



“I really love art. I think art is life. The boundary between art and life is very blurred. Sometimes art is about copying and reflecting life so I am very interested in the project at the Flemish Pavilion. I learn art and life from my parents, my neighbours, all the people around me. The deepest ideas are not from the eye and brain; they’re from the blood. The heart is the key. You cannot only use your brain, you have to feel something from your heart.”

“When I was very young the government sent my father to the South of China, accusing him of being a counter-revolutionary... My father was a calligrapher. The Cultural Revolution was at its height. The war destroyed everything. We lost a lot of memories. My family were landowners so were categorised as bourgeois. We were shamed but my parents taught me to be proud; we were educated and they knew the value of education.”

From the Blood

As his installation for the Flemish collateral exhibition at the Venice Biennale is built around him, Beijing-based Song Dong takes time out to talk about his working philosophy to **Francesca Donovan** and collaborates in a series of portraits.

Two days before it was set to open, the Flemish collateral contribution to the 56th Venice Biennale, *The Revenge of the Common Place*, was a construction site. Wires from light fixtures tumbled out from

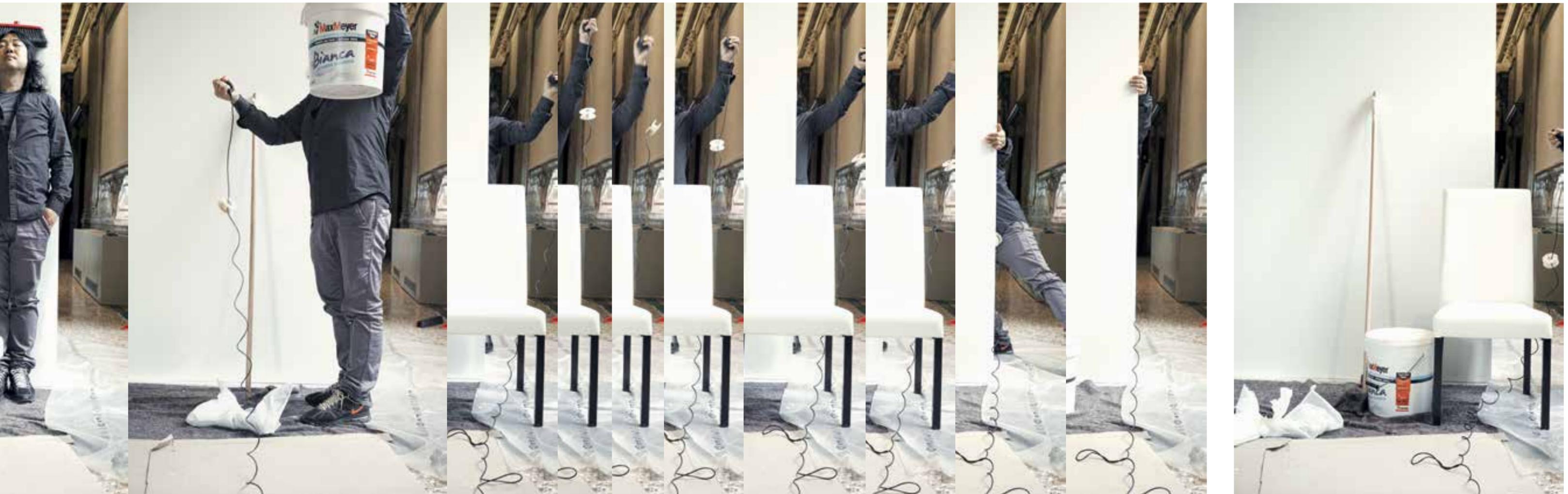
holes in walls, wrapping themselves around brooms and stretching across, what was then, an empty space. The installers worked to piece together the exhibition space after the project had been forced to

relocate. Amidst the controlled chaos, Song jumps to his feet and in a moment of spontaneous enthusiasm, starts to position himself in front of the camera, to build a series of assisted self-portraits for CCQ.

Song Dong was born in the Chinese capital, Beijing, in 1966, to a once prosperous landowning family, who had fallen into poverty during China’s mid-century turmoil. Supported by his mother, the young Song began to paint. After the Tiananmen Square protests, in 1989, the

artist’s work took on a more experimental approach. He had watched the landscape of Beijing change out of all recognition in the preceding decades and, in some ways his practice has perhaps been formed out of a response to those changes.

In 1995, the artist began to keep a diary. The resulting work, *Writing With Water*, saw him relay the diary entries onto a flat stone using a brush and water instead of ink, so that the words disappeared. —>



"Hans is very interested in copy. He asks whether art is original or fake. I do a lot of original fake. Sometimes copying is not a bad thing. I use some of Marcel Duchamp's ideas. I learned a lot about Chinese craft by copying predecessors. Hans likes to make dialogues. I have constructed works in order to create dialogues with Marcel Duchamp and Magritte and Ai Wei Wei. I made dialogues between the masters and myself. I like that everyone is an artist. Everyone has a mobile phone and can take a picture. An exhibition is not only in one room: it's online, it's in the whole world and the whole world is witness."

"Here, everyone can pick up candy. That is artwork. Many people desire the sweet Belgian chocolate: first they take the rich chocolate and afterwards they take the plain biscuits. Most people are more interested in luxury and seeing this in action makes me question what is important in our eyes. Some people who come to my exhibition want to see art. Others want something for free: free food, free gifts. Some want candy and some want art because people have different levels. That is a very happy thing and people who come to see art want to get happy."

On a visit to Tibet, he had himself photographed repeatedly striking the surface of the Lhasa River with an archaic Chinese seal. This stamp of authority left no imprint, for *Printing On Water* (1996). That same year, he produced *Breathing*. On a freezing New Year's Eve, Song lay face down on the icy ground in Tiananmen Square for 40 minutes. As he lay, his breath formed a sheet of ice on the pavement.

Sometimes it seems that the past has been forgotten in China. Song, however, has never succumbed to this particular form of amnesia. *Waste Not* (2005) was an ode to his mother's obsessional hoarding, a habit that stemmed from her experience of extreme poverty

in the '50s and '60s. Song constructed a house and garden from 10,000 of her knick-knacks, trinkets, books, buttons, pots and pans.

Harnessing the mundane power of the object, Song explores how our possessions are defined within their surroundings. His practice is less focussed on aesthetics than on a deeper exploration into an object's value or essence; its capacity to become transformed into a receptacle for significance.

Waste Not has, with other works, been exhibited at the Barbican Centre in London. He has also exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and dOCUMENTA (13). Hans de Wolf invited Song to

create a new work for the Flemish exhibition at the Venice Biennale, to be shown alongside work by Francis Alÿs and Rinus van de Velde. He hoped to initiate a dialogue around differing attitudes to appropriation across the East/West divide, using Warhol's famous Brillo boxes and Marcel Duchamp as conceptual starting points. —CCQ

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Song Dong's solo exhibition – Life is art, art is life – is showing at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands until 1 November 2015.

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Assisted self-portraits, Song Dong, 2015
Photo: Ric Bower