Yan Xing, *Treatise on Ancient Design. Ex Post.*[1]

Cecilia Canziani

More than a few of the photos conserved in the Central State Archives in Berlin show Adolf Hitler inspecting blueprints, visiting construction sites, and studying models alongside Albert Speer, the architect behind the Third Reich's aesthetic transformation program. Monumental language—or the grandiloquent style already defined by Hitler in *Mein Kampf,* and therefore prior to his rise to power— was not intended merely for ornamental or propaganda purposes but instead assigned a key role in the execution of the Nazi agenda, moulding public space and translating political rhetoric into three dimensions. This grandiose reconstruction plan for Germany's leading cities supervised by Hitler himself was only partly accomplished, but the language spoken by these texts in stone has never broken free of the power that formulated and expressed it. The crisis currently affecting the monumental form can be considered in this light; it is no accident that the New German Cinema's founding manifesto coincides with the accusation raised in *Brutalität in Stein* (1961) by Alexander Kluge and Peter Schamoni against Nazi architecture as the formal expression of the regime's political power. Similarly, the Kassel Documenta represented an attempt to heal the wounds inflicted by the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition on the body of art and its spaces.
In other words, the use of monumental scale is a common feature of articulations of word and space that divest themselves of human proportion; space and language do not exist outside a relationship with their specific times, and they sit in history's courtroom as either witnesses or defendants.
Here in these rooms, however, the monument has acquired domestic dimensions. The materials with which walls, doors, and floors have been reconfigured transpose the layout of the gallery into another place and time—into a Haus der Kunst in Munich that is not philologically reconstructed but evoked at a reduced scale, and ultimately rendered familiar to local viewers because the white marble demanded by Hitler's architects has here been shunned in favor of locally quarried travertine and Apuan green marble.

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1.   Yan Xing's *Treatise on Ancient Design* was on view at Magazzino in Rome between September 26th, 2018 and January 31th, 2019.

The gallery's two adjacent spaces, turned into a single area by two corresponding signs on the floor and ceiling—a rectangle in green marble and a string of neon lights—simultaneously constitute the work itself and a stage set for it. On the wall in the first room hangs a brass and glass illumination fixture originally intended—we suppose—for a larger space. Every wall in the second space is fitted with a series of framed drawings that only a second, more attentive glance reveals as elements expressing a relationship of reciprocity with the space and potentially providing a scaled version of it. The frames, made of pale, precious wood (which like the light on the wall immediately suggest a well-defined period of history), have each been given their own sign, a shallow moulding, that make them different from one another, similar to the indentations in the wall plaster below or beside them. The inner part of the frame is in green marble, the same as the floor. The paper is scored by signs both technical and more gestural: both scriptures demand decoding. These drawings resemble diagrams that summarize and represent the environment created by the artist: they are both design and removable sculpture. The sign has migrated from inside outward and alighted on the walls, floor, and ceiling, in this way manifesting a certain reluctance to being separated from the area to which it relates.

The gallery's apparently empty space is the result of a radical, deceptively imperceptible transformation that sets it in another time and place. Only installation and deinstallation—moments in which the presence of the public is prohibited—reveal the actions of construction and destruction required by the work and restate its nature as an operation of institutional critique—articulated, however, not so much or solely in terms of a spatial/functional relationship but instead as narrative potential. More simply: the power relations in the art system (between artist and gallerist, work of art and collector, commercial space and museum space, for example) are manifested in the alteration of the gallery space and in the deeply-rooted pertinence of each of the elements of the show in its entirety, and therefore in its resistance to separation. At the same time, the diagrammatic representation—the *design* evoked by the title of the show, the décor of the space, and the signs that migrate from one element to another—holds the space itself together and delineates the environment as the setting of a layered narrative. The work is therefore a set or scenery that places different times and places into relation (Augustan Rome and Fascist Rome, the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa, Rome and Munch, the past and the future), which the viewer transforms into narrative material by performing the work with his/her body.

The permanence of the canon is emphasized by the large drawings hanging on the walls: a sort of

mise en abîme or recurring sequence of the logic underlying the space we perambulate, which in some way calibrates and orients our reading and use of what we see.

The monument analyzed as object is linked to the construction of the landscape—morphological but also cultural—of which it is a part. Yet as Michael Rothberg recently proposed, memory has a "multidirectional" aspect because it is formed by the collection of many and various acts of memory that often clash with anything else that might be read in the space.

Unheimlich is the German word that translates into "uncanny" in English to indicate the unease one feels facing something that appears both familiar and unsettling at the same time; *Heim* means "home". We're inside a restricted, clearly framed context: a space apart from the adjacent real world, a place in dialogue with the historical dimension of art, a sort of *institutional critique* on the one hand, and a critique of history on the other, but above all, one that opens a new chapter in Yan Xing's artistic research that considers the collapse of idioms, chronologies, geographies, and judgments. This room must be read while bearing in mind the environment he created for his installation *Opfer* (2018) in São Paulo, Brazil, and even more clearly the one for his *Lenin in 1918* (2013) project, and it is a part, in fact, of a continuing narrative with other works and other spaces.

Although absence is a characteristic element in all of Yan Xing's work, it is the driving force behind this show to even greater extent than before. If in past works the artist has scattered traces of stories to be recomposed around the display space, *Treatise on Ancient Design* is a stage on which nothing happens at all, yet its power contains an action. In this it resembles the movement of a device Yan Xing often employs in his videos: the long shot, which he has used in *Opfer*, *Dangerous Afternoon* (2017), and *Thief* (2015), in which the camera focuses on a part of the space awaiting someone's passage through it in order to give a start to a story, meanwhile charging the frame, like Hitchcock or Antonioni, with tension, desire, fear, and violence.

Yan Xing's works always assume the nature of a situation constructed for the development of a narrative that traverses the exhibition space (the space of the artwork), taking the form of a private performance that tells or suggests its narrative to the viewer through visible signs or in a subsequent development. Perhaps this domestic monument, this compromised display space, this architecture in search of redemption, this unfilled-in framework should also be considered more as scenery than environment. In this sense, then, *Treatise on Ancient Design* turns out to be a work that has as much to do with monuments as with cinema and its gaze.