

# BwO: THE ART OF 吉于 (YU JI)

# TEXT BY TODD VON AMMON

The studio feels far away from the city outside. Shanghai pulses and folds in on itself to the rhythms of construction, transaction and desire.

The studio resembles something between an archaeological site and a triage unit. On the floor rest several dozen human body segments in casted concrete: a torso with no limbs (leg and arm stumps akimbo); two more slouched torsos bound together, back to back and at the waist, with a steel strap; a headless bust with one arm projecting outward. On the subway-tiled walls, several other body segments rest in steel straps and holsters. Ensnared in this tangle of limbs are several doll-sized fetishes with rigid postures. On a nearby shelf, a few more of these statuettes lay in a tight row, bits of rebar poking out from crumbled bases. Upon a thick threaded rod, a massive concrete head floats at waist height on a base, equal parts Olmec Colossus and overgrown infant. An identical colossal head rests on the floor among other misfit limbs. A layer of detail seems to have sloughed off these human forms, having been sculpted from memory. The *Flesh in Stone* series is one chapter in artist 吉于 (Yu Ji)'s creation myth.

The center of gravity in the myth is the *Ta Jama*—an ongoing series of handmade boulders. *Ta Jama* is numinous by design: the name has no referent. Crafted from readily available materials like plaster, wooden beams and chicken wire, they often purport a mystic inner life. One recent *Ta Jama* filled an entire exhibition space and rumbled with a primordial drone. Another recent exhibition displayed pieces of *Ta Jama*, their rocky skins torn asunder to reveal their inner makings—skeletal wooden scaffolding.

In the Dogon creation myth, creator god Amma creates an egg which holds the unformed universe. Some unknown impulse causes the egg to open and disperse itself into the void, ultimately forming galaxies, planets, elements, and bodies. The Dogon Egg's corners prefigure the cardinal points of the universe and all its contents.

“The body without organs is an egg: it is criss-crossed with axes and thresholds, with latitudes and longitudes and geodesic lines, traversed by gradients marking the transitions and the becomings, the destinations of the subject developing along these particular vectors.”<sup>1</sup>

The unbroken Dogon Egg contains the pure ingredients of the universe, then its shattering represents the complexity and difference of matter. Yu Ji's sitters undergo a lengthy and arduous process as the artist carefully studies their proportions, allowing the mind to subsume the sitter's body into memory.

The cortical *homunculus* is the brain's map of human body. Latin for “little man,” the *homunculus* is a complete illustration of the human body, though its proportions follow meandering contours of neural tissue instead of muscle and bone. Yu Ji's smallest *Flesh in Stone* objects—no larger than a newborn infant but with adult proportions—resemble the *homunculi* of early science, wherein from the *ovum* came a Lilliputian individual who simply grew in size, carrying his or her original *homuncular* proportions. In Yu Ji's creation myth, the body does not grow from egg to zygote to embryo and so on, but is borne from the virtual, *homuncular* body (without organs) which lives within each of us like a phantom. This *homuncular* being can adopt any scale, but its proportions are intrinsic.

A common experience during recovery from amputation is the phantom limb. When a limb is lost, the somatosensory areas in the cortical *homunculus* remain. Sufferers often report feeling pain or stimulation in a lost hand or foot. It's as if the corporeal “fleshy” body shares its space with an imaginary body, which often survives beyond the life of its physical counterpart. The mind projects the memory of the lost limb as a fully formed hologram that the body can feel but not see.





The majority of Yu Ji's *Flesh in Stone* works adhere to a one-to-one human scale. A leg may swell from its torso and taper away below the knee, or extend past the calf and terminate at the ankle. Another figure's horizon may be just past the genitals, at which point it terminates. One can complete the figure in his or her mind—difficult to resist forming a ghost-image of the body intact—but only after scanning his or her own body, or activating his or her own cortical *homunculus*. Though the *Flesh in Stone* bodies are made of casted concrete, they engage the viewer's haptic nervous system and are thus surprisingly sensuous. They are, however, not sensual: the presence of genitalia alludes not to sex but to another point on a neural map. I feel my own nerves projecting themselves onto the smooth concrete skin of these smooth, truncated bodies.

Yu Ji's bodies visit the smooth space of the psyche before returning to the physical world. Inscribing memories is similar to writing notes in sand. The mind, like the Dogon Egg, is a realm of transitions and becomings, of endless crisscrossing vectors, of a multiplicity of flows. One cannot inscribe physical experience upon it, as it is constantly inscribing upon itself. When Yu Ji's figures return to earth, they've taken on a smoothness in kind, like river stones.

The fleshy body is an organism: it consumes, defecates, procreates, and pursues myriad forms of desire. From the outside, the human body is a complicated, inefficient, and incorrigible desiring-machine.

By metabolizing her subjects through memory, Yu Ji renders the body's organs as "[...] no longer anything more than intensities that are produced, flows, thresholds, and gradients."<sup>2</sup> According to Deleuze and Guattari, the "plane of immanence" is a unified field that knows only latitudes and longitudes, speeds and haecceities.<sup>3</sup> One can imagine Yu Ji's figures as orbiting around the plane of immanence but never fully making contact, losing their organs and details as they travel from the three dimensional world into the mental field and back again. Yu Ji's project is about flows of energy, deterritorialization, and undifferentiated planes.

Shanghai is the quintessentially machinic city: heterogeneous parts continuously recombine

to create a multiplicity of desiring machines. I look across the Bund at Pudong and the rainbow skyline pulses and flashes with a rakish and appealing menace. I lose awareness of myself and am subsumed by a wave of unfamiliar hungers. Like standing beneath the vaulted ceilings of a cathedral, the skyline of Shanghai is transcendental.

In the studio, I am beckoned towards *immanence* in favor of *transcendence*. Yu Ji's figures invite us to compare ourselves to them: bodies without organs, or sites of pure internal uniformity through which energy can pass in any direction, and at any speed.

In a sparsely installed exhibition, the skinny trunk of a tree balances in the middle of the concrete floor. The stick-like trunk, selected for its height and straightness, has been denuded of all its branches. If it weren't for a tiny piece of ballast embedded in the foot of this stick, it would never stand. In total stillness it will survive on its feeble inertia alone—but should a rogue wave of air come barreling through the gallery in the wake of a capriciously speedy person or a hastily slammed door, the tree will fall and a loud slap will reverberate through the room: the same soft torrent of air will become sharply corrugated with sound waves. With the simplest of tools, Yu Ji allows us to access a purer field—one of flows, thresholds and gradients: the air in a room. Transcendence, ever-popular, is always an option: Yu Ji's quiet radicality is in its endorsement of immanence.

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 19.

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 164.

3. Yu Ji's cat is named 一所 (Yi Suo) which translates roughly to "a (determiner)" i.e. "a school."

**Etudes-Lento IV, 2017 (detail) (opposite page, top)**  
**Rema-Rema, 2017 Courtesy: the artist and Beijing**  
**Commune (opposite page, bottom)**  
**Flesh in Stone #1, 2013 Courtesy: the artist (p. 217)**