



Bodies of Substance

works by

Margaret Hunter

Azade Köker

Ping Qiu



Talbot Rice Gallery
at the University of Edinburgh



Foreword

Pat Fisher • *Assistant Curator*

ALL OUR RECENT SCIENTIFIC, medical meddling in the stuff of the self has not seemed to quell the interest that the corporeal body has for the visual artist. Like the anatomist of old, even after the dissection has been done there is still an awe surrounding life.

Margaret Hunter, Ping Qiu and Azade Köker in common with many other contemporary artists use the body as the domain of their creative exploration. They use it however not through visceral analysis like Hatoum or Quinn but as a site for symbolic representation.

The three artists are based in Berlin. They bring to the investigation a personal and a generic viewpoint. They are considering displacement (none of them are German) gender, relationships and in particular an elemental study of being. Hunter's powerful (almost) rooted wood

carvings which are both on and of the earth are weathered, inscribed and strengthened by life journeys. Azade Köker explores the sculptural void with air filled virtual bodies, being and nothingness, they show a transient frail nature. A third element showing the properties of water is explored by Ping Qiu – floatation - in the site-specific *Fingerblumen* and containment in her powerful human vessels.

The artists have been brought together to create a collaborative installation where the works themselves occupy the same space as the viewer, freestanding in the middle of the room creating a direct mutual engagement and perhaps allowing us to ponder that when we do encounter them we do so from within our own skin.

The ethos of collaboration has also informed the exhibition management. In

helping to realize it our first thanks go to Dr Kerstin Mey who has worked as a co-curator on the project from the outset. Her tireless work, patience and good judgment have been invaluable throughout.

Additionally our thanks go to the project funders and sponsors:

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Special thanks to Irene at MBE Dundee for keeping a cool head in a crisis.

And finally our thanks to the artists, Margaret Hunter, Azade Köker and Ping Qiu for the commitment, energy and attention they have brought to the project.



Azade Köker

Ping Qiu

Pat Fisher

Kerstin Mey

Margaret Hunter

Discussion

Margaret Hunter, Azade Köker and Ping Qiu in discussion with Kerstin Mey
Berlin, 20 December 2001

MEY What role do collaborative art projects play in your working practices? Where do you stand regarding the collaboration of artists?

HUNTER We all feel that it is important for this project to be organised by two outsiders (curators). We are being well looked after. When artists organise projects the situation can sometimes become difficult due to overbearing egos.

KÖKER We have come together with our individual positions and entered into a productive dialogue. The success of creative collaborations in general depends on the nature of the joint project in terms of its content, process and outcome. It is too early to take stock of this project since it is still evolving. I have collaborated

with other artists in many projects and have always regarded those exchanges as very productive, even though the interactions amongst artists can become complicated and complex.

QIU It was the exhibition concept in the first place that brought us together and allowed us to encounter each other's work. To our own surprise we have discovered quite a few similarities both in our intentions and our art, but also significant differences. In fruitful discussions I have been able to develop new ideas for formal solutions that might be more convincing. Artists have strong personalities. Exhibition projects led by a curator can be compared to an orchestra led by a conductor. Of

course competitive attitudes may affect the group dynamics in a negative way. Yet co-operation helps to develop tolerance, to bear frictions and offers the opportunity to learn from each other. Looked at in this way, competition within the same professional field does not matter that much.

MEY Curators initiate the polyphonic ensemble playing of the artists and give the beat.

HUNTER Our working practices are quite diverse. I think it is interesting that the differences dividing us appear in another light due to the fact that we live and work in the same place. All three of us came to Berlin from various countries and cultural backgrounds. Through the choice of place we share a common ground and have developed similar attitudes.

MEY What role does Berlin play in your work?



S'Hort Series V

2001

KÖKER The aura of a place, the energies emanating from it, is important. It does not matter where an artist is situated or if s/he can define this aura exactly or not. Berlin is full of energy, yet those energies are not always positive.

HUNTER Berlin - before, during and after its division - has always been a place of fluctuation. People come and go. Their motives for coming to the city, for staying on or for leaving (again) are manifold. The climate in Berlin is sometimes raw due to historical circumstances, the population density of Berlin and the level of competition. To survive as an artist in Berlin - where the East-West division is still apparent more than 10 years after the German reunification - you need to be very assertive. The divide reflects our own situation too: living in-between two countries, in-between two cultures.

QIU I am very glad to live in Berlin, because the city offers a wealth of information, opportunities and encounters. This advantage of abundance can easily turn into the disadvantage of plenty. Then the richness and diversity of cultural provisions turn into floods that threaten to overwhelm. Artists in particular have to be careful not to drown in the surplus provision. Perhaps this situation makes it harder to establish one's own aesthetic concept and to stick to it.

HUNTER Once you have found your way and believe in it, you are strong and no longer subjected unconditionally to the diverse influences.

MEY Is it more difficult for women than for men to establish a position as artist in Berlin?

KÖKER That was certainly the case in the past, but the situation has changed.



Untitled

PVC, 1999

Photo: Ilona Ripke

QIU I think women have an advantage over men. For centuries, society including culture was dominated by men. Thus, the territory of feminine aesthetics has, to a large extent, remained a new territory. Despite recent social changes it still offers enormous scope and many creative opportunities.

KÖKER Masculine art has had centuries to become established. The other - the feminine - takes time too, to become established.

MEY Does a female / feminine aesthetics exist?

KÖKER There is female / feminine thinking, a different perception and sensibility, because thinking and perception are connected to one's sexuality, to one's embodied experience. The individually specific as well as collective socialisation, subjective bodily experience become manifest in a person's expressions, surface in their

art. In the past women lived as females and worked as males particularly in sculpture, an area that had remained inaccessible for women for a long time.

MEY Women, to assert themselves in a patriarchal society, have often employed and unconsciously internalised 'masculine' ways of thinking and behaviour.

HUNTER I have often been asked, why I concentrate on the female figure as principal symbol in my paintings and sculptures? To me the answer is obvious: I have gained my life experience as woman. I had two children early, was a housewife and yet professionally independent. Divorced and a single parent I had to earn a living for my family during my art school training. This wealth of experience informs my themes without me saying that I am going to produce images as a woman. Of course, we live in a society that is changing in profound and manifold ways. Much of the change was

initiated and carried by the Women's Liberation movement and has altered the social position of women in the West. I can still remember the radical Women's Lib movement in West Berlin, when I arrived there in 1985.

QIU The radicalism of the Women's Lib Movement was necessary in order to achieve equal rights for women. Unfortunately every revolution produces victims. Many women activists, particularly those of the first and second generation, have paid a high price to succeed in the emancipation of women within society at large. I am grateful to them for being able to live my life in a more self-determined way. In my view the relationships between women and men currently develop more harmoniously.

KÖKER A number of Women's Lib activists, who battled at the forefront in Germany during the 1960s and 70s, today live at the margins of

society. I would like to return to the issue of the localization of artists and draw our attention to the concept of identity without talking about a specific female identity. Individual identity is determined in particular by one's (field of) activity.

MEY The current interests lie with the processes through which individual identities are constructed, rather than to trace and establish collective identities. It's about 'identity work'.

KÖKER Michel Foucault thought that to realise one's full potential, one has to become like an artist, recreating oneself over and over again. Far from being a fixed point, a one-off outcome, identity is a continual process, a constant demand.

MEY You all come from diverse national and cultural contexts in which different projections of femininity exist. Where do you see points of contact, similarities, and where are differences?



The End of the Parallels

Wood, 1998

Prisma House, Berlin

KÖKER We are united in our sympathies for the fore-fighters for women's social equality. Those sympathies are echoed in our artistic commitment, although not necessarily in an explicit manner.

HUNTER This positioning happens rather more subconsciously in my work. We share a sense of a strong individual identity, which has emerged through our change of place, through our cultural displacement. We came to Berlin, initially without speaking any German. In a foreign environment and without the support network of family and friends one was thrown back on oneself, and so was forced to reflect upon oneself.

MEY Did the change of place liberate?

KÖKER I knew from an early time that I had to leave the familiar environment of my native country in order to seek new challenges that allowed me to escape the

comfortable way of thinking and living. This decision was not motivated by provincial parochialism, because Istanbul, where I grew up, is an international and open city to which I am still emotionally connected. However, I cannot feel the same for two different countries and have the same level of responsibility.

HUNTER Even though it is hard to go it alone, I experienced the new beginning in a different culture as liberating. I became more self-confident.

KÖKER We are united perhaps in our ability to assert ourselves as women and artists in another country.

HUNTER In individually different ways we have created scope for our work and life.

KÖKER Crucial for me was that I made my work my reason d'etre. Art has become my `Heimat' (home) no matter where I live. The equation of



S'Hort Series II

2001

`Heimat' and art does not mean an extremely puritan way of life and respective work ethics. It expresses that art for me has become a means of survival. I think we may share this motivation. Yet, `Heimat' as an issue is more complex. I cannot live in one place and work for/about another place. I react to the particular circumstances in which I live and work. Yet, the intellectual and emotional `Heimat' reflects a reality. `Heimat' has nothing to do with nostalgia.

HUNTER My work also provides me with a `Heimat'. I have realised that recently, particularly when I worked as an artist in different locations, on Majorca, in Finland, in the North of England, and then again in Scotland and Berlin. The essence of my experience, for instance the intense temporary participation in the life of others, living out of a suitcase that contains the essential things of life, are now gradually informing my work.

QIU With the term 'Heimat' I associate protection. China, my country of origin, signifies 'Heimat' in a narrow sense. When I am in Berlin I sometimes feel as a Berliner, but then again I feel very foreign. I cannot really define a place at all as my 'Heimat'. On the whole I feel rather international.

HUNTER In real life one cannot mix a cocktail by taking associations from one's country of origin, from transitional places, and from the location where one currently lives and works. Life is in pieces, fragmented and constantly flowing. Therefore any definition of 'Heimat' is fluid too and changes continually.

QIU One cannot be given a 'Heimat'. 'Heimat' - if it exists at all - has to be acquired. When my daughter was five years old she asked me: 'Mum, why do the children say I am a foreigner?' I answered: 'You are a foreigner because your mother is Chinese'. So she asked: 'If I got to China, then I

won't be a foreigner any longer.' 'Yes, you will still be a foreigner because of the long nose from your Swiss Dad.' 'If I go to Switzerland, then I won't be a foreigner.' 'Yes you still will be one, because you have inherited your mothers slant eyes.' 'Then I shall always be a foreigner. When will the other children become foreigners?' 'When they go to China or to Switzerland': My daughter said relieved: 'Then we all will be equal.'

HUNTER That brings me to the theme of the outsider. The concept of 'Heimat' is too narrow. We are all foreigners and in that sense outsiders. The outside position, which we have chosen voluntarily, produces insecurities. But there are advantages too. It offers greater freedom with regard to social and cultural conventions, a greater freedom of mind.

MEY Is the position of outsider a privilege?

HUNTER Yes, not-to-be-part-of can be a privilege not least in terms of an 'untainted' perspective on everyday life.

MEY The English expression 'in-between' very fittingly describes this situation. The hyphen symbolises the fluidity of the position.

HUNTER It embodies the possibilities inherent in this 'in-between' position.

KÖKER 'Heimat' for me means responsibility. I don't care whether I am considered as part of a community or not. In spite of my professorship at a German Art School, despite having become a civil servant working for the German state and despite feeling at home there, I don't belong to Germany. This situation provokes me and it makes me think. Responsibility means to take a political stance motivated by my concrete circumstances. I express my opinion and my feelings through my art and my actions. You are right, Margaret,



Untitled
PVC, 1999
Photo: Ilona Ripke

an unobstructed view can only be developed if one remains on the outside, whether s/he has stayed in her/his place of origin or not.

QIU I consider my position both as a person and artist as international.

KÖKER In order to be international or to avoid the danger of regionalism, one needs to have access to information, which, today, is intrinsically linked to the new information and communication technologies, above all the internet. Yet, our global exchange is far from being perfect, in spite of the global new media and technologies.

HUNTER I would like to argue that there is a considerable difference between sensually concrete and second-hand experience. The measure for understanding is determined by the sum of one's own experience; and especially an artistic sensitivity enables us to perceive the

reality in all its facets and to respond with our art.

KÖKER We are faced by an overwhelming availability of information and events at local, regional and global level and possess only very limited time for first-hand experience.

QIU However, a deliberate withdrawal from the overpowering flow of information might safeguard one's unspoilt ability to gain experience so that fewer, selected impressions can be soaked up in a much more intensive and lasting manner.

KÖKER Yes. The period of fast perception, thinking and action aims at the surface. Generations to come will socialise and gain access to information in different ways with direct consequences for the production and consumption of art.

MEY What role do surface and colour play in your sculptural work?



Pouring
Terracotta, 1995

QIU Surface and colour belong to the basic formal elements of art. The development of a refined perception and a greater sensitivity towards the tactile and light reflecting/absorbing properties of the material form part of the foundation courses in art.

KÖKER Surface plays a rather minor role in my visual objects. I employ quite a banal packaging technique to form hollow bodies and objects using plastic foil and cotton fabric. Emphasising the dematerialisation of the corporeal I point to a contemporary reality that is stripped of its contents. There is no depth anymore. We live in a total vacuum. I consider this 'evacuation' my principle concern, not the surface.

HUNTER I mark the surface of my wooden sculptures through chain-sawing, scratching, scorching and the application of stain, paint and/or varnish. This mark-making lends my individual figures a specific identity. My work is about

'wrapping' a body and
circumscribing an idea.

QIU I would like to return to the
issue of materiality. In my work,
such as the 'Finger Flowers', I use
ordinary household rubber gloves,
which I stuff, take in and close-up by
sewing as necessary, and arrange
them into more complex designs
with a figurative character. The
choice of material in art plays a
crucial role, particularly in terms of
the work withstanding the impact of
time. Art, be it visual art, literature,
music, etc always attempts to build
up resistance against the descent into
oblivion. In the art of the past this
issue, amongst others, motivated the
use of durable material. My gloves
are very transitory. I strive to
communicate through the spirit of
my work rather than being
concerned about its durability and
longevity.

HUNTER I like to work with wood, it
is a living material that moves and
changes.

KÖKER The durability of the material
is secondary. For the image to be
striking and persuasive is far more
important. A picture that touches
will inscribe itself into the individual
and collective visual memory.

MEY Does the critical debate
about the imageries, formal
repertoires and visual technologies
of other artists present and past
assert a direct influence on your own
ways of working and modes of
expression?

KÖKER Basically, art does not need
other art. I am interested above all
in my own visual practice. Until I
took on a professorship I hardly
engaged in the theoretical
exploration of work by other
contemporary artists. However, as a
teacher I carry responsibilities for
others and actively participate in a
continual exchange with other
artists, both prospective and
established ones. I am very
interested in the debates within my
subject-field. As artists we rely on

this kind of productive friction. That makes our joint project for the Talbot Rice gallery particularly appealing.

HUNTER Looking at other artists' work can influence one's own practice. Yet, such influences can be traced only retrospectively. Within the process of producing work they rarely surface consciously and clearly.

MEY I am particularly interested in this issue in terms of your positions vis-a-vis generic conventions and sculptural precedents.

KÖKER The aesthetic strategies, the formal methods and the

philosophical positions of the individual artist are crucial. Ours differ completely. Someone else dealing with dresses does not automatically share my own aesthetic and intellectual concerns. In the course of time numerous sculptures have been created, yet motivated by diverse aesthetic intentions. My intellectual concerns are important. Our joint project evolves around such a critical debate.

HUNTER This discussion marks an important step in our collaboration. In the process of putting up the show in Edinburgh other interesting issues and questions will most certainly arise.



*Kirsten Mey
Azade Köker
Ping Qiu
Margaret Hunter
Pat Fisher*

Margaret Hunter



Wir, We

Stained wood, 2001



Carrying the Eggs

2001



Self-containment

1997



Nuremberg Funnel (Nürnburger Trichter)

1992



S'Hort Series IV

2001



S'Hort Series VI

2001



Double Head (Doppel Kopf)

1997



Arrangement
2001



Holding One's Own
1997



Bodies of Substance

Dr Kerstin Mey

The title of this project is not one but many. It is not definite but open. Bodies of Substance signifies the encounter between the three female artists: Margaret Hunter, Azade Köker and Ping Qiu.

For its participants it means difference, dialogue, juxtaposition, and communion. It alludes to their work as organic, coherent and substantial entities, evolved from their sustained careers as professional artists.

The three women have in common their chosen place of residence, Berlin; and share the enriching and empowering experience of living 'on the joint' and across geopolitical boundaries and languages, of a liminal existence. They came to live in the former West Berlin and established themselves as artists there before the German reunification. Since then they have been exposed to the complex and complicated transition

process that ensued after the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989.

The process of change has been perceived with particular intensity and immediacy in the old/new capital, where East and West clashed unmediated after more than 40 years of total division. Today, Berlin with its poly-centric urban structure and intimate quarters, with its diverse social and ethnic fabric, with its wealth of traditions in the arts, and exposed yet liberal cultural climate offers many creative opportunities matched by high levels of competition, friction and fluctuation. The re-emerging metropolis has been, in all its rawness and fluidity, a catalyst for these artists' aesthetic production.

Their individual visual practices have been nourished multifariously through the lived experience of 'otherness', of cultural displacement, flux and change. For Margaret Hunter, who was born and

educated in Scotland, for Azade Köker , who grew up in Istanbul, Turkey, and for Ping Qui, whose roots are in the People's Republic of China and who now possesses Swiss citizenship, cross-cultural fertilization informs their aesthetic inquiries.

The caption Bodies of Substance also signals these women's shared aesthetic concern for the figure, for body images and body politics. It points to their focus on sculpture as an imaging technology, and to their interest in corporeality and bodily containment. Hunter's, Köker 's and Qiu's distinct ways of working intersect in terms of their commitment to the female figure as a site of symbolic representations. Their practices emanate from the conjunction of subjective, embodied experience, knowledge, desire and pleasure. However, during the gestation and realization of this collaborative project significant differences came to the fore too.

An expressive translation of archaic and abstracted human forms determines Margaret Hunter's formal repertoire. It

provides the foundation for the intense presence of her wood carved, self-contained figures and ensembles. The figure's vigorous corporeality its often ruptured, usually fragmented and frequently under attack from penetrating, foreign bodies - oversized arrows and metal cage-like structures - that endow the work with compelling symbolism, and leave it disconcertingly caught between holding together and being ripped apart. Thus the statues enunciate the intense friction between a multitude of external forces and internal dispositions, between disparate desires, expectations and needs. The tension between one's singularity and the need to belong to is articulated powerfully in Hunter's sculptural ensembles, through the statuesque character of the individual figures and the repetitive, unifying rhythm between them. The visible traces of the sculpture's coming into being, of the surges of energy that created it, breathe life into the work. In addition, the figure's surface is deliberately scratched, scorched, stained and occasionally painted. These marks, which oscillate between sign, wound and

stigma, lend these almost life-size bodies their individual identity. There appears to be a tangible resonance between Hunter's treatment of the figure's skin as a site of cultural inscriptions and prehistoric engravings on the surface of statues and other cult objects commonly linked to matriarchal structures and mythologies, to the goddess as cosmological figure and universal source of fertility and life.

Azade Köker 's primary aesthetic concern is directed at the complex relationships between space and sculptural body. Her work explores the dichotomy of presence and absence, of nothingness and being, of essence and appearance through the dematerialized human body as well as familiar objects. The metamorphoses of the body, the boundaries of corporeality are her themes. From an early investigation of traditional sculptural properties and substances, Köker moved towards lighter and rather unusual materials such as Japanese paper and, more recently, polythene foil, latex, silicon and very fine raw cotton fabric. These materials are being layered over moulds and pasted together with glue or

heat in order to create empty, airy shells - delicate, brittle and ephemeral. The recast objects speak of an 'aesthetics of the mundane' in a two-fold manner: firstly, through the material and banal wrapping technology employed; and secondly, through the choice of transpositioned recast models. In the past, everyday objects such as armchairs, piping, books, etc, became 'casting moulds', or the formed objects referred to actual garments such as ballet tutus, dresses, gloves and shoes. Recently, the artist has used two shop mannequins - loaned by high street department stores in Berlin and Istanbul respectively - to recast fragmented female figures resembling larvae. They are often staged as ensembles and hover above ground, flexible and movable within themselves, and through their suspension in space. The bare as well as the enveloped 'pupations' come to life through the power of illumination, which literally highlights their actual dematerialization and creates their tangible auratic presence. The light in particular brings to

the fore their aporetic nature, their existence in-between skin and cloth.

Köker 's work takes issue with the loss of substance, with the spiritual vacuum in which contemporary life is situated. The excess of information and images produced by the mass media and new information and communication technologies has led to a deadening deflation of meaning. This vacuum is expressed by the sculptural void.

However, these voids possess formative powers. There is no total emptiness or nothingness. Thus the vacuum may become a site of hope for potential new beginnings. The hollow, translucent fragments of idealized contemporary female bodies - awkwardly erotized through posture and (un-)veiling - allude to our growing capacity to visualize the body interior employing non-invasive technology. Likewise, the larvae also remind us in a powerful way of the fact that the fragmented body, as one of the main tropes of recent and contemporary art and science, is intrinsically linked to images of the complete, perfect, ideal and organic body-produced through the

mirror image, our everyday perception and by advertising and mass media.

Ping Qui explores diverse ways of working with different materials as well as various formal languages. Yet, she has been frequently concerned with women's traditional gendered roles in the home and in domestic services, signified amongst others by brightly coloured ordinary rubber household gloves. These are formed through stuffing and sewing, and then assembled to larger entities such as Finger Flowers. These mesmerizing objects vacillate between vegetation and human remnants, because the rubber gloves - at a second glance - resemble disturbingly human hands in all their fleshiness and softness. Our hands connect us to the materiality of reality, they sustain us physically, they protect us and reach out to others. The gloves lightly float on the water surface as floral ensembles contrasting the specifically selected architectural or natural environment in a striking manner. Like beacons they never cease to shine. Their temporary existence in an actual location is permanently documented in

photographs. Their aporetic character proposes the collapse of the constructed dichotomy between nature and culture. These striking installations are saturated with layers of ambiguous resonances to Chinese as well as western culture, mythology and symbolism. They refer consciously to art historical precedents such as Monet's famous *Nymphs* as much as to generic conventions of sculpture. However, Qiu's work is often seasoned with a good measure of humour and untamed sensual pleasure. Her voluptuous terracotta forms have been inspired by ancient Chinese vessels employed for daily rituals such as the tea ceremony and the preparation of food. She first encountered those artefacts during a visit to the British Museum in London in the early 1990s. Being at a distance from her native environment kindled a strong interest in her inherited cultural traditions. Qiu's enticing, curvaceous vessels - being at once lower body and breasts - celebrate women's corporeal presence in the world, their

fertility and procreativity, and contest the prevailing body ideal. Other vessels carry representations of both male and female sexual organs. In a playful manner, as mythical animal bodies and vase-like forms, they propose the possibility of a harmonious communion of opposites rather than expressing sexual ambiguity. Those works are motivated by the artist's lived experience of the paralyzing and destructive effects of gender neutralization, that is, a type of state-imposed equality of men and women within a strong traditional patriarchal framework ignoring biological difference. The exhibition reveals a unifying tension between the ethereal and the earth-bound, between the ephemeral and the enduring. In their own particular way all three artists insist on an art that invokes a utopian state of being, that conjures up moments of beauty and spirituality - delicate and fugitive - in the face of daily struggle for survival, suffering, pain and decay.



Margaret Hunter



Ping Qiu



Azade Köker



Margaret Hunter



Pat Fisher



Kirsten Mey



Ping Qiu



Azade Köker

THE EXHIBITION project has evolved over the past two years. Not only has it brought together the artists with the curators, but has also initiated a close encounter between the artists, who knew of each other but had not met before in Berlin or otherwise. The collaborative spirit, that has governed the entire process of planning, organising and realising the show, has enabled us all to gain a deeper understanding of each other's ideas, approaches and practice. We hope that both the show and the catalogue communicate these insights to its viewers/readers.

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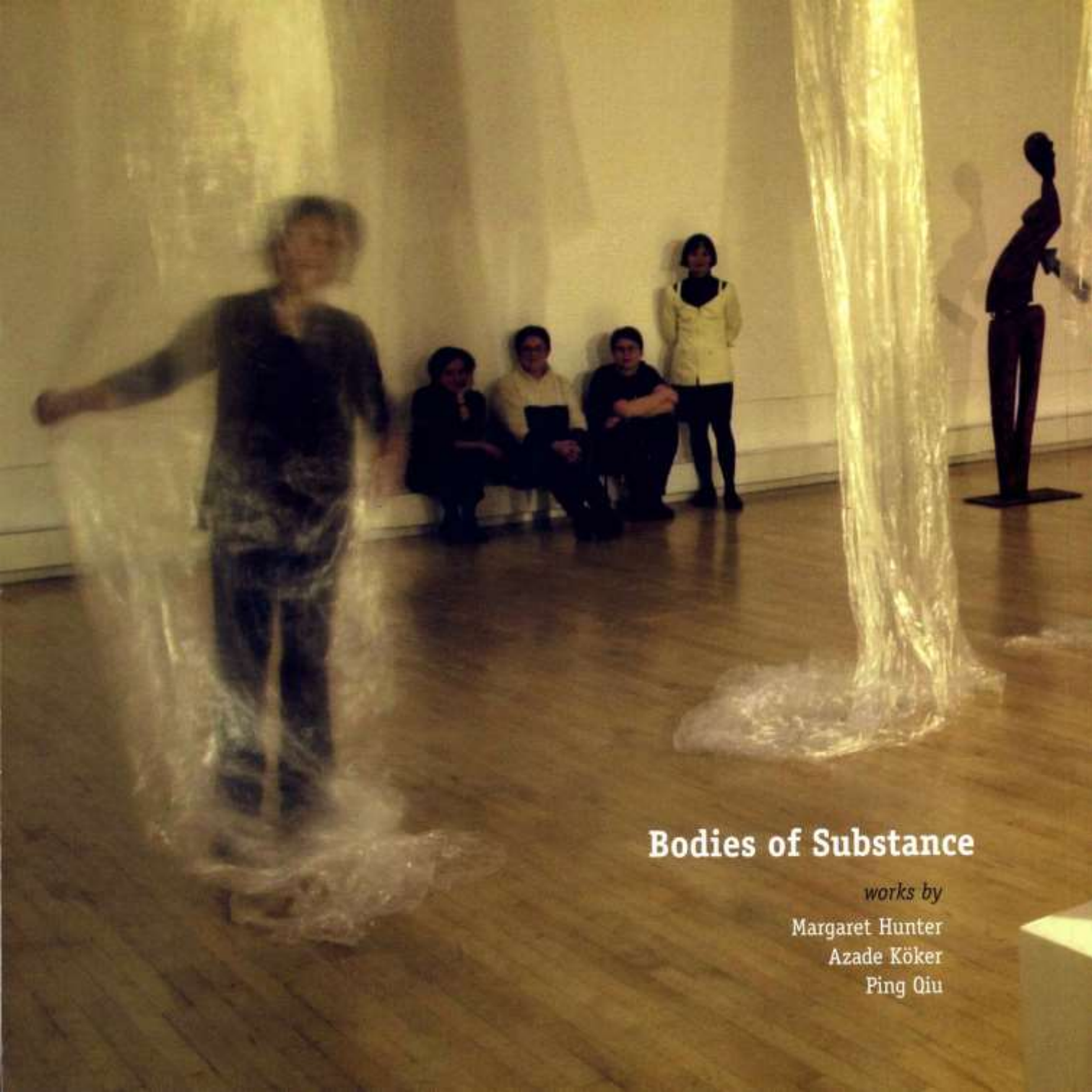
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For definitive information or images, please consult Margaret Hunter through her website:

www.margaret-hunter.com



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