

# ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2015

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

BEST OF  
2015



BEIJING

## Yan Xing GALERIE URS MEILE

In Yan Xing's 2013 solo show at Galerie Urs Meile, the artist suspended a monitor from the courtyard entrance that played a video spelling out, in Chinese characters, the title of Richard Hamilton's seminal 1956 collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* This earlier installation was alluded to in Yan's recent exhibition at the gallery: A copper plate inscribed with the character for "thief"—the title of both this show and this particular piece (2015)—was affixed to one of the courtyard's steely gray-painted walls. These walls appear yet again in a new video work (also titled *Thief*, 2015), behind a young man in a suit who nervously holds a dagger while anxiously assessing his surroundings. This scene follows one in which two young men pry open a stolen oyster with a similar blade. In this way, symbols recur in Yan's work, forming a recognizable aesthetic language as they surface at different times and in diverse environments.

Three large river pebbles that appear in *Thief's* oyster-shucking scene were placed in the lobby of Urs Meile, forming the visual center of *The Story of Shame*, 2015, a site-specific installation that also includes six black-and-white photographs of men in dress clothes. In one photo, a man reaches to pick up a dropped handkerchief; in another, a man stands tall as a wet streak spreads down the front of his pants. The stones were arranged in a way that recalled Lee Ufan's work from the Mono-ha, or School of Things, period (1967–74). However, in Yan's work, the stones are not accompanied by industrial steel plates, sand, or glass, but rather by soft fabric: a white athletic sock and a silk handkerchief, each embroidered with the character meaning "longevity," and another sock embroidered with the character for "shame." These objects, draped over or tucked under the stones, together form a kind of portrait of an elegant, discreet gentleman. In another room, viewers encountered a familiar aesthetic in *Tendon*, 2015. While the piece hints at a personal story, featuring a collection of photographs of Yan's mother cutting silk, it otherwise rehearses the themes of *The Story of Shame*, but with a Carl Andre-like Minimalistic arrangement of tiles replacing the stones of Ufan.

Some of the photographs in Yan's exhibition and many of the scenes in his new video linger over the forms of strong bodies and find lust everywhere—in a male gymnast's unwieldy gesture (we see him fail to execute exercises on the pommel horse and rings) or in a horse's robust

neck. These sexualized images are intermixed with the artist's recurrent symbols such that both elements come across as intentionally abstruse. It was difficult to make much of what the exhibition's disparate components offered one another; the provocations seemed to serve only to make the experience of the work sexier.

Departing drastically from these works was *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, 2013–15—presented in yet another space of the gallery—in which the artist draws from Peter Weiss's novel of the same name and the life of Symbolist theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Yan constructs a fictional narrative of the twentieth-century Russian avant-garde, from which two paths emerge that might be interpreted as roughly parallel to the worlds of capitalism and socialism. Each of these upshots is seemingly represented by one of two characters whose interactions, depicted via a series of photographs, posters, and ephemera, drive the story.

It is perhaps reductive to find Yan's works at odds with one another; of course, the idea that politics provides an alternative outlet for lust aligns with psychoanalytic theory. The question is, What purpose does Yan's sexy imagery ultimately serve? In this writer's opinion, the biggest motivation for his appropriation and defacement of these iconic conceptual forms, as they relate to art history, is his rejection of vanity. Unfortunately, in this solo exhibition, Yan failed to reveal the fear that is usually latent in one's experience of boredom.

—Sun Dongdong

Translated from Chinese by Chelsea Liu.

TOKYO

## Rei Naito GALLERY KOYANAGI

In Japan's current furor over Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "reinterpretation" of the postwar constitution's renunciation of war, it's hard not to see everything here through a political prism. At a recent protest outside the National Diet Building, one of the speakers, an animator, began his speech by invoking the etymological connection between animation and "life giving" via the root *anima*. Although his message was garbled in the hubbub of the crowd and by the caprices of the speaker system, the man—I didn't catch his name—seemed to be suggesting that we assembled protesters were animating the constitution, giving it life, even as Abe was trying to strangle it.

These words unexpectedly returned to mind a few days later while I was viewing Rei Naito's exhibition "The joys were greater." Naito was showing a series of works called "Face (the joys were greater)," which she began circa 1993 but exhibited for the first time this year. The fragile objects, which Naito makes by tearing out pages from fashion spreads, crumpling them up, and partially unfolding them, were then suspended from the wall by loops of thread, so that they could be stirred and, indeed, animated by the passing air currents. Activated through motion, the manifold creases in the paper redistribute the hierarchy of information in the images. Where usually the model is the fulcrum of the fashion composition, in Naito's sculptures, all of which use black-and-white images, each individual crease assumes equal significance as it distorts facial features, pinching brow and nose together, or refracts light when the object flutters against the wall. In one work, a half-naked model, shot against a nondescript backdrop, seems to dissolve into a terrain of grayscale tones. Another features an image of a young woman standing on the sidewalk of a French city—as the headlines of the broadsheet placards around her suggest—but through Naito's intervention, the relations between subject and background are collapsed: A billboard visible in the upper-right corner, itself show-



Yan Xing, *The Story of Shame* (detail), 2015, ink-jet prints, silk-embroidered socks and silk handkerchiefs, shoe, dimensions variable. Photo: Hao Ge.