

## Interview

“It’s as if curators and artists are servile functionaries in the production of things. But they don’t have an after life or an under life. In fact we are all human, fallible, fragile, mistake making, desiring, obsessed beings.” Elena Filipovic speaks to Gayatri Sinha against the background of the tantalizing exhibition, *Dangerous Afternoon* by Yan Xing.

*In truth I don’t know how to begin the story I am about to tell. Let me start with this: I am real, flesh and bones, the director of Kunsthalle Basel and curator of its program. I invited Chinese artist Yan Xing to create a new body of work for his first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland. He conceived an exhibition that includes, as one of its many elements, a displayed, unremarkable object: the ceiling lamp from above my office desk. This decision impacts my daily work for the duration of the show....*

*But here the story becomes complicated. Yan Xing, also of flesh and bones, has invented a fictive artist in whose exhibition, “Dangerous Afternoon”, you currently find yourself. Most things around you (save the real lamp of the real curator) were “made” by this fictive artist and installed by a fictive curator, whose personal tribulations haunt the exhibition. This curator, the story goes, is a devoted and happily married middle-aged man who one day falls, desperately and inconsolably, for a stranger’s feet. After a period of torment during which he concedes to his desire, the curator tries to convince the stranger to let him have his way with the latter’s feet. The stranger agrees, on one condition: the curator must give over his wife to the stranger for a night. A moral dilemma ensues: to consummate his desire, the curator must not only convince his wife to betray him, but convince her to do so in order that he, her husband, betray her in turn with the same man. This whirlwind of desire, torment, and duplicity, all unfolding during the preparation of the exhibition, as well as the fictive curator’s degrading relationship with the artist (stemming from his distraction and paranoia), are the backstory of “Dangerous Afternoon”.*

*“I wanted to make a show about a curator undone by desire,” Yan Xing declares. The result is a body of objects whose arrangement conspires to make libidinal intrigue palpable....*

- An excerpt from the gallery notes on the exhibition *Dangerous Afternoon*

Gayatri Sinha: Would you like to tell me about conceiving the show and the fragile sort of emotion behind this somewhat fraught relationship, between the curator and the artist, because this is not something that is not usually acknowledged.

Elena Filipovic: Yes it is definitely a fraught relationship between the “curator” and the “artist” although it must be said that the “curator” is, in fact, a fictive element in the imagination of the artist. So I, as the real curator of Kunsthalle Basel invited the young Chinese artist Yan Xing. His immediate idea or proposal for his exhibition was to invent not only an artist but to invent a curator and to make work that would be positioned in the space and thought of in relation to its context as one element in a larger fiction.

This story telling and fictive element is central to his work. It was one of the reasons I was interested in him although I obviously did not know what I would be getting as a show. I think in a post-truth moment it’s all the more interesting to find out how artists are putting their finger on the relationship between reality and fiction, truth and lie, story telling and history.

GS: Without the narrative that you share with visitors would we be able to get a sense of the meaning of the show?

EF: I think without the narrative you may not know precisely what has happened in the room or what is going on—and I’ve experienced taking visitors through the show before they know the story—but you do sense a strange, maybe even erotic, tension.

GS: Something dark?

EF: Something dark, something fraught; and although his show is very spare and minimal, there are not many objects there, there is such a deliberateness to the positioning of each of the objects that it lends the whole a particular atmosphere.

GS: And space that is so minimally used.

EF: And the space that each object takes. That, maybe, is the largest object that Yan Xing built for the exhibition: tension. And the question then is can an artist create something that is completely intangible which is more about an atmosphere or a feeling? I think that this is conveyed through very different ways. One of the ways is if you look very closely at the exhibition you start to notice certain sight lines and everything is extremely precisely installed in relation to a line that connects one object to another in the room, to another element of the architecture and once you start seeing these lines or connections, then you cannot unsee that.

GS: Yes that was intriguing.

EF: As a curator myself, if I were installing such a show I would never install a stone so close to the photograph on the wall because I would be thinking about the public that would want to approach a work. By being in your way it makes you semi-conscious of your body, your movement, of your feet.

The artist has constructed it this way that you are very unsure of where you can stand, which plays into the story. Your consciousness about your feet becomes ever present. You start to pay attention to how you walk and then you start to notice that this is a pristine room but there are these kinds of scratch marks or scuff marks running along the entire perimeter of the exhibition space. So in your mind you start to ask questions, how is this possible, what happened here, and even if you don't know the answers those questions are being raised, your asking of them is an important element in the show.

GS: There are two things that I was curious about. One is its transgenerational - it's an older man and a younger man and the other is it a homosexual theme. In that it suggests that the notion of shame — which is what the curator feels — and who in the text is described as the stranger, I found this triad of possibilities in a way predetermines our reaction. The curator as an older man, in a position of professional authority is also emotionally vulnerable. And we may consider the possibility, what if it was a heterosexual relationship. Would the man be similarly imbued with such a sense of regret or shame?

EF: I think the shame comes not from homosexuality, because in fact nowhere in the narrative is there a sexual encounter. The curator realizes that he's fallen for another man's feet. He isn't in love with or interested in a sexual relationship with *the person*, but the feet. The shame comes from the fact that he is a married man, that he has a commitment to his relationship that he is betraying. So the shame is not concerning homosexuality but a shame about what do you do with desire that falls outside of the relationship to which you have committed.

The curator sort of knows nothing about the person whose feet he desires, he also has no particular interest in him, it's not a love affair, it's not a sexual affair, except in so far as the stranger, the man with the feet becomes the obsession with the curator. The stranger asks for a transaction and part of the fraught relationship is also that the curator realizes that he is going to have to convince his wife to betray their marriage and sleep with someone she doesn't know so that her husband can in turn fulfill a fantasy about someone else's feet. I think the artist was more interested in human dynamics and in our culture how normativity, how shame, how relationships function and how you could construct a story that would involve as many different, problematic and surprising elements that become the backdrop for his thinking about an exhibition. The emotional, the sensual, the erotic are usually not the things that are talked about in relation to an exhibition...

GS: Plus the fascination about staging the show...

EF: It's as if curators and artists are, if not machines, then at least servile functionaries in the production of things (art or exhibitions, discourse, events...). But they don't have an after life or

an under life. In fact we are all human, fallible, fragile, mistake making, desiring, and obsessed beings.

GS: There is also that interesting suggestion about the conflict between the curator and the artist about what should be up on the walls and the nails that are implanted. That's very interesting because that is the part of another very difficult transaction.

EF: Indeed, few people recognize what Yan Xing has done a form of institutional critique, but the show is very much about all these things that you don't talk about. There is a relationship in the making of every exhibition, between a curator and an artist and who ultimately gets to make the decision about what goes up in the wall or how it's shown. There is a power dynamic to be sure but there is also authorship - the sense that a show is signed. It's signed by the artist who has made the work and also signed by the curator who has curated it. And these are all things that get so little discussion in our contemporary practice but they are there under the surface.

GS: It's fascinating that he found a visual language to talk about these kinds of intangibles. In a way it is the artist speaking back to the curator - it is not only post truth it is post facto.

EF: Yes, I think a very important element in the exhibition is one that probably many people will and deliberately so not have the chance to fully experience is the three hour long film that is featured in the stairwell. It's a dinner party and the artist spent quite a lot of his energy in the thinking to compose the seven participants of this film. They are a Basel based writer, and quite a celebrated art historian, local television personality, a Parisian actor, a musician etc. He hand picked each of the individuals, organized for them to have dinner together where they exchanged intimate stories about their life, about their positions on culture, on art, on history. And at one moment, one of the participants (who has been carefully coached by Yan Xing, although not to the point of scripting his speech, there is still much improvisation and agency in it) tells the other guests that the curator at Kunsthalle Basel has become obsessed with his feet and that's one of the ways that the "backstory" of the exhibition is conveyed.

So in a way you could watch three hours of this film in order to catch the few minutes when the figure of the "stranger" tells his story and this is one of the ways that a public might come to know the intricate backstory to the exhibition. But it may be, more importantly, that Yan Xing met these seven people to talk to them about his project knowing that these seven individuals, most of them based in and around Basel, will tell their friends and neighbours this improbable story and in a way it's a form of guerrilla communication, in which rumour plays a very important role. So we've had some people who've come for the exhibition because they know someone who knows someone who heard from someone at the dinner party about this backstory. The artist didn't want us to make it hyper explicit, so there's no wall text which

discloses the fiction, although my exhibition hand out does tell some of the broad lines of the backstory, although in a very personal (non institutional) way. So rumour actually plays an important role in how it's communicated.

GS: It's also interesting that it is a Chinese artist from outside the wealthy, powerful institutions of the west who takes on this notion of curatorial engagement and its many complexities and then he strikes a hard bargain I think, standing outside the western canon, looking in.

EF: Yan Xing is an artist who has been criticized by Chinese artists and critics for not having produced an art that looks "Chinese" or that responds to a preconception about what art from Asia should act like or be like. He has always given a very interesting response to questions about that, explaining that he grew up in context and with a mother that kept their house full of western fashion magazines, products, and objects. His mother had a tendency to believe that if you had a shampoo it had to be a shampoo from the West. So, in fact, he says (I paraphrase here) "I grew up in an environment where it didn't make sense to start painting Chinese calligraphy because the West was what I was nourished with, and feel like responding to." As a result, he's made art that has become highly criticized for not looking the part of the Chinese artist. But I found it interesting to work with someone who could be critical of perceptions of what art from a certain region should look like.

GS: It's interesting you say that because the fact that you have those Cezannesque paintings actually offsets the Chineseness of the work I think. It doesn't suggest a greater European engagement...

But just to come back to your position here at the Kunsthalle Basel, and to try to understand how do you see this institution working under you over the next few years?

EF: Well, to begin with Kunsthalle Basel is a very old and esteemed institution. The association or Kunstverein that founded Kunsthalle Basel is nearly a hundred and eighty years old. As someone from Los Angeles that's almost incomprehensible, something that old, not to mention its track record as an institution that has always defended the avant-garde of its moment. So when I arrived and started looking into the photo archive, I realized that this was the place where Monet's *Water Lilies* were shown for the first time outside of Paris. It was one of the first institutions in Europe to have a major Jackson Pollock exhibition. It was the place where Gauguin had an important show. It was where Jeff Wall had his first big exhibition outside of Canada, Mike Kelley had his second big institutional show, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, many artists that have now become sort of art historical figures have had if not a first then a very important show in Europe, here at Kunsthalle Basel.

For me that was an extremely exhilarating and daunting history to live up to and as the first female director of an institution as old as it is, it also felt like a particular challenge. In the two

and half years that I have been here it's been a very fast paced period I'm humbled by what we've managed to accomplish. We can offer artists, I think, unparalleled conditions because it is a building and a space that was conceived by artists for artists. It's neither a post-industrial building that has been converted into a white cube nor a museum that is made to show off the architecture. Artists got together in the mid 1800s and figured out what is the best sort of space you could dream of and somehow all these years later it still holds true. Artists are still extremely inspired and challenged by the spaces, which have a majesty and also a very human dimension to them. I construct my programme very much with an agenda in mind, I don't think of it as one exhibition plus one exhibition, but rather as a programme, as a story that is being told and being built over the years. There is a decided political agenda at the heart of it, one that doesn't always manifest itself in the most explicit ways. Just the show we've talked about, Yan Xing's, demonstrates a politics in the kind of questions that it raises about truth, about relationships, about institutions and the institutional mechanics. And whether its artists from Andra Ursuta and her show called *Whites* which was a critique of white Western male modernism or Maryam Jafri and her questioning of the archive, questioning of the products and the mega industry that tells us what we should desire, what we should want, what we should buy; whether its Anne Imhof's opera *Angst* last summer where seemingly blasé looking dancers performing an incredible critique of our contemporary society or Yngve Holen and his incisive critique of consumer culture or Anika Yi before that... I'm trying to build something that has a track record of showing art that is political without necessarily looking like political art.

GS: Sounds like an immensely productive time. What do you have coming up?

EF: Our very next exhibition to open will be a performance project of Adam Linder, an Australian choreographer who is making one of his most ambitious pieces for the art context to date, which we have commissioned and are co-producing. It will be on for three weeks and the very last day of that exhibition will be the very first day of the exhibition that follows it, which is by his partner in life, the artist Shahryar Nashat. While Adam Linder's performance is finishing up and luring visitors into the foyer, I will give an opening speech for Shahryar Nashat's show and while my speech is happening, the technical team will be finishing the installation of Shahryar Nashat's show in the same space upstairs. And so there is this bleeding of one show into another. Each of them is doing two independent shows that each operate like a solo show, but they together wanted to find a way to acknowledge that when two people who love each other, live together, and talk everyday about their work and thinking, well, there is a seepage, an influence all while still having independent practices. So each of them has made a solo show but they found a way for these two shows to touch.

GS: This work that you have shown us in your space and as you speak suggests that the curator's role is also mutating in a certain sense – the physicality, the presence, the voice, the body, the intervention of the curator as being extremely palpable.

EF: I think every project demands or asks for its own type of accompaniment. So for some exhibitions, the artists know very clearly what the show should be, what they want from it, how it should look, there is, let's say, relatively little on a conceptual work that I have to do. I am really just someone there to support them, to be a sounding board, and to be the first member of the audience perhaps. In this case, with these two artists, we really talked a lot about how to conceive a way for these two practices to show themselves as independent and as related at the same time. And the impetus for that was inspired by their work and the observation that it was significant and something that is not so much spoken about in our contemporary art world.

But, as I was saying, I think every project demands its own form of care (we cannot forget the word curator comes from that: curare, to care for) and maybe one of the great things about my job is that it is always changing. It requires being sensitive to what a project needs and also what it doesn't need. Because one can never forget that it's their show in the end.