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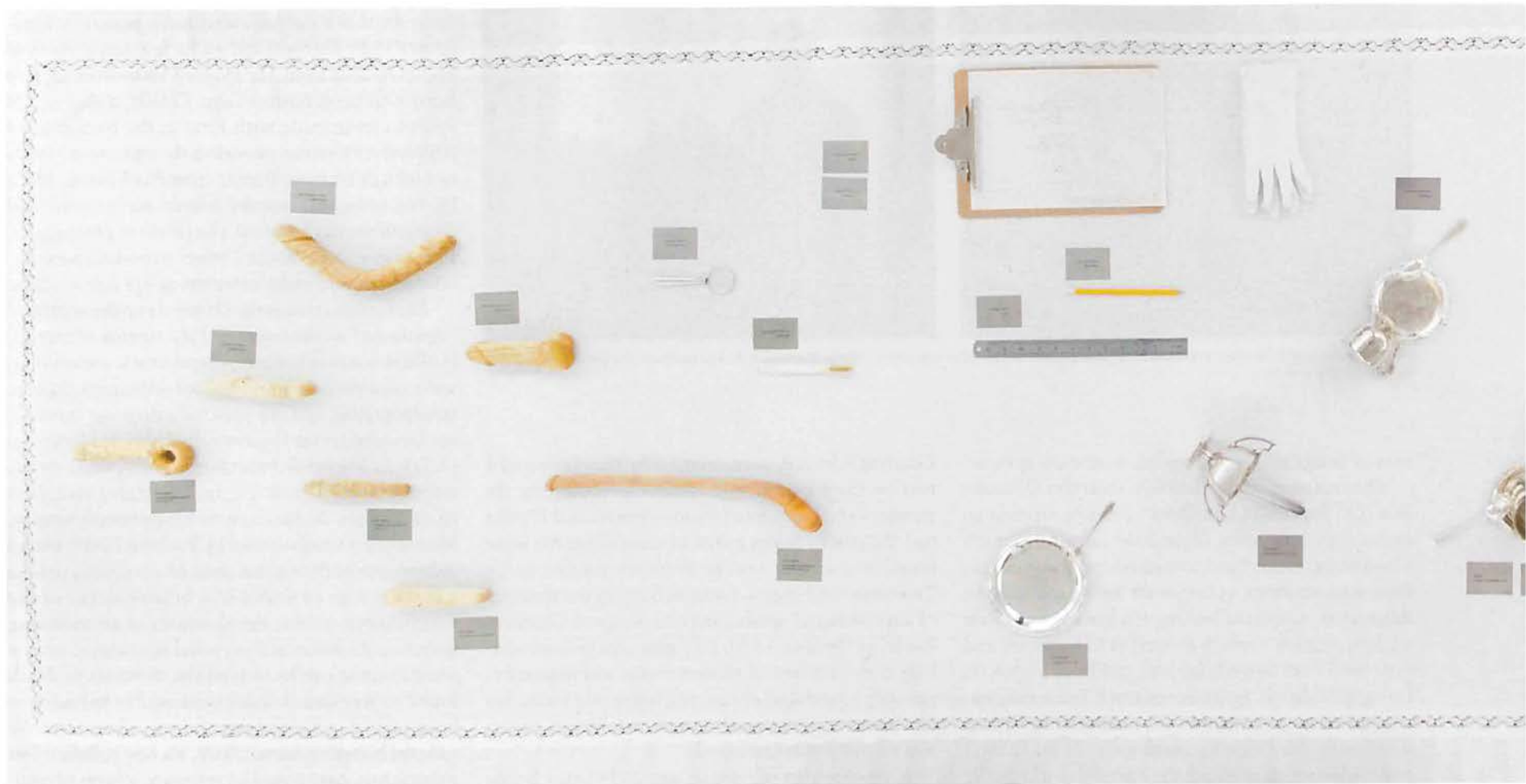
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OPENINGS

YAN XING

BRIAN DILLON





"THE PROCESS IS LIKE WRITING A NOVEL": This is how the Chinese artist Yan Xing describes his work and the disparate elements—sculpture, video, photography, performance, and an array of art-historical reference points—that he subtly convolves. Writing has long been part of his wider practice: He is also a prolific blogger. But although much of Yan's art of the past half decade seems poised at the edge of fiction, he's quick to disclaim any fundamental urge to fabulate. When he invokes the novel, it's to say that the work requires—on the artist's part and ours—a constant parley between design and anecdote, plot and performance, argument and material order. If several of Yan's most recent installations have seemed to build enclosed, reflexive narratives, these are usually fretted by desire and dirt and disarray.

Consider, for example, *Caucasus Bureau*, 2015, an installation that invents an imaginary institution. Here the organization is a Soviet-era group set up to study the politics, culture, and history of the Caucasus region; the bureau purportedly collapsed along with the Soviet Union but was never fully dissolved. The work involves an orderly disposition of wooden office furniture, postcards, stationery, a massive typewriter, and a tiny 16-mm Kiev-30 spy camera, but also some ornate tumblers and decanters, stubbed-out cigarettes, a pair of men's shoes neatly tucked in a corner. There have been bodies here, maybe just minutes before, and though we may picture them as strictured and bureaucratic—there's a black-and-white photograph of five sober-suited men discussing a painting—a residue of unwieldy desire still hangs in the atmosphere of the abandoned office.

The men in suits compose one set of clues to the libidinal layer beneath the anthropological and administrative surface of *Caucasus Bureau*. Such figures are everywhere in Yan's work, though they are usually younger, lither, less buttoned-up. In his piece



Above: Yan Xing, *The Sex Comedy* (detail), 2013, performance, table, chairs, tablecloth, feather duster, teapot, sugar bowl, milk jug, tray, teacups, saucers, teaspoons, sugar tongs, cookie trays, pastry tongs, dessert forks, metal labels, wooden dildos, gloves, drawing paper, pencil, magnifying glass, ruler, bone brush, clipboard, two-channel video (black-and-white, silent, 5 minutes 56 seconds; black-and-white, silent, 3 minutes 4 seconds), dimensions variable.

Opposite page and left: Two views of Yan Xing's *Caucasus Bureau*, 2015, ready-made objects, found prints, found photographs, found objects, mixed media. Installation view, Iset Hotel, Yekaterinburg, Russia, 2015. From the 3rd Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art.

Right: Yan Xing, *The Story of Shame*, 2015, drywall, ink-jet prints, cobblestones, embroidered socks, embroidered silk handkerchiefs, shoe. Installation view, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing.





Yan decomposes and recomposes famous works so that they hint at a history that never was or could be.



The Sex Comedy, 2013, they convene around a dinner table and examine a selection of wooden dildos as if they are curious archaeological artifacts. The photographs in *The Story of Shame*, 2015, are sparsely and in some cases obscurely displayed: half-hidden so as to highlight what Yan calls their “anti-expressive tendencies.” But the men in these images are engaged in activities awkwardly at odds with their sharply creased self-presentation: One crouches to pick up a monogrammed handkerchief; another tucks a sports sock into a suit pocket; a piss stain spreads on the pristine pant front of a third. *The Story of Shame* elegantly choreographs these moments of furtive revelation and mysterious display. At times, as with



Above, left: Yan Xing, *The Story of Shame*, 2015, ink-jet print, 15¾ × 12¾”.

Above: Yan Xing, *The Story of Shame*, 2015, ink-jet print, 15¾ × 19¾”.

Left: Yan Xing, *Lenin in 1918*, 2013, mixed media. Installation view, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing.



Above: Yan Xing, *Thief*, 2015, HD video, color, silent, 16 minutes 19 seconds. Below, from left: Yan Xing, *DADDY Project*, 2011. Performance view, Pékin Fine Arts, Beijing, 2011. Yan Xing, *The Sweet Movie*, 2013, performance, two-channel video. Performance view, Palazzo Contarini Polignac, Venice, 2013. From the 55th Venice Biennale. Photo: Sergey Illin.

the gymnast in *Thief*, 2015, the performance of masculinity is even more unreserved: Violence and eroticism are mutely enacted via gesture, shadow, and wild expression (Yan's videos are usually silent and black-and-white).

Yan's nudes and seminudes recall images by Robert Mapplethorpe—most obviously his *Man in Polyester*

Suit, 1980—and, more vexingly, Leni Riefenstahl's *The Last of the Nuba* (1973). But such aesthetically and racially fraught sources sit alongside more neutral citations in Yan's work; in each case, he says, it's a matter of decomposing and recomposing famous

works so that they hint at a history that never was or could be. *Lenin in 1918*, 2013, is a kind of peep show, or *tableau vivant*, in which modernist specters (the ghosts of works by Brancusi, Malevich, Mondrian, and Matisse) converge to describe—what, exactly? A living space? A curriculum? A stage set? All of these, assuredly, but also something more speculative. Yan frequently yokes together avant-garde design, didactics, and theater—Russian director and producer Vsevolod Meyerhold is among the sources he cites—in order to posit an otherworldly, even utopian milieu of mysterious politics.

In fact, performance, rather than the novel, may well be the category that holds Yan's sportively erudite work together. His first notable work was *DADDY Project*, 2011: The artist stood facing a gallery wall and intoned a narrative, apparently autobiographical, regarding his father's absence and a history of abuse and violence. In retrospect, the personal element seems of a piece with Yan's practice as blogger and social-media confessor, but his subsequent work has considerably complicated any idea that one should take the artist's voice, or his physical presence in the gallery, as a guarantee of authenticity, on one hand, or as an invitation to step inside a fictional contrivance, on the other. As in *The Sweet Movie*, 2013, in which a director and his crew frame and light the shots of a porn film, the performance is always a deferral of self and sexuality, and the action definitively elsewhere. □

BRIAN DILLON IS UK EDITOR OF *CABINET* MAGAZINE AND TEACHES CRITICAL WRITING AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, LONDON. HIS MOST RECENT BOOK IS *THE GREAT EXPLOSION* (PENGUIN, 2015).

