instance, news articles covering Kong's performances are frequently published by *China Daily*, a publication owned and run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Is she therefore being strategically upheld to signal a government that tolerates environmental critique?¹⁹ In terms of published works in English that feature or are about Kong, there are only Tong Yujie's *Chinese Feminist Art* (2018) and Chi Hua's *Bride of the Earth* (2018). Additionally, there are no critical reviews of her work and Kong is not widely written about, a fact due in part perhaps to her status as a marginalised and relatively 'outsider' artist who previously had a career in an entirely different field.²⁰ For these reasons and

¹⁹ While researching this case study, I have grappled with questions like this around Kong, as well as inconsistencies between sources about her biography and artistic practice. Not only does a language barrier hinder my ability to investigate further, but the PRC has its own internet, separated from ours by a nearly impenetrable wall. For more on this see Raymond Zhong, "How China Walled Off the Internet," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/18/world/asia/china-internet.html>.

²⁰ Several aspects of Kong's biography cited in online and print sources offer conflicting details about her life. She worked at the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Beijing Municipal People's Procuratorate from 1981 to 1988. She went on to work as a defense lawyer for twelve years, serving prisoners facing the death penalty (Hua, 1). According to Hua, it was in "the early 1980s" that Kong moved to Beijing to begin work at the municipal procuratorate, resigning in 1989 to then take the bar exam and become "a practicing lawyer, defending death row inmates and speaking for migrant workers" (Hua, 18). Alternatively, the *South China Morning Post* reports that "in 1992, she co-founded a legal practice with several lawyers" (Yau, 2020).

because of the intersecting themes in her artistic practice, I firmly believe that a thesis written about Kong is not only necessary but relevant to contemporary art discourse.

My use of documentation to conduct an analysis of Kong's series is informed by the theories of the following performance art historians. Jones importantly challenges the prioritization of the live performance over its documentation, defending the use of what she calls the "traces" of a performance. These include photographs, audio, and video documentation, all of which Jones deems valid in producing legitimate art historical analysis. Regardless of whether or not I witness a live performance in the flesh, there is no "unmediated relationship" and my experience of a performance through its documentation is "equally intersubjective."²¹ Furthermore, Philip Auslander writes that there are two distinct categories of performance documentation, "the *documentary* and the *theatrical*."²² In the case of the relationship between Kong's performances and their documentation, it is not evident which category they belong to. Her performances do not all receive the same level of attention in terms of how they are recorded.²³ Following Auslander's categories, it is therefore possible to read the documentation of Kong's work as documentary, given that the photographs and video recordings function in the traditional sense to record her performances, but also as theatrical, since some performances lack the contextual details to confirm that a performance – a durational piece in which the artist actually moved through space wearing the gown – even took place. This distinction raises the important question of whether or

21 Amelia Jones, "'Presence' *in absentia*: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 12.

22 Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd, 2012), 47 [emphasis in original.] Auslander goes on to point out that the distinction between these two categories is in fact shakier than may be traditionally thought and that in fact, they have a lot in common.

23 Some works such as *Marry the Blue Sky* clearly involved photographers who took a series of high-quality photographs that follow Kong through the performance, whereas only a few shoddy photographs exist of other works such as *Red Alert Dress* (2015). There is no way to know the reasons for this or if in fact each performance is actually documented the same and simply distributed differently across online platforms.

not Kong's bridal gowns are at times made with the sole intent of being photographed or filmed.²⁴ Meiling Cheng's coinage of the term "prosthetic performance" or the extension of the live (or *once-lived*) art through its documentation, is relevant here to understand how the documentation of these performances can become a kind of performance in their own right.²⁵ The sheer volume of photographs documenting Kong's marriage series reveals her determination to disseminate the sociopolitical message of her art, as well as a tendency toward self-promotion. Constantly posing for photographs during a performance enhances the illusion of a fashion shoot, enabling Kong's activism and preventing her from being censored or arrested. Thus, there are multiple reasons that justify my use of documentation in an analysis of Kong's performances, despite how limited my access to more specific details through these photographs and videos may be.

At this point, I should explain my position as writer and researcher in relation to my subject, and how I navigate the issues around that positionality. I bring my own set of negotiations to the study of Kong's work, engaging in a kind of 'cultural translation,' to use postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's concept. He describes, "the newness of cultural translation [as] akin to what Walter Benjamin describes as the 'foreignness of languages' [and] with the concept of 'foreignness' Benjamin comes closest to describing the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference."²⁶ Due to my upbringing and residency in North America, I recognize that I impose a Western gaze which is complicated by my background as mixed-race – Chinese and Canadian. My mother is a first-generation immigrant from Hong Kong who is also a visual artist. This informs my interest in Chinese women artists, particularly as they express themselves and explore identity politics through body and performance art. From the 1990s into the 2000s, the

²⁴ Auslander, 49.

²⁵ Meiling Cheng, "The Prosthetic Present Tense: Documenting Chinese Time-Based Art," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd, 2012), 180.

²⁶ Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), e-book, 325.

PRC saw an explosion of its contemporary art scene, in which “an almost uniformly male cohort of artists, noted for their bad boy political dissent, garnered attention on the international museum circuit and art market.”²⁷ It is still difficult to find Asian women artists listed in art history books, including those that claim to survey contemporary Asian art. In terms of representation at large-scale exhibitions, art historian Joan Kee points out that the number of women artists representing any Asian countries at the Venice Biennales between 1970 and 1995 was fewer than fifteen.²⁸ As such, my goal with this thesis is also to contribute to English language scholarship on underrepresented Chinese and Asian women artists.

One aspect of my mixed diasporic upbringing is that I did not learn to read or write Chinese and only speak some limited Cantonese. As a result, I understand and acknowledge the limitations of my research and align myself with Cheng who writes about Chinese performance art from a similar position. She describes: “my encounter with every Chinese artistic subject [is] an intercultural negotiation and my studies of his/her performance a sub-field of Sinology. [...] Even presuming that no neutral critical subject exists, my diasporic acculturation still raises the stakes of my transcontinental investigation.”²⁹ I am mindful of the gaze I cast upon my research subject and I recognize that I have been educated and acculturated in North America under a traditional Euro-Western system. That said, as someone who negotiates a bi-racial identity, who is in-between, I am also subject to the white Western gaze and thus personally invested in interrogating it. Although my approach is grounded in art history, I take issue with the colonialist Euro-Western

²⁷ Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), e-book, 7.

²⁸ Joan Kee, “What is Feminist about Contemporary Asian Women’s Art?” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, eds. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), 349. Recently, more female identifying artists are presenting at the Venice Biennale, with Shu Lea Cheang to be the first woman representing Taiwan and Naiza Khan representing Pakistan. See “Is the Future Female at the Venice Biennale?” accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.sothebysinstitute.com/news-and-events/news/future-female-venice-biennale>.

²⁹ Cheng (2012), 180.

tradition that underlies this discipline. I therefore build my analysis using theories of ecofeminism, new materialism, gender, sexuality and performance, which allow me to move beyond the conservative nature of the discipline of art history. I would also note that this thesis is not meant to be the definitive text about Kong's artistic practice. Throughout my research and analysis of her work, I have determined that Kong does not fit neatly into some of the theoretical frameworks that I apply as part of my methodology. I believe that this points to the singular nature of her performance art practice, which nevertheless deserves critical attention given the severe lack of English language scholarship on Asian women artists.

The first chapter of my thesis discusses the deployment of Kong's body in a marriage performance which, at first glance, can be construed as tying the knot so to speak on the problematic alignment of women and nature. Using Val Plumwood's ecofeminism and Qingqi Wei's Chinese ecofeminism to inform my analysis of Kong's *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* and *100,000 Green Leaves Dress* (2019), I argue that in fact this expression of love for the nonhuman challenges the dominant conception of male, female, and human as stable categories. I also examine how fashion, gender, and capitalism operate in the artist's relationship to space.

In the second chapter, I provide a brief history of Chinese marriage laws and a discussion of gender politics in the present-day PRC to better understand the significance of marriage in Kong's performance art. With the government's rhetoric around the phenomenon of "leftover" women and the country's current sex ratio imbalance, I identify a "moral/sex panic" in the PRC. As an unmarried woman in her 60s, Kong's public marriage performance art not only addresses these conditions but rebukes the government's pressures on women to marry. Furthermore, her decision to appropriate the bridal gown from heteronormative culture in order to marry the Earth is profoundly subversive, since this marriage does not fulfill the goal of producing a child. I

incorporate new materialist and ecosexual philosophies to unpack and articulate the radical form of relationality Kong proposes instead.

The third chapter builds on my analysis of the subversive qualities of Kong's marriage series through a discussion of her aesthetics. I conduct a transnational comparative analysis between Kong and three Japanese women artists who also strategically activate their bodies/selves in performance and body art. By disappearing into her own artwork, Kong participates in an aesthetic of body obfuscation that I believe is aligned with Sianne Ngai's conception of an aesthetic of consumption. This process of self-objectification and self-obliteration is a reaction to and confrontation of the white colonialist male gaze while also evoking aspects of ecofeminist philosophy and a oneness with the universe.

I conclude my thesis by asserting that Kong's artistic practice demonstrates a critical form of relationality that reflects a necessary creative approach to the current ecological crisis. Given her position as an outsider of society and of the art world, Kong's marriage performance series disrupts norms on several fronts, demonstrating how activism through art is possible in the PRC.

CHAPTER ONE

For the occasion of World Earth Day on April 22, 2016, Kong created the *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* [fig. 4]. In an interview with Studio International she says that the name of the piece comes from the expression, “I am the egg delivered by Earth.”³⁰ The performance took place in front of the National Centre for Performing Arts in Beijing (NCPA), nicknamed the Giant Egg. Located in the Tianmen Square district, this enormous shell-like structure was designed by French architect Paul Andreu (1938-2018) and is one of the largest and most significant cultural centres in the PRC.³¹ With an artificial lake surrounding the building and reflecting the glass and steel of its oval shell, the site is a picturesque location attracting many tourists. Compared to the A-line dresses in Kong’s marriage series, *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* is instead a ball gown silhouette. The artist’s body is almost completely indiscernible in the dress, due to the mounds of white fabric which contribute to a swollen almost pregnant effect. Only her bare arms and face are revealed. On her head, Kong wears a large basket-like crown made entirely of eggs, covered in chiffon, and tied under her chin in a bow. The fabric covering the wedding gown is the same lightweight chiffon used for the train. It is sheer and movable, catching the light as Kong walks around and poses for photographs with her audience of passersby. The eggs are delicately sewn to the gown and train, with some falling off during the performance. Kong’s *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* is thus a site-specific piece that links the organic shape of the NCPA to the materials used for the wedding dress. The popularity of the site increases the visibility of both Kong and her call for environmental protection.

³⁰ Kong, interview by Lilly Wei, trans. Catherine Cheng, *Studio International*, December 22, 2016.

³¹ Charlie Qiuli Xue, et al., “In search of identity: the development process of the National Grand Theatre in Beijing, China,” *The Journal of Architecture* 15, no. 4 (2010): 517.

Another explicit example where Kong incorporates organic and natural symbols into her bridal gowns is *100,000 Green Leaves Dress* (2019) [fig. 5]. Kong shared photographs of this performance on her Instagram account, explaining that the piece was a collaboration with the Chinese internet technology company NetEase and would tour several cities across the PRC.³² The *100,000 Green Leaves Dress* is sleeveless, with the upper part made of green fern plants and the lower skirt covered in plastic pool inflatables of frogs. There are two trains made of green fabric with the same ferns attached, and a third train between those two of green plastic inflatables in plant shapes. The trains, each one thirty meters long, do not appear to be attached to the dress but rather are being pulled on strings by the artist, who wraps them around her bare arms. She wears a green moss-covered globe on her head with plants sprouting from the top. It is a larger and heavier headdress than Kong usually wears. Visually, the gown is extravagant and lush, but it appears completely impractical to walk in. The artist juggled between lifting her dress as she walked, pulling the trains, and preventing her headdress from toppling over.

In order to promote her ecological message, Kong aligns herself with nature, using materials such as eggs and plants to adorn her wedding dresses. These specific examples highlight the contradictions in Kong's practice, notably her excessive use of plastic materials and her endorsement of women's alignment with nature. This chapter investigates Kong's work through an ecofeminist lens to determine how she grapples with these paradoxes and whether or not she reinforces the patriarchal power structures that she intends to subvert.

³² The extent of my knowledge of Kong's collaboration with NetEase comes from her Instagram page. There are photographs and poster images promoting Kong's *100,000 Green Leaves Dress* event that feature the company's logo and name. Kongning525252, "Thank you NetEase for always supporting my *100,000 Leaves*. On March 9, I will work with children in Shenzhen to make green artwork *Leaves*. Since 2016, NetEase has supported me to make hundreds of leaves with children in Beijing, Shandong, Guangdong, Tianjin and other places. One day I will use 100,000 leaves made by 100,000 children to make the world's largest leaf 100 meters long!" Instagram, photograph series, March 6, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuqwA5SFIFe/>.

Ecofeminism in the West and in the PRC

Initially coined in Françoise D'Eaubonne's 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, ecofeminism has been described as "bec[oming] popular only in the context of numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction, sparked-off initially by recurring ecological disasters."³³ According to Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, ecofeminism designates a grassroots social movement that grew out of "the feminist, peace and the ecology movements [...] in the late 1970s and early 1980s."³⁴ Behind this movement is a philosophy that the domination and oppression of women is deeply connected with that of nature. This is perhaps best explained by Val Plumwood who identifies "the problematic of nature [as being] so closely interwoven with that of gender."³⁵ For Plumwood there is a network of dualisms underpinning the problems of climate change and planetary abuse. Particularly in Western culture, these dualisms, such as reason and logic over nature and emotion, are also rooted in modernity. She explains that

[t]he concept of reason provides the unifying and defining contrast for the concept of nature, much as the concept of husband does for that of wife, as master for slave. Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him.³⁶

Much like western ecofeminism, Chinese ecofeminism can inform an ecocritical reading of Kong's work. Qingqi Wei locates Lu Shuyuan as one of the early writers and thinkers to theorize ecocriticism and ecofeminism in the PRC in 1989.³⁷ The goal of Chinese ecofeminism, as in the West, is to take issue with the dualisms that underpin society, such as culture over nature, or male

³³ Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 2014), e-book, 13.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

³⁷ Qingqi Wei, "Toward a Holistic Ecofeminism: A Chinese Perspective," *Comparative Literature Studies* 55, no. 4 (2018): 780.

over female. According to Wei, Chinese ecofeminism is significantly influenced by the ancient Chinese holistic philosophy of Daoism. The founder of Daoism, Laozi, links femininity with nature by defining “the Dao as the mother of the heaven and the earth.”³⁸ The two major principles of the female *yin* and the male *yang*, represent social order and harmony between humanity and nature. Wei uses literary texts to locate ecofeminism in Daoism. He cites a story that links a farmer’s wife to her natural environment, describing how “the border of her subject is extended until she and her environment are united.”³⁹ This kind of embodied merging of nature and female subjectivity speaks to the problematic relationship that Plumwood identifies, and which feminists across cultures have difficulty untangling. In Wei’s comparison of Western and Chinese ecofeminism, he claims that “the Chinese ‘feminine’ or *yin* mind comes to redress this degradation of women and femininity, as some Western researchers summarize this nondualistic agenda held consistently by Daoist thought which is also central to ecology.”⁴⁰ Although the Daoist conception of *yin* and *yang* would seem a binaristic form of thought, it focuses instead on bringing “a myriad of binary opposites into a harmonious unity”.⁴¹ Thus, contemporary Chinese ecofeminism is informed by this philosophy which emphasizes balance rather domination. It is necessary to consider how these ancient philosophies infuse themselves into Chinese consciousness and culture, and how they may inform Kong’s art practice.

Her marriage performance series straddles the line between endorsing a dualistic view and challenging it. Kong not only embraces her relationship to nature but amplifies a stereotypical femininity while doing so through her highly constructed bridal gowns. On the other hand, her

38 Ibid., 775.

39 Ibid., 777.

40 Ibid., 779.

41 Ibid., 774.

vision is that of a oneness between humanity and the natural world, where it belongs to us and we to it. She crystalizes this relationship in the form of a marriage, which holds gendered and sexual implications. Kong embodies a bride, appropriating a central symbol of heteronormative culture, to marry herself to the Earth rather than to a man. As such, her female coded body goes against the grain and subverts expectations. Plumwood outlines how a serious ecofeminist critique of the master narrative must both revise and challenge the ideals of female and male, as well as problematize the conceptualization of ‘the human’ and human culture.⁴² I argue that Kong achieves precisely this. The creative proposition put forth in her performance series poses not only a challenge but also an affront to the established boundaries of ‘the human’ category. There are however a number of issues that problematize the environmentalism of Kong’s work.

Ecofeminist art in the Capitalocene

Marry the Blue Sky effectively conveys a sense of urgency and fear around air pollution with the exorbitant number of 3M face masks that make up the dress, inhibiting Kong’s movement through the streets of Beijing. The weight, size, and materials that she uses in her marriage series also prompts the audience to reflect on their individual consumption practices. Despite the evocative aesthetic of Kong’s bridal gowns project, how is her practice considered ecocritical or activist if the materials she uses are not environmentally conscious? Even when the artist appears to be wearing organic or natural materials, such as the ferns in *100,000 Green Leaves Dress* or the eggshells in *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress*, they are most likely artificial, and plastic remains the most predominant material across her series. What might Kong’s justification for this be and how does she reconcile the problematic?

⁴² Plumwood, 29.

To begin, certain gowns in Kong's series are explicitly made of repurposed or recycled materials, as in *Black Tube* (2019) and *Degradable Bride* (2018) [fig. 6 and 7]. Other gowns appear to be used for more than one performance or adapted into new versions, as with *Marry the Blue Sky*, which was worn in 2014, 2015, and then spray-painted dark grey when the gown became dirty, becoming *Smog Bride* (c. 2018).⁴³ For reasons outlined in my introduction, it is not possible to confirm how many other gowns are altered and reused in her practice. Although these few instances of attempts at a more ethical and environmentally friendly practice do not absolve Kong, I argue that her inconsistent use of eco-friendly materials does not discount her activism. Though it may not always conform to a Euro-Western notion of environmentally activist art, this does not mean that her work is less important or less ecologically oriented.

Additionally, the context within which Kong operates must be considered when approaching her work because it dictates much of what she is able to do. With the launch of Deng Xiaoping's "open door" policy in 1978, the CCP and the PRC "quietly launched itself on a path to capitalism."⁴⁴ The resulting economic growth and urban development across the country has been unprecedented and frankly, "there is no greater example of the growth of global industrial capitalism than its rapid development in China."⁴⁵ The effects of this massive transformation continue to unfold, as the distribution of technology and wealth between cities and rural areas has been mostly uneven. All the while, the country remains dependent on coal and pollution levels rise to exceptionally hazardous levels. In 2014, *The Guardian* reported that Beijing's authorities would

⁴³ *Le masque et la brume*, season 1, episode 5, "La mariée était en gris," directed by Pierre-Philippe Berson and Marc Cortès, featuring Kong Ning, France Télévisions Slash, 2018, <https://www.france.tv/slash/le-masque-et-la-brume/895559-kongning.html>.

⁴⁴ Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio, "Introduction: What is Contemporary Asian Art? Mapping An Evolving Discourse," introduction to *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, American First edition (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), 2.

⁴⁵ Jane Chin Davidson, "Performance Art, Performativity, and Environmentalism in the Capitalocene," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, ed. Paula Rabinowitz, February 2019, 13.

invest 760 billion yuan into new measures that would reduce emissions.⁴⁶ A more recent study of the PRC's Huai River Policy (1950-1980), which provided homes with coal for heating during winter, highlights the detrimental health effects of inhaling unsafe levels of airborne particulate matter, explaining that "it is apparent that the existing evidence has not convinced countries to adopt and enforce tough emission standards."⁴⁷ Cheng cites the work of Mary E. Gallagher to carefully point out that, despite "political theorists' predictions about the close tie between capitalism and democracy and withstanding precedents set by other formerly communist countries, China's 'economic development and increasing openness' has, instead, reinforced 'the stability of [its] authoritarian rule.'"⁴⁸ Given her context, Kong must make certain concessions in order to avoid censorship or arrest as she calls the public's attention to air quality and other signs of environmental degradation. I read her choice to create eccentric bridal gowns out of a range of materials, new and recycled, as a strategy to pass her ecofeminist message as fashion. Therefore, we cannot rule out Kong's activism on the basis of what materials she uses. I would also argue that more diverse voices and marginalised identities such as Kong's should actively be included and taken seriously by scholarship on ecocritical art.

Due to the environmental conditions caused by the PRC's massive economic growth, I locate my study of Kong's artistic practice in a discourse of the Capitalocene as opposed to the Anthropocene. The important difference is that this term may offer a more "expansive view" since it refers to "life in the age of capital [...] acknowledge[ing] the way in which capitalism has

46 Jennifer Duggan, "Beijing to spend £76bn to improve city's air quality," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2014, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/chinas-choice/2014/jan/23/china-beijing-authorities-measures-tackle-air-pollution>.

47 Avraham Ebenstein et al., "New Evidence on the impact of sustained exposure to air pollution on life expectancy from China's Huai River Policy," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)* 114, no. 39 (2017): 10384.

48 Meiling Cheng, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2013), 239.

become the system in which *all* species-life must circulate.”⁴⁹ At the heart of Kong’s performance art practice is the unique combination of commentary on environmental degradation and the larger question of human to nonhuman relationality. For that reason, I wish to acknowledge how Kong’s practice can be discussed as part of a genealogy of environmental activist artists, including Indigenous artists whose contributions are continuously overlooked and underrepresented in Euro-American scholarship. I align myself with thinkers such as Jane Chin Davidson and Zoe Todd who importantly point out the activist work and accomplishments of Indigenous people.⁵⁰ The performance practice of artists like James Luna (1950-2018) for example “reveal[s] the ways in which the artistic use of performance can honor the indigenous mind and the living ontology of nature as inextricable from environmental activism.”⁵¹ Chin Davidson also frames the work of artists like Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (b. 1952) with this notion of Indigenous ontologies, since their practices, she argues, also resist the dualistic logic from the Enlightenment of a nature/culture divide. Colonialism, like capitalism, is completely entwined with the institution of marriage, and all of these belong to the system of patriarchy. I acknowledge the activist work of Indigenous artists and thinkers in the context of the Capitalocene, since I believe Kong also works to challenge the specific entwinement of these systems of power.

Kong was born a member of the Daur ethnic minority in Manzhouli, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), and as such, her artistic practice can be read as an effort to assert herself and her identity as part of the larger struggle for self-determination that Mongols and other minority groups across the PRC are engaged in. The movement for autonomy by IMAR Mongols

⁴⁹ Chin Davidson, 2.

⁵⁰ Todd asks for instance: “Rather than bequeathing climate activism to the AI Gores of the world, when will Euro-American scholarship take the intellectual labour and activist work of Inuit women like Rosemarie Kuptana and Sheila Watt-Cloutier seriously?” (Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 7).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

has lost its fervor in recent history, which may be due to how the PRC's rapid economic development put pressure on Mongolians to "assimilate culturally and linguistically."⁵² Though I do not believe Kong's practice is a contestation of the PRC's sovereignty over IMAR, her identity is defined by these politics. I agree with Chin Davidson who, in her survey of ecocritical artistic practices, demonstrates that "the most poignant [examples of performance's potential to advocate for environmental protection] are works by indigenous artists."⁵³ Kong's artistic practice, despite the flaws we have examined, also makes a significant contribution to environmental advocacy. In the following section, I discuss the specific strategy Kong deploys during her performances in order to stage a resistance against systems of oppression.

Gender in Urban Environments

It follows from this conversation of the Capitalocene that we should examine Kong's relationship to urban space. Part of the PRC's post-socialist development has involved an unprecedented level of urbanization to the detriment of the natural environment. Until now we have seen Kong's performances in front of landmarks in Beijing, but she has toured other urban centres around the world. With the exception of some instances where Kong appears to have been invited for educational events to interact with children and audiences indoors, her performances all take place outdoors in public spaces. Although the sites of Kong's performances are certainly chosen for their formal qualities and popularity, it is also necessary to consider the potential relationship between her wearable sculptures as fashion objects and the spaces in which we encounter them. Following the work of John Potvin, these sites "do not simply function as backdrops but are pivotal to the

⁵² Enze Han, "From domestic to international: the politics of ethnic identity in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia," *Nationalities Papers* 39, no. 6 (2011): 942.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

meaning and vitality that the experience of fashion trace.”⁵⁴ Kong’s wedding dresses and the buildings and sites she chooses mutually influence each other, where the performance and its meaning is informed by the history and context of the site, and the site itself changed by the artist’s performance.⁵⁵ The fact that Kong is not still but moving throughout her performances is also significant to this relationship, since “mobility implies bodies moving through, acting out, time and space.”⁵⁶ Potvin cites Michel de Certeau to discuss the meaning of bodies moving through space in the context of fashion, as well as the activation and transformation of space, and how this relates to the performing subject. Namiko Kunimoto similarly cites the work of de Certeau in her discussion of contemporary Chinese artist Chen Qiulin (b. 1975). Kunimoto’s analysis is particularly relevant here to compare how both Chen and Kong’s practices reveal the ways in which gender is constructed in urban space.

Chen’s photography and video art are concerned with changes to space as a result of industrialization and urbanization in the PRC. Kunimoto asks, “do artists use their art to find agency within circumstances that limit autonomy, or do their practices demonstrate the ways space and subject adhere to the spatial and bodily demands of capitalist accumulation?”⁵⁷ I believe this question and how the author proceeds to answer it can be applied to an analysis of Kong’s practice as well. Using de Certeau’s theorization of tactics and strategies in the city, Kunimoto investigates how Chen asserts her personal autonomy. Specifically, the tactic of walking for Kunimoto, following de Certeau, can elucidate how “the construction of gender cannot be separated from the

⁵⁴ John Potvin, “Introduction: Inserting Fashion Into Space,” introduction to *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007*, ed. John Potvin (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

⁵⁵ By wearing her dresses to these sites and performing her marriage ritual, Kong transforms these historically significant sites into the space of fashion, art, and activism. Potvin writes that “fashion enhances the identity, worth, pleasure, and currency of certain places and spaces” (Ibid., 2).

⁵⁶ Potvin, 2.

⁵⁷ Namiko Kunimoto, “Tactics and Strategies: Chen Qiulin and the Production of Urban Space,” *Art Journal* 78, no. 2 (2019): 32.

construction of space.”⁵⁸ Although her movement through city streets is restricted by the physical imposition of her gown, Kong’s performances consist primarily of purposeful walking. Both Chen and Kong are walkers in cities, “[n]either wholly a voyeur nor wholly a writer of the space, each body is produced by its negotiation with its surrounding.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, in her photograph *Old Archway* (2009), Chen can be seen wearing a bridal gown [fig. 8]. Kunimoto explains that

[a]mbivalence haunts those who move through the city. Chen herself embodies the height of this ambivalence, walking through the dirt roads or along the alleyways in a disheveled wedding dress in many of her videos and photographs. The dress heightens the sense of gendered vulnerability, her sense of selfhood wedded to the city, marking the ceremonial moment between singularity and union. We might read Chen’s work as a rendering of [de] Certeau’s ‘chorus of idle footsteps,’ the creation of a new spatial order that organizes the imaginative possibilities of theater and documentary around the authorial female subject.⁶⁰

This analysis of Chen brings together several notions that we have seen in the introduction and the first part of this thesis, including the potential for performativity in documentation. By embodying the female role of the bride, these women artists assert their gendered bodies in urban space and display their daily struggle against the patriarchal system that they are both subject to. By comparing her to Chen, I hope to have shown how we might understand walking through the cityscape as a tactic in Kong’s practice.

I now wish to probe further into the significance of the bridal gown in Kong’s performance practice, given her cultural context. When the reporter for *States of Undress* asks Kong about her choice to design and wear wedding dresses, the artist’s eyes fill with tears as she replies: “Desire for the love that nature gives me. Humans are very complicated for me. I am not well suited to being with people. Nature is simple and pure.”⁶¹ This brief and poetic answer says much about

⁵⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶¹ *States of Undress*, 2016.

Kong's self-positioning as outside social norms and how her relationship to nature comes to replace a traditional human to human relationship of love and desire. But why would Kong choose to embody a bride and use marriage instead of some other ritual for expressing love for the planet? We have seen that the highly aesthetic gowns and the cameras that follow their wearer through the streets allow Kong to get away with promoting an environmentalist message. But beyond this, I argue that the strategic use of the bridal gown responds also to the enormous pressure women face in the PRC today. Gender based discrimination and inequality are rampant in contemporary Chinese society. To understand these politics and to respond to the above questions around Kong's practice, we must consider how marriage is and has historically been at the center of Chinese women's lives. In the next chapter, I discuss how Kong's choice to dress as a bride and perform a marriage ritual is connected to gender inequality and the conditions for women in the PRC.

CHAPTER TWO

Under the feudal system in China, it was decreed that women had no rights or freedoms when it came to marriage. During the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), “while the mighty performed power by accumulating concubines, the poor had to contend with such a scarcity of women that they made use of polyandry and wife-sale to ensure the survival of families, evidently often with the encouragement of a wife.”⁶² The power dynamics of marriage in China as in many other contexts was thus deeply tied to property and its exchange. Women were not equal to men under the law, and depending on her status or stage in life, a woman had to follow the three obediences and four virtues, which were “obedience to one’s father [prior to marriage], obedience to one’s husband in marriage, and obedience to one’s sons following the death of one’s husband.”⁶³ The four feminine virtues consisted of submissiveness and appropriate behaviour, restraining speech, appearances, and working to maintain the household.⁶⁴

With the establishment of New China in 1949, Mao Zedong “praised women for being ‘an important force in production, holding up half the sky’.”⁶⁵ This saying, which conveniently resonates with Kong’s marriage to the sky and promotion of a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, became popular for signaling equality between men and women. In 1950, this sentiment of equality was solidified in the republic’s first Marriage and Family Law, which “prohibited arranged marriages, rescued many women from misery, and gave them the freedom to

⁶² Sara McDougall and Sarah M. S. Pearsall, “Introduction: Marriage’s Global Past,” *Gender & History* 29, no. 3 (2017), 512.

⁶³ Chen Mingxia, “The Marriage Law and the Rights of Chinese Women in Marriage and the Family,” in *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (The Feminist Press at CUNY: New York, 2004), 169n1.

⁶⁴ Nirmal Dass, “Three Obediences and the Four Virtues,” *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, ed. Linsung Cheng (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2016), e-book.

⁶⁵ Tao Jie, introduction to *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (The Feminist Press at CUNY: New York, 2004), xxvi.

choose their spouses.”⁶⁶ The 1950s was a period that saw changes not only to government policies for gender equality, but also increased representation of women in roles in the Chinese public sphere.⁶⁷ Under Mao’s government, women were trained and called upon to actively participate in productive labour outside the home. As such, regardless of gender, people earned the same pay for the same labour and thus women’s status in society appeared to be equal to that of men. In reality however, gender discrimination still pervaded private and public life across the country. It became clear in the reform era of the 1970s that women had been dependent on and satisfied with their status compared to that of men. A steady regression in women’s social status was evident in how they were cheated out of their rights to property, work, and education.⁶⁸

The Marriage Law was revised in 1980, reasserting the rights and freedoms for women around marriage, as well as their equality to men, adding “the protection of the legal rights of women, children, and the elderly.”⁶⁹ Under contemporary Chinese law, there exists “a set of legal relationships in which men and women are equal.”⁷⁰ While there is technically equality between men and women in terms of their rights in marriage and family, there is in fact a disconnect between policy and the lived reality of individuals. It was not until the 1990s that the issue of domestic violence, which was previously ignored outright and viewed as the private business of married couples, began to be addressed publicly. Finally, in 2016 a law to protect women was passed.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xxvii.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Mingxia, 159.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁷¹ “No escape: In China, courts deny women divorces in the name of ‘social harmony,’” *The Economist*, October 10, 2019, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/china/2019/10/10/in-china-courts-deny-women-divorces-in-the-name-of-social-harmony>.

Contemporary Chinese society is largely dominated by patriarchal ideals and has seen a broad resurgence of gender inequality in the twenty-first century.⁷² One example of this culture is in Chinese television broadcasting. Leading up to the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, *Ban bian tian* or *Half the Sky*, which also takes its name from Mao's infamous expression, launched on CCTV. This was China's only television program oriented towards women, gender issues, and social change. According to Shou Yuanjun who was Editor in Chief on the program for many years, "the process of preparing *Half the Sky* reflected the budding of gender consciousness among female writer-directors for television and broader thinking on the part of decision-makers."⁷³ After its many years on the CCTV, *Half the Sky* was canceled in 2011 due to restructuring in the network.⁷⁴ This is a significant moment in Chinese broadcasting because, while it did not begin as such, in its latter years *Half the Sky* came to "consciously position [...] itself as a champion for women's rights."⁷⁵ Along with their regulation of televised content, the Chinese government is guilty of investing in mass media campaigns that pressure women into marriage. As an unmarried woman over the age of 60, Kong fits the criteria of a so-called "leftover" woman or *shengnü*, a derogatory term that was added to the official Chinese lexicon by the ministry of education in 2007. There is no doubt that Kong's choice of the bridal gown is informed not only by the social and legal history of marriage but also this phenomenon of the "leftover" woman. Understanding these politics is necessary in order to fully grasp Kong's

⁷² Leta Hong Fincher, introduction to *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, (New York: Zed Books, 2014), e-book, 3-4.

⁷³ Shou Yuanjun, "Half the Sky: A Television Program for Women," in *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (The Feminist Press at CUNY: New York, 2004), 261.

⁷⁴ The International Herald Tribune, "Holding Up Half the Sky," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/07/world/asia/holding-up-half-the-sky.html>.

⁷⁵ Ying Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes: the story of China Central Television* (New York: New Press, 2012), 219.

marginalization and her transgressive expression of that embodied condition through a performance art practice.

The widely used phrase “leftover” woman describes “an urban, professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single.”⁷⁶ The state media launched widespread campaigns to address this so-called crisis. In 2014, before the end of the one-child policy in the PRC, Leta Hong Fincher published *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* in which she identifies the problematics of this societal phenomenon and other forms of gender-based discrimination in contemporary China, such as domestic violence and rights to wealth and property.⁷⁷ Hong Fincher claims that in a sense, the category of “leftover” women is fictitious, a group fabricated by the government “to achieve its demographic goals of promoting marriage, planning population, and maintaining social stability.”⁷⁸ The All-China Women’s Federation was the first organization to define the term. Although this organization was originally conceived under the CCP in 1949 with a feminist mandate, they have since contradicted themselves by further stigmatizing the unmarried women of Chinese society. Hong Fincher explains how this comes as no surprise, since the Women’s Federation was also tasked by the government with “carr[ying] out invasive monitoring of women’s reproductive lives and forced women to have abortions, ‘permanently tarnishing its reputation as an advocacy group for women’.”⁷⁹ Susan Greenhalgh writes that, in this way, “‘women’s bodies became mere objects of state contraceptive control, vehicles for the achievement of urgent demographic targets’.”⁸⁰ The Women’s Federation is

⁷⁶ Hong Fincher, 2.

⁷⁷ See especially Hong Fincher, “How Chinese Women were shut out of the biggest accumulation of real-estate wealth in history,” *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, (New York: Zed Books, 2014), e-book, 44-74.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁰ Susan Greenhalgh in Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, 18.

therefore guilty of operating as a puppet of the state and of aiding the project of policing women's bodies in the PRC.

A recent Op-Doc by the *New York Times* follows an unmarried woman in her daily struggle with the stigma of being a “leftover” woman.⁸¹ At one moment of the day, the film's main subject Qiu Huamei encounters a slew of red and white advertisements in the Beijing subway promoting a mobile dating application with the tagline: “Today you're going to marry me.” Qiu has a successful career as a lawyer, and yet the media campaigns run by government and the Women's Federation would tell her and every other educated urban woman to “stop focusing on their careers and get married.”⁸² Contemporary Chinese marriage practices are entirely connected to class relations and consumerism. Part of the PRC's post-socialist condition is grappling with “the influence of global capitalist cultural forms and practices.”⁸³ A recent ethnographic study looks at the diamond ring market and the practice of bridal photography to demonstrate how in the PRC, as in the West, getting married is reserved for those who can afford it. In the West, Chrys Ingraham theorizes the “wedding-industrial complex” where women are at the center, targeted from all sides as consumers of an ideology and culture.⁸⁴ Under Ingraham's logic, the “white wedding dress,” the most dominant form in the Western tradition, symbolizes not only purity, femininity and fertility, but also a consumer. The wife is, after all, the primary targeted consumer in a domestic household, caring for and sustaining the family. A striking number of examples in material consumer culture propagate weddings as signifiers of “membership in dominant culture,” from

81 *Single in China*, directed by Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia (2020: *The New York Times*, Op-Docs), video, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/opinion/china-marriage-leftover-women.html>.

82 Hong Fincher, 18.

83 Wanning Sun, “Bridal photos and diamond rings: the inequality of romantic consumption in China,” *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 4, no. 15 (2017): 14.

84 Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 26.

children's toys to bridal magazines and wedding films.⁸⁵ Wanning Sun observes how Chinese couples and families increasingly negotiate “whether and to what extent to participate in the capitalist ideology of ‘romantic utopia’.”⁸⁶ Marriage practices in the PRC and their clear entanglement with class, consumption, and capitalism, represent the tensions around and changing nature of identity in the PRC. For Sun, the popularity of De Beers' diamond wedding rings advertisements [fig. 9] and the importance of Western-style bridal photography for Chinese individuals and families, demonstrate an inner cultural conflict.

Though the PRC's one-child policy ended in 2016, the effects are clearly visible in the country's current “sex ratio imbalance [which] has created a demographic crisis of tens of millions of surplus or ‘leftover’ men (*shengnan*).”⁸⁷ The onus of this problem rests on the shoulders of women who, by the government's heterosexist logic, have no reason to be unmarried. Even in the PRC's LGBTQ communities, lesbian women face different challenges than gay men do, with regards to discrimination in the job market, financial support from parents, or eligibility for property ownership.⁸⁸ This discrimination is two-fold, where non-heterosexual women are disadvantaged by their condition as women and as queer. I argue that the alarmist language around the sex ratio imbalance in the PRC constitutes what anthropologist Carole Vance identifies as a “sex panic.”⁸⁹ According to Janice Irvine, the term is a derivative of Stanley Cohen's “moral panic,” and it can be used to “explain volatile battles over sexuality” at different moments in any given society.⁹⁰ I use the term “sex panic” here to highlight the hostility toward Chinese women

⁸⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁶ Sun, 14.

⁸⁷ Hong Fincher, 20.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁹ Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 434.

⁹⁰ Janice M. Irvine, “Transient Feelings: Sex Panic and the Politics of Emotions,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007): 1.

around their rights and freedoms in marriage and sexuality. To the CCP and its organizing groups who perpetuate the stigmatization of unmarried women and the policing of their bodies, Kong represents and embodies this sex panic. She deploys her body in a marriage performance series to confront and reject the government's campaigns outright. By marrying herself to the Earth and sky, Kong's performance practice is both transgressive and threatening because she does not adhere to the role society would have her in. She is not the wife of a man, a reproductive mother, or a domestic and submissive daughter. Especially blasphemous is her appropriation of the Western bridal gown – a central symbol to heteronormative culture – while marrying the nonhuman. Kong is an independent and unmarried woman who previously held a successful career as a defense lawyer. Now as an artist who aspires to international recognition, she remains an 'other' to both society's gender and sexual norms. The greatest threat to the nation however is the fact that the union between Kong and nature will not yield a child, thus threatening what Lee Edelman names "reproductive futurism."⁹¹ He defines this term as an imposition of "an ideological limit on political discourse," one that "preserv[es] in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable [...] the possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations."⁹² In other words, a politics where the future is outside of, or does not depend on a heteronormative reproductive logic. According to that logic, the future of society and social order is secured in the figure of the child. Edelman decenters the child from the socio-cultural imagination in such a way that does not discount the possibility of the future. Instead, he challenges this theory by proposing a new conception of the future that is unbound from the heteronormative.⁹³ This concept of the child figure is secured in a heterosexual marriage,

⁹¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ For more on queer politics, heteronormativity, and the debate around marriage equality, consult: Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Shame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

along with property, domesticity, and other power dynamics. This is evident in how the phrase “Think of the children!” is the rallying cry for those opposing alternative marriage, based on how any non-normative sexual and gendered marriage might “imperil the next generation as children would be confused and damaged permanently by growing up in households that seemed to deviate from the norm.”⁹⁴ Kong’s vision of the future grounds itself in the practice and tradition of heterosexual marriage in order to address the detrimental effects of patriarchal domination on the natural environment and all human and nonhuman life. Her marriage performance series is an experiment in human to nonhuman relationality and thus a subversion of the heteronormative culture she appropriates. By making a marriage ceremony the center of her performance art, Kong constructs a strong critique of gender inequality in the PRC that also touches on issues of class relation that have emerged as a result of the nation’s exponential economic growth spurt.

Marriage is the foremost hegemonic ritual that secures heteronormative order across cultures and countries. Nancy Cott argues that “marriage has designated the ways both sexes act in the world and the reciprocal relation between them. It has done so probably more emphatically than any other single institution or social force.”⁹⁵ In 2018, Chinese art historian Tong Yujie published *Chinese Feminist Art*, a comprehensive survey of feminist art from 1978 to the present. Her chapter on queer politics features Kong alongside other artists who subvert the institution of heterosexual marriage. Based on her appropriation of the wedding dress and in light of the sex panic around unmarried women in the PRC, I argue that Tong is right to locate Kong’s work in

2000); Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 547-566; Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, 175-194. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁹⁴ Sara MacDougall and Sarah M.S. Pearsall, “Introduction: Marriage’s Global Past,” *Gender & History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 514.

⁹⁵ Nancy Cott in MacDougall and M.S. Pearsall, “Introduction: Marriage’s Global Past,” 513.

this chapter on queer politics. This reading appropriately frames Kong's performances alongside works like *The Wedding* (2009) [fig. 10], a performance by artist Xiao Lu (b. 1962). Currently living and working in Beijing, Xiao is perhaps best known for her work in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition of 1989 where she presented *Dialogue (Duihua)*. In a performance, Xiao opened fire on her own work, shooting bullets at a mirror phone booth installation. The exhibition, which is remembered as "one of the most important events in the history of contemporary Chinese art"⁹⁶ and as having had enormous social impact, was shut down due to Xiao's gunshot that day, 5 February 1989. Several days later, the exhibition reopened, drawing in larger crowds than the initial opening of *China/Avant-Garde*.⁹⁷ Xiao explains in an interview with Monica Merlin: "I did *Dialogue* just because at the time I felt very stifled, really quite suffocated. [...] Even though [my boyfriend and I] were living together as a couple, I felt like we were strangers and I couldn't talk to him about anything. I felt like I could not communicate with men. *Dialogue* was about that."⁹⁸ Since *Dialogue*, the artist has created many works dealing with gender and sexual identity in various forms. Her performance entitled *The Wedding* follows the artist emerging from a coffin and proceeding through the streets surrounded by men in black suits, until she reveals to the gathered crowd a ring on each hand symbolizing that the artist has married herself.⁹⁹ Tong describes the performance:

At a conventional wedding ceremony for heterosexual couples, the artist [Xiao Lu] staged a cross-casting performance marrying herself to herself. With the cooperation of the marriage witness, the artist put rings on her left- and right-hand fingers respectively, symbolically

⁹⁶ Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 113.

⁹⁷ Hang Jian and Cao Xiao'ou, "A Brief Account of *China/Avant-Garde* (1989)," in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, eds. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 122.

⁹⁸ Xiao Lu, "Women Artists in Contemporary China," interview by Monica Merlin, *Tate*, February 21, 2018.

⁹⁹ In her interview with Monica Merlin for the Tate project, Xiao Lu mentions a piece titled *Wedlock* but does not explain it further. This may be another name or translation variation of *Wedding* performance, which appears in Tong Yujie's *Chinese Feminist Art* (2018).

completing the ring exchange ceremony between the bride and the groom. The artist single-handedly accomplished the ceremony, which only exists within the power structure of heterosexual love contracts. The work casts doubt on and challenges the exclusivity of the power structure formed by heterosexual contracts.¹⁰⁰

It is evident in Tong's language that she believes the artist is exploring and playing with gender, embodying both a bride and groom in one person. The narcissism of Xiao's gesture is overt but I believe it does not dismiss the compelling feminist message of the piece. A bride emerging from a coffin and walking into the light of day to marry herself is a symbolic representation of finding happiness in self-love and the rejection of heterosexual relationships. Another artist that Tong features in her book is Fan Popo (b. 1985) who also stages a wedding performance in her project *New Qianmen Street* (2009) [fig. 11]. Organized with LGBTQ rights activists and volunteers, Fan chose 14 February, Valentine's Day to occupy the tourist area around Qianmen Avenue in Beijing. Two women and men dressed in Western wedding attire form same-sex couples and pose affectionately for photographs in the street. The event was highly visible, drawing in many locals and tourists and earning coverage in the media. Fan Popo released a film in 2010, which documents the entire event and the public's responses to displays of homosexual love and marriage. Same-sex marriage has yet to be legalized in the PRC and it is clear from the mixed reception of *New Qianmen Street* that many people still hold homophobic and discriminatory sentiments toward queer people.

While it is appropriate for Tong to frame Kong's work alongside these projects by Fan and Xiao, I do not read her marriage performance series as explicitly queer. Moreover, I do not equate or conflate all non-heteronormative relationships, whether they are expressions of love for the nonhuman or same-sex human relationships. My intent is to demonstrate how Kong's artistic

¹⁰⁰ Tong Yujie, *Chinese Feminist Art* (Hong Kong: 中国今日美术馆出版社 China Today Art Museum Press, 2018), 306.

intervention is an expression of a marginalised desire, one that is deemed unnatural and shameful in heteronormative society. For this reason, I believe that the work of queer theorists is helpful in thinking through Kong's alternative relationality and desires. Though her performances are not explicitly sexual, it is nonetheless necessary to consider Kong's work through the lens of ecosexuality, given that her sexuality is still implicated in a marriage to the Earth. Ecofeminist Greta Gaard writes that "humans (from industrial capitalists to ecofeminists and environmentalists) are gendered, sexual beings, and gender is crucial to many peoples' erotic expressions."¹⁰¹ I invoke Gaard's work because she interrogates hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity through the conceptualization of ecosexuality. She asks, "how might a queer, interspecies consideration of gender guide our revisioning of human eco-masculinities and eco-sexualities?"¹⁰² Gaard and other scholars such as Jennifer Reed and Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio posit that these kinds of alternative practices can move us beyond the homo-hetero divide. For Reed, the queer perspectives in the ecosexual movement shed light on methods of resisting historically dominant ideologies,¹⁰³ which can be seen, for example, in the work of artist couple Annie Sprinkle (b. 1954) and Beth Stephens (b. 1960). Formerly a sex worker and porn star, Sprinkle's performance art practice has dealt with the female body, sexual pleasure and desire since the late 1980s. Beginning in 2008, Stephens and Sprinkle have been staging ecosexual weddings where they invite the public to participate with them in "their vow to love, honor and cherish the Earth, Sky, and Sea."¹⁰⁴ The couple honours Mother Earth through site specific weddings and attire, such as wedding to the snow in Ottawa

¹⁰¹ Greta Gaard, "Toward New EcoMasculinities, EcoGenders, and EcoSexualities," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, eds. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 226.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁰³ Jennifer Reed. "From Ecofeminism to Ecosexuality: Queering the Environmental Movement," in *Ecosexuality: When Nature Inspires the Arts of Love*, eds. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Lindsay Hagamen (Puerto Rico: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 101.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

(2011), to the moon in Los Angeles (2010), to the Appalachian Mountains in Athens Ohio (2010), and to Lake Kallavesi in Finland (2012) [fig. 12].¹⁰⁵ Stephens describes their ecosexual performances as “a strategy to create a more mutual and sustainable relationship with our abused and exploited planet [by] switching the metaphor from ‘Earth as Mother’ to ‘Earth as Lover’.”¹⁰⁶ They fight in the spirit of what Gaard names “environmental, interspecies, and climate justice” through an exploration of the radical possibilities offered by ecosexuality.¹⁰⁷ Stephens and Sprinkle have concretized a veritable social movement in the United States, with many couples and individuals attending their speaker series and wedding performances.

Another distinctly queer example of ecosexual art is Zheng Bo’s (b. 1974) ongoing *Pteridophilia* series, which he began in 2016 [fig. 13]. His research and artistic practice stem from an interest in socially and ecologically engaged art. The images in *Pteridophilia* display naked male bodies among lush green landscapes, caressing trees and engaging in BDSM with other plant life. Similarly, in Stephens and Sprinkle’s ecosexual weddings, the artists perform explicit sexual acts with each other and organic materials. As a public performance artist, Kong is undoubtedly aware of her context and the power of the Chinese government to censor and arrest artists and activists. She therefore proceeds cautiously, presenting a more family-friendly version of an ecosexual desire that focuses on spiritual love for the planet. Kong’s work is far from devoid of sexuality however, since she embodies the figure of the bride, who represents femininity, fertility, and reproduction.

Karin Cope is another writer and activist who examines the practices of artists working at the intersections of feminism, queer activism, anti-racism, gender justice, and environmentalism.

¹⁰⁵ See also their film *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* (2013) which provides an overview of their ecosexual philosophy and art as it intersects with ecological activism and ecojustice movements.

¹⁰⁶ Reed, 99.

¹⁰⁷ Gaard, 235.

She believes these experiments “invent heterotopic proxies and possibilities we can inhabit only discontinuously in the present.”¹⁰⁸ Part of her position encourages that we not limit ourselves to the category of ‘human’ when conceiving of an inclusive future, but that we open the social imaginary to desires for the nonhuman. She asks:

What if there is some shadow of truth in all of those appalling jokes and rightist fearmongering about the unlimited aspects of our unruly desires? What if thinking about enshrining civil rights for a range of queer, polyamorous, and trans acts and lives does indeed usher in some aspect of interspecies interdependence or of bestiality, by acknowledging the novel orders and combinations that inhabit our dreams, and thereby our lives? Why should we not use and celebrate these resources, the products of love, fantasy and laughter to, as [Judith] Butler suggests, ‘imagine ourselves and others otherwise,’ as more and less than and not simply human; why should we not try more fully to ‘point elsewhere,’ to ‘embody’ that elsewhere and ‘bring it home’?¹⁰⁹

As difficult as it may be to confront some of these questions, I argue that this thought process is necessary to get outside of existing frameworks and critique established institutions. I align myself with Cope’s belief that art is a productive and generative space for grappling with these complex questions. Part of what I identify in this thesis to be the radical ecofeminist relationality of Kong’s performance series exceeds many of the theoretical frameworks I apply in my analysis. This speaks to the distinctiveness of her artistic practice and the openness and creativity of her approach to the ecological crisis. These questions around desire for the nonhuman recall the work of biologist Donna Haraway who maintains that we do not live in a nature/culture divide, but rather in *naturecultures*. This term is particularly useful here because of how it synthesizes nature and culture, human and animal, to acknowledge how inseparable these categories are. The group deemed passive and non-agentic under an Enlightenment logic of nature over culture, includes animals, who are subsumed with the land, alongside women and Indigenous people. The

¹⁰⁸ Karin Cope, “‘They Aren’t a Boy or a Girl, They Are Mysterious’: Finding Possible Futures in Loving Animals and Aliens,” in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, ed. Heather Davis (McGill-Queen’s University Press and Mentoring Artists for Womens’ Art (MAWA): Montreal and Kingston, 2017), 58.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

domination of nature involves grouping those cast as sexually and ethnically different “closer to the animal and the body [and thus] construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture.”¹¹⁰ The broader study of what Haraway calls companion species – which includes cyborgs, dogs, and cybernetic machines – can allow us to consider relationality among the natural kinds of the Earth. Haraway asks, how might “an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously[?]”¹¹¹ The study of how humans are constituted in different kinds of unions with nonhumans contributes to the posthumanist project of decentering the human.

One of the early performances in Kong’s marriage series attempts to explore the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. Though it is the only one of Kong’s pieces to date where she weds a nonhuman animal, *Marrying a Horse* (2015) [fig. 14] is, nevertheless, an early example of the concerns that carry throughout her marriage performance series. Also, *Marrying a Horse* is unique in how it brings Kong’s ethnic minority status and her sexual difference to the fore. The artist traveled across IMAR to perform a marriage with a white Mongolian horse in the ancient city of Andabaozi. I have only found a few photographs and stills from video documentation of this performance, but their poor resolution makes it difficult to discern the details of the gown and location. It is clear that the horse was adorned with a rainbow coloured sash and that there were guests present to witness the marriage, some of whom were dressed in traditional Mongolian attire. Kong’s bridal gown is described by Hua as being forty meters long and made of roses, leaves, water droplets, and stars.¹¹² Hua writes that Kong has “always had a brave Mongolian horse living in her heart that is tough, brave, long-suffering, and

¹¹⁰ Plumwood, 4.

¹¹¹ Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, 1 edition (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 3.

¹¹² Hua, 65-66.

has a steadfast spirit.”¹¹³ The gesture of being wed to a horse may therefore be to solidify Kong’s relationship to herself, her ethnic background, and to the values the horse represents of “mutual trust [and] interdependence.”¹¹⁴ Following Cheng, we can place *Marrying a Horse* in the subcategory of Chinese time-based art that she calls animalworks. For Cheng, animalworks are “a time-based art genre that incorporates animals as in/voluntary performers and/or manipulated art objects.”¹¹⁵ Like other artworks against the Anthropocene, animalworks decenter the master narrative of our species and humans’ assumed supremacy over all other life forms. Although many Chinese animalworks explore the predominant relationship between humans and nonhuman animals of raising them for food, labour and profit, one notable example that is relevant to the study of Kong’s work, is Wang Jin’s (b. 1962) *To Marry A Mule* (1995), originally performed under the title, *To Wed* [fig. 15]. Here, Jin’s photographic document “conceptualizes the prospect of human-animal parity” because of the symbolic potential in marriage of equality between the artist and his albino mule bride.¹¹⁶ The couple stand side by side for the photograph, with Jin in Western wedding attire and the mule in makeup, as well as a hat and veil. The mule thus represents “a wedded woman in a patriarchal economy.”¹¹⁷ Although marriage may seem to have the potential to give a societal role to a nonhuman subject, in Jin’s *To Marry a Mule* the animal counterpart “remain[s] chattel in our current global socioecology of living beings.”¹¹⁸ This is because, as Cheng points out, male and human oppression are still present in this animalwork through the artist’s control of the mule’s reins and harness. This could also be the reason for why Kong shifts her focus from marrying a nonhuman animal to marrying the environment in later works. The

¹¹³ Hua, 66.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Cheng 2013, 237.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 260.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 258.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 260.

suggestion of bestiality is more offensive than a marriage between woman and nature, especially since patriarchal society already promotes that alignment in order to suppress women. The immateriality of Kong's counterpart in her marriage to the Earth and sky is more permissible, rather than the tangible nonhuman animal subject.

Kong's *Marrying a Horse* also begs the question of whether or not the nonhuman subject is actually humanized in the process of a marriage performance art piece. The agency and subjectivity of the nonhuman can be better understood through the work of new materialist philosopher Jane Bennett. While she presents a philosophical position against the Anthropocene, Bennett's work is not precisely posthumanist. Her focus is instead on understanding the nonhuman components that exist within and around humans, affecting our social and consumptive practices. For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on Bennett's argument for how a conception of matter as "vibrant" can inspire a more ecological approach to life on Earth. What kind of contributions do the nonhuman make if we consider them as being not passive but having agency? How does this thought process affect our relationship to matter or 'things'? Bennett writes:

I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world.¹¹⁹

This positioning comes from a greater desire to do away with the hierarchical binary that upholds subjects and organic life as powerful and active against objects and things as dull and passive. Bennet builds an alternative conception of the self through an approach that is not centered on the human but rather on a world of vibrant powerful things. I argue that Kong's performance series is not a straightforward example of Bennett's theory in practice. The artist pays careful attention to

¹¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

the nonhuman world and clearly feels the “call of things,” to use Bennett’s phrase. Kong tells the *Viceland* reporter: “to some extent I feel like a soldier here to protect the earth.”¹²⁰ Her gowns are always constructed out of a mass collection of plastic objects and other materials, as in *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* or *Orange Horns Bride* (2015) [fig. 16], which swallow up the artist’s body into her artworks. The overwhelming materiality of Kong’s performance practice and the physical burden of carrying around these wearable sculptures, contributes to an ecological commentary on individual consumptive practices in the age of the Capitalocene. This is complicated however by the fact that Kong’s art places her body/self at the center and can be read as being complicit in the “narcissistic reflex” that Bennett identifies in her problematization of human language and thought. Documentation of Kong’s performances show the artist striking poses for the camera both alone and with members of her audience. We rarely see the team of individuals who assist Kong each step of the way from the construction of the gowns, their transportation to the sites, and the carrying of them through city streets during performances. BBC news captures a moment in Kong’s performance of *Orange Horns Bride* in Beijing where the artist receives help from two colleagues to strap into the bridal gown. Multiple photographers and videographers who are not from the BBC follow Kong through the streets.

The labeling of a ‘narcissistic reflex’ or of narcissism in a woman artist’s performance or body art practice is a fraught subject among feminist critics and art historians.¹²¹ Jones observes the discourse around artist Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) who feminists have accused of “a regressive feminine narcissism.”¹²² What we can glean from Jones’ reading of Wilke is that although her practice differs from Kong in how Kong never deploys her naked body in performances, both

¹²⁰ *States of Undress*, 2016.

¹²¹ This is also true of other practices, including of self-portraiture. We can observe and debate how narcissism, the gaze, and parody are at play in the work of American artist Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) for example.

¹²² Jones 1998, 171.

artists obsessively and repeatedly display themselves in various poses. Jones defends Wilke's "obsessive use of her own body in her work [because this] in fact produces a narcissistic relation that is far from conventional or passively 'feminine,' turning this conventional, regressive connection of women with narcissistic immanence inside out (even as it reiterates it)."¹²³ I therefore see Kong's narcissistic compulsion and shameless promotion of her body/self and ecological message as unproblematic and feminist, all while recognizing Bennett's point about a move away from narcissism in order to emphasize the agency of the nonhuman. I argue that Kong reconciles this issue by intentionally obfuscating her body in the bridal gown. To the people who encounter her public performances, Kong looks more like an accumulation of objects than a bride or an environmental activist. This is especially true for *Orange Horns Bride* and the 2015 version of *Marry the Blue Sky*. She therefore balances the prevalence of material things with her self-promotion in these performances. In the next chapter I expand upon this feminist art historical discussion and develop an aesthetic analysis of Kong's work that explores the functionality as well as the connection to politics of gender and sexuality.

¹²³ Ibid., 175.

CHAPTER THREE

In direct response to Beijing's first ever pollution "red alert" in December of 2015, Kong created *Orange Horns Bride*. This piece, one of the flashier and more elaborate gowns in her series, best illustrates my aesthetic analysis of Kong's marriage series. Seemingly made of hundreds of fluorescent orange and red plastic cones, the gown is a three-dimensional wearable sculpture. Video footage by the BBC shows Kong shuffling with difficulty through the old quarter of Beijing, posing in front of the ancient Drum and Bell Towers.¹²⁴ The dress is an A-lined sleeveless gown that, despite being a looser cut, appears to restrict the artist's full range of motion. A layer of orange cones drapes over Kong's shoulders and falls down her backside, leading into two long trains made of more cones that are attached to a delicate fabric of the same colour. Her bare arms disappear in the dress, such that the only visible part of Kong's body are her eyes, and the rest of her face is covered by a large orange facemask. She has never looked more like a parcel than here, with tufts of orange crinoline flourishing out from atop the cloth hat she wears. The cones jut out from her dress in different directions forming an almost hourglass shape, undulating in size. From certain angles she looks swollen and pregnant, as in *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress*. Kong keeps one orange cone in hand and holds it up to her face for photographs, as though she is crying out. Other photographs show Kong interacting with passersby and handing out new facemasks to individuals of different ages [fig. 17]. According to the BBC this performance lasts for over an hour.

I have alluded to how the aesthetic of Kong's bridal gowns comes to reconcile the supposed narcissism I identified in the previous chapter. Another function of Kong's aesthetic is how, as

¹²⁴ These towers are part of the Forbidden City in Beijing, which is "the largest and most complete ancient palace in China" and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987 (TzeHuey Chiou-Peng, "The Forbidden City Zijincheng 紫禁城 Gùgōng 故宫," *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, ed. Linsung Cheng (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2016), e-book.

carefully crafted hand-made objects, these intricate gowns are pieces of couture with Kong passing as their designer and model. The subversive qualities of her message are lost on viewers who are distracted by the flashy and eccentric aesthetic of her gowns. This chapter identifies another strategic layer to Kong's aesthetic, namely the link between her ethnic background and her decision to completely disappear her body/self in a merger with her art. The aesthetics of these performances participate in what I call an aesthetic of obfuscation, wherein love, desire, visibility, race, and gender are all at play.¹²⁵ By drawing links to the work of other Asian women artists who deploy their bodies in a similar fashion, I conduct a postcolonial feminist art historical critique of Kong's work.

Women's bodies are written and read as objects to be consumed rather than subjects who are able to speak or claim their subjectivity. This is especially the case for racialized and marginalised bodies like those of Asian women. The characterization of Asian women as easily consumed or existing for the pleasure of consumption, has its roots in Orientalist views of Asia. The ability to articulate the embodied nature of one's own subjectivity in public sites in cities around the world, as well as online, is therefore especially significant for subjects like Kong who exists on the margins of both the PRC as a Mongolian ethnic minority and of the art world as an Asian woman artist. The tradition of Orientalism carries into contemporary visual culture through the proliferation of a 'cute' or *kawaii* aesthetic that is applied to Asian women and used to reduce and fetishize them, thus reinforcing the production of subjects as objects for consumption. I therefore introduce Sianne Ngai's theorization of 'cute' as an aesthetic category, to then build up

¹²⁵ For a recent discussion around contemporary Asian women artists, subjectivity, and institutions, see the panel *Hyper(in)visibility* hosted by stephanie mei huang and featuring Pearl C Hsiung, Astria Suparak, Hồng-Ân Trương, Maia Ruth Lee, and Christine Tien Wang (July 2020) <https://stephaniemei.com/hyper-in-visibility-1>.

to my reading of Kong's and my other case studies' obfuscation of their bodies/selves as responses to the white colonialist male gaze.

Ngai argues that the cute, interesting, and zany are marginalised aesthetic categories despite the fact that they “index—and are thus each in a historically concrete way about—the system's most socially binding processes.”¹²⁶ In comparison to the more classical categories of the beautiful and sublime, Ngai's aesthetic categories are decidedly trivial. Their triviality, however, is precisely the reason they are worth studying today in the current moment of a “totally aestheticized” consumer culture.¹²⁷ I foreground my aesthetic analysis of Kong's marriage performance series by focusing on Ngai's theorization of the cute as an aesthetic of consumption. The relationship between the modernist avant-garde and the category of ‘cute’ is exemplified in the work of Japanese artists Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959) and Takashi Murakami (b. 1962) as well as that of Gertrude Stein and Francis Ponge. Ngai writes, “poets have had a particular stake in the meaning and function of ‘cute,’ an aesthetic response to the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate.”¹²⁸

Closely associated to material and consumer culture, cuteness designates an otherness, a commodity or object that is “simple or formally non-complex and deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening.”¹²⁹ Returning often to Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) Ngai demonstrates how the category of cute expresses a range of feelings. Cuteness, for Ngai, is an “aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities.”¹³⁰ We

¹²⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

see this in an etymological study of the word, where its origin in ‘acute’ (alert) is completely at odds with the softness and sleepiness of a cute aesthetic. The malleability and (ab)useability of cute objects goes hand in hand with their ability to withstand rough handling, as well as their easy consumption.¹³¹ Citing Theodor Adorno’s notion of “culinary” from *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), the pleasure in consuming is perhaps best expressed visually in the form of Ngai’s Japanese examples. Artworks, toys, and other materials produced by Nara and Murakami effectively encapsulate *kawaii*, the “aesthetic organized around a small, helpless, or deformed object that foregrounds the violence in its production.”¹³² The popularity of these artists’ work and of *kawaii* image production is rooted in Japan’s history of rebuilding its own image coming out of WWII. *Kawaii* and cuteness influence trends and markets throughout East Asia and other continents. While the *kawaii* remains deeply rooted in Japanese aesthetics, through globalization and the Internet, this trend is exported to the West and around the world. The global consumer associates this cuteness to a broader understanding of an “Asianness.” Such a racist generalization of “Asianness” or that which is assumed to belong to a geographically unspecific “Other,” participates in the Orientalist project of reducing those subjects for easy access and consumption by colonial powers.¹³³

The Asian female body is and has been made hyper visible for the sake of consumption through practices in visual culture and art history that are based in the tradition of Orientalism.¹³⁴ Part of the project of Orientalism involves the erasure of Asian women’s subjectivity and agency.

¹³¹ Ibid., 88.

¹³² Ibid., 78.

¹³³ Conversely, “Asianness” can also be instrumentalized as a unifying category, connecting people of pan-Asian ethnic background to each other in the diaspora and to people in the continent of Asia.

¹³⁴ See Sasha Su-Ling Welland’s discussion of Orientalism in the PRC and the objectification of Chinese women in her introduction to *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art*, 7-40. See also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).

The Japanese artists that I discuss here are regarded as some of the most successful in the art market and have received a great deal of attention in scholarship as part of the relatively late emergence of interest in an Asian women's art. Kee explains however that this is largely due to their "association with groups, movements, or male artists already ordained into the avant-garde."¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the work of Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929), Atsuko Tanaka (1932-2005), and Yoko Ono (b. 1933) are all valuable examples informing my development of an aesthetics based analysis of Kong's performances. Jones cites what Kris Kuramitsu's calls "doubled otherness" to describe Kusama, adding that "she is racially *and* sexually at odds with the normative conception of the artist as Euro-American male."¹³⁶ This nonnormative condition applies to each of my case studies, including Kong, as a contemporary Chinese woman artist attempting to assert herself in the global art world.

Three Case Studies

In 2017, Kusama held the record for highest price paid for a work by a living female artist.¹³⁷ For all her success in the commercial scene, Kusama is a complicated case for art historians given how her mental illness and body are interwoven with her artistic production. As Marin R. Sullivan puts it, the fusing of Kusama's self with her work happens on purpose and "in perpetuity."¹³⁸ Several parallels exist between Kusama and Kong in their biography and approach to art making. Kong tells multiple sources about her own battles with mental health, saying that her creative practice

¹³⁵ Ngai, 352.

¹³⁶ Jones 1998, 7 [emphasis in the original].

¹³⁷ Darryl Wee. "The Unstoppable Yayoi Kusama," in *Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-unstoppable-yayoi-kusama-1486394644>.

¹³⁸ Marin R. Sullivan, "Reflective Acts and Mirrored Images: Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden," in *History of Photography* 39, no. 4, (October 2, 2015), 407.

has become a kind of therapy for her.¹³⁹ Ever since she left her work as a lawyer, Kong has become prolific if not obsessive about art making, producing paintings, sculptures, installations and videos alongside her performance series.¹⁴⁰ It is clear through her ability to mediatize herself that Kong is interested in actively constructing her image and narrative. What is unclear however is whether or not she may be playing into the stereotype of the “mad artist,” which art historian Midori Yoshimoto identifies as being overemphasized by scholars who reduce Kusama and her work to mental illness.¹⁴¹

Themes of excess, desire, and love are all present across Kusama’s sculptures, installations, performances and paintings. Most relevant to this thesis is Kusama’s merging of body/self with her art through photography. The sheer number of photographs where the artist poses in and among her work “suggest a carefully orchestrated performative impulse across [Kusama’s] artistic practice during the mid-1960s.”¹⁴² In collage works such as *Sex Obsession Food Obsession Macaroni Infinity Nets & Kusama* (1962) [fig. 18], Kusama poses naked atop one of her phallic furniture sculptures, her body covered in polka dots. Jones describes this action writing, “her body/self is literally absorbed into her work and indeed *becomes* it.”¹⁴³ What is this desire to disappear into one’s own artwork? Kusama often found herself the only woman and person of

¹³⁹ Yau, 2020. As with the details of her career as a lawyer, there is conflicting information about this aspect of Kong’s biography. She allegedly spent time in a mental asylum to deal with trauma and anxiety from both her career as an attorney and from the death of her parents as a child. Both Hua and Yau seem to point to Kong having spent time in an asylum around the year 2000.

¹⁴⁰ She has produced hundreds of paintings and drawings, which mostly depict women, and has been exhibited at Cipa gallery and Amy Li gallery in Beijing. One of her first paintings, *Youth Who Warded Off Pain* (2010) holds several aspects that reappear elsewhere in her work; troubled or distraught figures in stressed or anxious situations. For paintings by Kong that have sold at auction, see: “Kong Ning,” Mutual Art, accessed January 13, 2020, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Kong-Ning/67068F7471F707CD#more>.

¹⁴¹ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 45.

¹⁴² Sullivan, 406.

¹⁴³ Jones 1998, 7 [emphasis in the original].

colour in a sea of men, so this gesture might express the uncomfortable and overwhelming feeling of being swallowed into the phallus field.

Photographs are also a means for Kusama to advertise herself, where she “enact[s] herself ambivalently as celebrity (object of our desires) or artist (master of intentionality).”¹⁴⁴ This allows Kusama to play with the male gaze, enticing and soliciting attention as a woman and an artist. Using Craig Owens’ “rhetoric of pose,” Amelia Jones writes:

Through the very performance of their bodies through the feminizing rhetoric of the pose, feminist body artists begin to complicate and subvert the dualistic, simplistic logic of these scenarios of gender difference by which women are consigned to a pose that is understood to be unself-reflexive, passively pinioned at the center of a ‘male gaze.’ We recall that Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognized the efficacy of physical movement in tearing the body/self away from pure objectification: “It is clearly in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being.” By *acting*—as artists in general but also more specifically as performers, literally viewed “in action”—feminist body artists insist on having access to the same (always failed) potential to transcendence that men have traditionally had in patriarchy.¹⁴⁵

In similar ways to Kusama but without ever posing naked, Kong is her own kind of publicity hound, posing for countless photographs which are then proliferated online through her social media and in news articles. The promotion of her performance for the sake of raising environmental awareness is still a shameless self-promotion, where the artist’s gendered body is front and center. Documentation of Kong’s marriage series performances show the artist posing generally with her head turned up toward the sky and her arms outstretched, either to hold up her veil or headdress, or as a gesture of reaching out and giving herself up to the sky [see fig. 3, 4, 6]. These poses also prioritize the gowns, allowing them to be displayed in their full capacity as intricate wearable sculptures. Dressed as a bride, Kong’s body is imbued with feminine virtues and the promise of a reproductive future. Her posing therefore solicits the male and

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴⁵ Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, First edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 155-156.

heteronormative gaze only to present an obfuscated body, distorted and indistinguishable beneath a mass of objects that form the gown. She presents a desire similar to that of Kusama's, of disappearing into her own artwork.

In the case of Atsuko Tanaka, her *Denki Fuku (Electric Dress)* (1956) [fig. 19] presented at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition in Tokyo, bears several similarities to Kong's marriage performances. The handmade dress of industrial lightbulbs and wires is activated by Tanaka and others across several performances.¹⁴⁶ Photographic documentation of the performance shows an "impassive expression" on Tanaka's face as she carries the weight of roughly 110 pounds, alleviated somewhat as the gown is suspended from the ceiling.¹⁴⁷ Some photographs document the artist posing with arms outstretched in front of her own drawings of *Electric Dress*. With the lightbulbs flashing bright colours on and off, heating up the contraption, "the adornment of the physical form bombard[s] the sense of the wearer."¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the power of the performance for the viewer lies also in the overwhelming space *Electric Dress* takes up as both a visual and sensorial sculpture, existing "between the sphere of the cyborg spectacle and the vulnerable female body."¹⁴⁹ Tanaka is both at the center of the work, hyper visible, and yet her body is completely obscured, revealing only a small face and hands.

Although *Electric Dress* was performed over ten years earlier than Kusama's *Self-Obliteration Event* (1967) [fig. 20] in New York, wherein the artist covered herself and others in polka dots, there are parallels between the two. As the lightbulbs of Tanaka's dress flash, they contribute to a kind of "visual dematerializing effect" of the body of the wearer, which is also the

¹⁴⁶ *Electric Dress* was worn by female and male subjects. Namiko Kunimoto states that a feminist and gender-based analysis of the piece may be complicated by this fact, see Namiko Kunimoto, *The Stakes of Exposure: Anxious Bodies in Post-War Japanese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 117.

¹⁴⁷ Kunimoto 2017, 116.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 115.

goal of Kusama's self-obliteration.¹⁵⁰ We can observe this process in Kong's work as well, particularly her *Red Alert Dress* (2015) [fig. 21] performed at the NCPA only days after *Orange Horns Bride*. The *Red Alert Dress* is made of hand-held traffic batons that each contain a glowing red light and the words "Stop" and "Public Security." In order to display the gown's full effect, Kong performed this piece at night, becoming a blur of red LED against a black sky. *Red Alert Dress* interacted with the NCPA structure in a spectacular interplay of light where both Kong and the transparent orb were reflected in the mirror-like lake that surrounds the site. One photograph shared in an article by CBC News shows the police inspecting Kong and her dress [fig. 22]. The flare and blur of the image contributes to and conveys the presence of a "dematerializing" effect in Kong's *Red Alert Dress* that spectators of Tanaka's *Electric Dress* witnessed as well. Part of the process of dematerialization for these artists means that their bodies become "connected to the eternal universe."¹⁵¹ For Yoshimoto, this concept relates to both a Buddhist understanding of the spirit as well as what she calls a pre-1970s ecofeminism.¹⁵² Yoshimoto's reading thus confirms my connection of themes like the infinite and eternal from Kong's symbolic marriage ritual, and the obfuscation of her body in that process, to an ecocritical and feminist project. Kong's body/self is at once the center of the performance and not its focus, emphasizing instead an ecofeminist message of oneness that does not discriminate human from nonhuman. Furthermore, the expression of a seemingly "endless love" (as in *Kusama's Peep Show—Endless Love Show* from 1966) parallels Kong's use of marriage as an eternal and infinitely binding expression of love for

¹⁵⁰ Yoshimoto, 73.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

the planet. This is solidified in Kong's use of specific auspicious numbers in her dresses, such as the *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* or *Marry the Blue Sky*.¹⁵³

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) [fig. 23] plays on similar themes in a wearable performance art piece where an opposite action takes place: Ono is undressed on stage in an interactive performance where the audience is invited to use the scissors to cut away at the artist's clothing. *Cut Piece* was presented initially at a concert in Kyoto, Japan titled *Insound/Instructure: Contemporary American Music*. In its initial composition, *Cut Piece* could have been performed by a man or woman, but because Ono ended up being the subject at its center, "the audience was unexpectedly put in a position of committing themselves to a taboo behavior."¹⁵⁴ The act of using scissors to increasingly reveal Ono's body expresses more directly a violence against women. The work is a powerful reflection on agency, the body, and the active/passive subject. Rather than allow the audience to remain in their traditionally passive role, the instructions of *Cut Piece* ask them to participate and confront their voyeuristic desires. Ono performs this piece multiple times in Tokyo, New York, London, and even as recently as a 2003 performance in Paris. *Cut Piece* can also be read alongside Kusama's *Self-Obliteration Event*. Yoshimoto writes, "the reconstruction of the self [is] not the main objective; rather than narcissistically concentrating on themselves, they offer[...] opportunities to the audience to participate in the obliterating act and to reflect upon itself as an audience."¹⁵⁵ In this sense, both works offer something to their audiences at the same time as the artists offer up their own bodies/selves.

¹⁵³ The number 1 for instance in the ancient Chinese tradition designates "the All, the Perfect, the Absolute beyond all polarity" and the number 9 "is mainly connected with heaven and cosmological problems, [as well as] 9 openings of the human body and 9 kinds of harmony [...]." Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37 & 119.

¹⁵⁴ Yoshimoto, 99.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 108.

The practices of Kusama, Tanaka, and Ono all help to better understand the relationship between the aesthetics of Kong's performance series and the identity politics at play in her work. The specific examples examined here serve my argument around an aesthetic of obfuscation as one that builds upon Ngai's formation of cuteness as it relates to consumption. In Kong's art, consumption occurs on multiple levels. First, in the literal sense as consumption practices relate to pollution, waste, and emissions, given that the goal of her marriage performance series is to bring attention to the ecological crisis. Kong provides the compelling and environmentalist image of being physically inhibited and consumed by those plastic and inorganic objects that make up her gowns. Second, this aesthetic of body obfuscation is an aesthetic of obfuscation as Ngai theorizes it because of the awareness in her gesture of merging her body/self with her art. This process of self-objectification and self-obliteration in an artistic practice forces the onlooker – presumed white male – to confront their complicity in consuming Asian women's bodies. By bringing together these artists in a comparative analysis with Kong, my hope has been to highlight the commonalities in their aesthetics and link those to the conditions that Asian women artists continue to face across specific contexts and nations.

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of Kong Ning's marriage performance series, this thesis has demonstrated how the modes through which we relate to each other can be radically rethought in an ecofeminist and activist artistic practice. The creative proposition put forth in Kong's performance series pushes and challenges the boundaries of human and nonhuman. She does this all while invoking and reflecting on her body/self as racially and sexually "other" to the global art world and within the PRC.

I argue that Kong's work fits Val Plumwood's criteria for a serious ecofeminist critique of the master narrative, which requires a challenge to the very notion of what female, male, and human mean. As we have seen, identity politics are not absent from this project. In fact, ecofeminist philosophy emphasizes how gender, sexuality, and race are inextricable from the issue of environmental degradation. It is clear also, given Kong's context, that we cannot read her ecofeminist critique as separate from the gender inequality and policing of women's bodies in contemporary China. Part of the struggle for equality means that issues of race, class, sex, gender, and the environment, must all be at the forefront, or as Audre Lorde writes, "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."¹⁵⁶ A reconceptualization of the institution of marriage for example cannot focus only on who has the right to marry, but must look also at how land, property, and capitalism are tied into it. My analysis of Kong's practice follows this logic and I believe her vision for the future is ecofeminist and inclusive of all types of desires.

One of my questions at the outset of this thesis was about the subversive potential of Kong's work. There is no straightforward answer. This thesis has argued that the ecofeminism, alternative

¹⁵⁶ Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 1960s," in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Silver Press, 2017), 124.

relationality, and material aesthetics of her performances allow Kong to express a strong social commentary. Her determination to express herself, her desires, and her subjectivity through art making has everything to do with her marginality, both in the PRC as a Daur Mongolian and internationally as an Asian woman artist. Though she is aware of the risk of censorship or arrest, she asserts that “our society needs genuine expressions of people’s fear, uneasiness, and confusions about life.”¹⁵⁷ When asked about whether or not she feels her work is political, Kong says, “I just want to urge people to love nature and protect the environment. Actually, I am helping the government. The government never thanked me, of course not.”¹⁵⁸

The existence of this thesis now makes possible other conversations around Kong. To further understand the relationship between her performances and their documentation, a closer look into her online presence may be necessary. This kind of investigation could include audience reception and feminist media studies to consider how Kong constructs herself and her narrative through tools like Instagram and Weibo. It is clear that she, or perhaps her team of assistants, has an understanding of the media and actively promotes these performances across online platforms. Several questions remain around Kong’s relationship to the Chinese government, including whether or not she works with them to promote this seemingly “soft” form of activism or if she is given no choice about being published on sites like *China Daily* in order for the government to signal tolerance. Furthermore, Kong’s performances in front of Western art institutions such as the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Centre Pompidou could signal a potential desire to be noticed by and included into those venues. This relates to the larger discourse around contemporary Asian art; how it is viewed, included, and excluded by the West, and how it views itself.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Hatton, 2015.

¹⁵⁸ Kong, interview by Lilly Wei, trans. Catherine Cheng, *Studio International*, December 22, 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Chiu and Genocchio ask the question “does Asian art need to be recognized and valued by the Western art market to be important in the international art world?” (Chiu and Genocchio, 3).

Kong's marriage performance series is primarily about desires. Using the romantic trope of the bride, the audience projects their own desires onto her body, which she turns on their heads by marrying the nonhuman. Kong's body disappears in multiple ways across her performance series. In *Red Alert Dress* the lights cause a dematerializing effect and in *Orange Horns Bride* her body is completely absorbed into the work. These instances show how, by merging her body/self with her art, Kong plays a game with her audiences' desires by objectifying herself and feeding into the heteronormative gaze, while also concealing her body behind the wearable sculptures and asserting autonomy as a woman artist in public space.

For Heather Davis, desire is a powerful tool in the feminist project of dismantling power structures. It has the ability to “push[...] us beyond our boundaries. It breaks us apart. It dissolves the divisions between the self and the world, recognizing the permeability of the skin, the porousness and morphability of our bodies. [...] Desire is what propels, what insists on the possibilities of new kinds of worlds.”¹⁶⁰ This is precisely what I mean by Kong's radical ecofeminist relationality. It is one that creatively expresses a new approach to life with Earth that also fundamentally challenges social norms. Davis cites the feminist artist and theorist Mary Kelly who says that “desire is repetitious; it resists normalization, ignores biology, disperses the body.”¹⁶¹ These qualities all speak to Kong's performance practice, as she resists containment.

¹⁶⁰ Heather Davis, ed., introduction to *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press and Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA): Montreal and Kingston, 2017), 6.

¹⁶¹ Mary Kelly in Davis, introduction to *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, 6.

FIGURES



Figure 1.

Kong Ning, *Marry the Blue Sky* (2015). Performance with dress made of 3M facemasks at China Central Television (CCTV) tower, Beijing. Image source: CCTV. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<http://kejiao.cntv.cn/2015/12/02/PHOA1449026900316501.shtml#PHOT1449026995969600>].



Figure 2.

Kong Ning, *Marry the Blue Sky* (detail) (2015). Performance with dress made of 3M facemasks at China Central Television (CCTV) tower, Beijing. Image source: CCTV. Accessed 18 May, 2020.

[<http://kejiao.cntv.cn/2015/12/02/PHOA1449026900316501.shtml#PHOT1449026996710608>].



Figure 3.

Kong Ning, *Marry the Blue Sky* (2014). Performance with dress made of 3M facemasks at Beijing Exhibition Centre, Beijing. Photo by Imaginechina. Image source: Alamy. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<https://www.alamy.com/chinese-artist-kong-ning-dressed-in-a-10-meter-long-wedding-gown-made-of-999-face-masks-poses-in-front-of-the-beijing-exhibition-centre-in-smog-in-bei-image263628796.html>].



Figure 4.

Kong Ning, *1,000 Egg World Earth Day Dress* (2016). Performance with egg dress at National Center for Performing Arts (NCPA), Beijing. Photo by Imaginechina. Image source: Alamy. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<https://www.alamy.com/chinese-artist-kong-ning-displays-a-wedding-dress-studded-with-1000-plastic-eggs-to-mark-the-world-earth-day-in-front-of-the-national-centre-for-the-image263329106.html>].



Figure 5.

Kong Ning, *100,000 Green Leaves Dress* (2019) in “My leaf works in Shenzhen.” *Instagram*, 9 March, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuybhutlRfi/>.



Figure 6.

Kong Ning, *Black Tube* (2019) in “Today’s smog work ‘Black Suga’ in the Temple of Heaven in Beijing.” *Instagram*, 22 November, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5KHH1IFFNB/>.



Figure 7. Kong Ning, *Degradable Bride* (2018) in “My ‘degradable bride’ works in Shanghai.” *Instagram*, 19 March, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BggCloCFEVs/>.



Figure 8.

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Figure 9.

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Figure 10.

Xiao Lu, *The Wedding or Wedlock* (2009). Performance. Image source: Artsy. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/xiao-lu-wedlock-3-1>].



Figure 11.

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Figure 12.

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Figure 13.

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Figure 14.

Kong Ning, *Marrying a Horse* (2015). Performance with horse in Andabaozi, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR). Image source: Taihai Net. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<http://www.taihainet.com/news/txnews/gjnews/sh/2014-12-25/1350209.html#g1350209=19>].



Figure 15.

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Figure 16.

Kong Ning, *Orange Horns Bride* (2015). Performance in dress made of orange and red horns at the Bell and Drum Towers, Beijing. Photo by Damir Sagolj/Reuters. Image source: Charlie Gillis. "Why China's artists are making waves, and getting away with it." *Maclean's*, 9 December, 2015. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<https://www.macleans.ca/news/world/why-chinas-artists-are-making-waves-and-getting-away-with-it/#gallery/china-art/slide-3>].



Figure 17.

Kong Ning handing out a facemask in *Orange Horns Bride* (2015). Performance in dress made of orange and red horns at the Bell and Drum Towers, Beijing. Photo by Imaginechina. Image source: Alamy. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [<https://www.alamy.com/chinese-artist-kong-ning-wearing-an-orange-face-mask-and-an-orange-wedding-dress-made-of-horns-gives-a-face-mask-to-a-pedestrian-on-a-street-in-heavy-image263418839.html>].

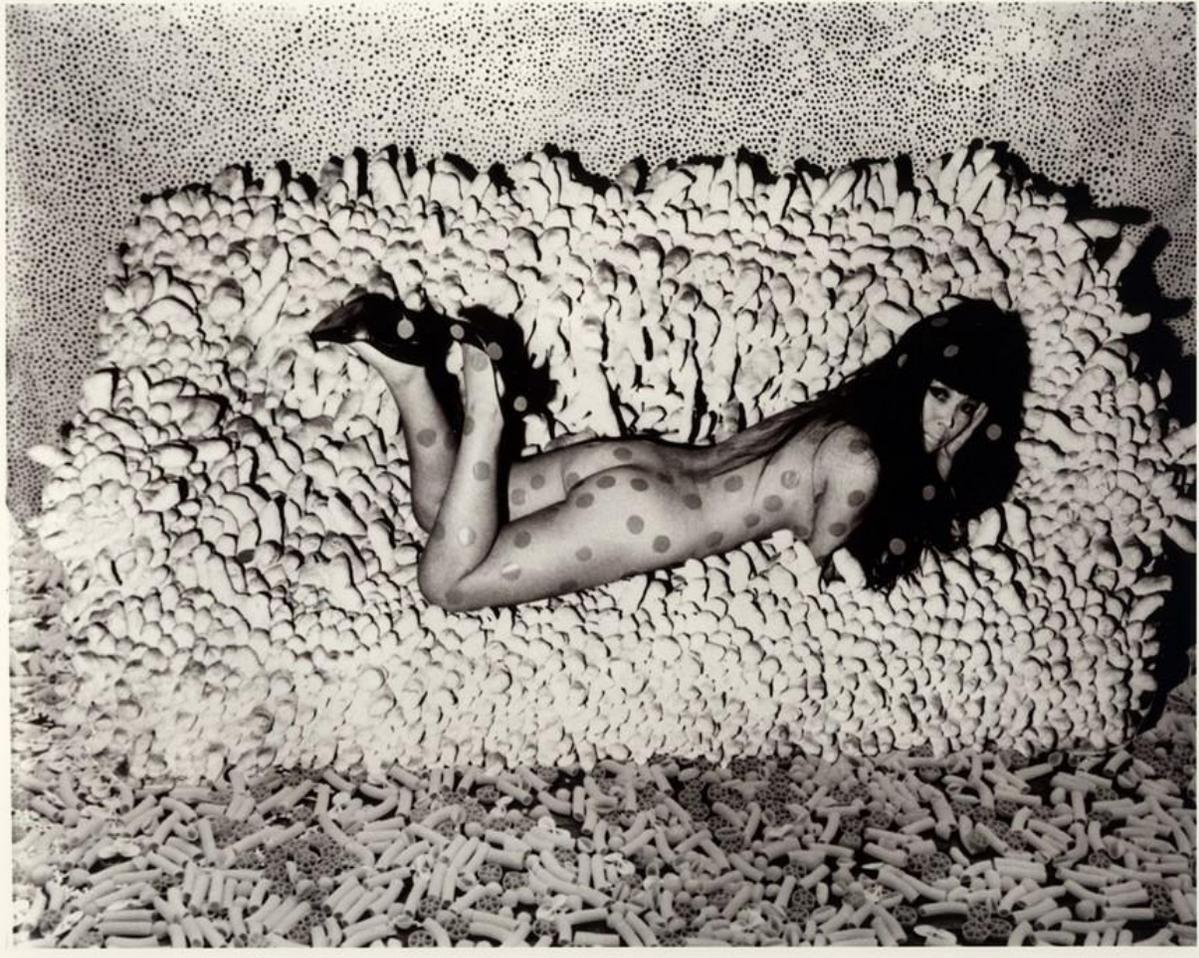


Figure 18.

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Figure 19.

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Figure 20.

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Figure 21.

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Figure 22.

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Figure 23.

Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece* (1964). Performance at Carnegie Recital Hall, New York. Photo by Minoru Niizuma. Image source: MoMa. Accessed 18 May, 2020. [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964/].

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