

Opfer

Tobi Maier

Yan Xing chose the German title *Opfer* as a double-edged sword for his first exhibition in South America, which opened in August 2018 at Galeria Jaqueline Martins in São Paulo's Vila Buarque district.¹ The word *Opfer* in the German language signifies “sacrifice” as well as “victim”, and it was from the perspective of this double meaning that I started approaching the work of the artist. Who was going to be a victim in this exhibition, and what was going to be sacrificed, I wondered. Yan Xing acquainted me with his reading of Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice* (1986), which features Alexander, a middle-aged actor-cum-intellectual, as a protagonist who is agonizing over impending nuclear holocaust and the disharmony in his own family. The film opens with a camera pan over Leonardo da Vinci's *The Adoration of the Magi*, completed in 1481 and in the Uffizi Gallery since 1670. At its center the painting shows the Virgin Mary together with her child below a carob tree, surrounded by a group of male and female observers. The background introduces a contrasting Pagan world with Roman gladiators on horseback and workers repairing the ruined Basilica of Maxentius, which apocryphally crumbled on the night of Christ's birth. Tarkovsky's camera returns to the painting several times and thus establishes the work as his point of reference. A scene of the protagonist—planting a withered tree together with his mute son *Little Man*—comes on immediately after the tree of life shown in the opening pan. The viewer witnesses the loving relationship as the father tells his mute son that “There is no such as thing as death, only fear of death.” Over the course of the film Tarkovsky's protagonist sinks deeper into depression and, driven by the counsel of his Postman messenger, a self-proclaimed collector of “inexplicable but true incidents,” grows more and more desperate, and eventually sets his own family home on fire. Alexander sacrifices his home and masterminds his own victimization, disregarding the vulnerability of his family. Yan Xing takes his cues from those two historic works of art, and for the exhibition has reworked their narrative essence into a language of his own. The series of interrelated works created in São Paulo all bear the same title: *Opfer* (2018). Not unlike Tarkovsky, who pared colors down significantly for *The Sacrifice*, the exhibition delivers a bleak outlook. The terrazzo floor is a nod towards

1. Yan Xing's *Opfer* was on view at Galeria Jaqueline Martins in São Paulo between August 25th and October 13th, 2018.

Tarkovsky's obsession with stone floors, often covered with water, and to the damp mudflats that feature in *The Sacrifice*. The labor- and cost-intensive endeavor of installing the semi-permanent terrazzo floor in the gallery is countered by a bloodstained pair of jeans and shirt that allude to a mysterious previous action in the gallery, as well as to Alexander's fearful dreamy visions of people fleeing amidst debris. This constant play between sacrifice and victim is fixed via a wall-mounted contract that establishes the basis for exchange between an as-yet unnamed collector, the artist, and his gallery.

The installation of *Opfer* in São Paulo does not come without precedent in the artist's practice. The intricate and veiled storytelling that is challenging the viewer's perception in *Opfer* has coined previous productions by the artist. Take for example Yan Xing's elaborate performative endeavors, which take the form of video works. *Performance of a Massacre* (2016), for which it had been announced that 37 actors would appear at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, was proclaimed cancelled last minute by the artist. Threading on the 2011 Norway massacre, the artist was supposed to have rehearsed with the actors for more than one year, and it had been announced that, when visiting the exhibition, the audience would pass through different "situations of threat" in the museum galleries. Yet on the evening of the performance, the eager audience was told that the producer received a SMS by the artist stating that the performance was cancelled. Instead, the institution's chief curator, a producer, an art critic, an art historian, and a museum educator joined one of the alleged actors on stage, where a discussion about the reasons and responsibilities of the cancellation took place. During a heated debate, the art critic went as far as claiming censorship at the museum, and the actor was the first to leave the stage—offended at not being given an explanation or apology. While the institution was revealing its full vulnerability, the massacre was performed not in the galleries but during the (filmed) conversation between the different professionals involved in the commissioning, production, and mediation process of the artist's work. In an era of fake news and alternative facts, *Performance of a Massacre* did test the preconceived boundaries of what a performance can be, as well as the expectations of conventional spectatorship and institutional regulation.

Or take *Tales from a Small New England Town* (2016), which presents seven students from Wesleyan University's Department of Asian Languages and Literatures seated around a table and narrating rewritten tales from a 18th century collection entitled *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. They are accompanied by another group of listeners seated around the library room, who witness the accounts of their peers as they appropriate accounts critical of the Qing dynasty and transform them into contemporary narratives sited on the university campus or its immediate Middletown, Connecticut,

vicinity—all the while maintaining ghosts and animals as their protagonists. Both works are performed for the camera and, while visually unspectacular, they take the viewer on a journey through the performance of spoken word.

Yan Xing's latest video produced for *Opfer* represents a rupture from this modus operandi. Here the camera seems to represent the hidden voyeuristic view above a street crossing in the Vila Buarque neighborhood. A video wall on the gallery's second floor—reminiscent of advertising billboards—relays the scripted and impromptu interaction of seven actors as they receive news of the loss of a loved one or point at a loathed banker passing by. The camera follows swiftly as passers-by go about their daily business, argue with each other, light a cigarette, or park a taxicab. Attempting to follow their movements in an increasingly dizzy state of mind, one ponders if among those humans portrayed at the street corner is the victim of the mysterious incident on the gallery's ground floor, the one that left behind traces of blood. As in his other works, Yan Xing does not resolve the enigma. Instead, another twist has been added to the show, another “inexplicable but true incident:” a grisaille painting inspired by Paul Cézanne's *The Aqueduct* (1885) provides a counterpoint to those interlaced stories. Not unlike Leonardo's *The Adoration of the Magi*, we are confronted with a group of trees, this time painted onto canvas. Created at an intimate moment in which the artist invited a local man (one of the film's actors or the victim of the gallery's ground floor assault, one wonders) to disturb and control him during the act of painting. Maintained in a grey underpainting and seemingly unfinished, the piece adds another loop to his fictitious novel, sacrificing the myth of the artist as genius and making Yan Xing a mere victim of his own exhibition effort.

The exhibition comes full cycle with a set of three pencil drawings situated beside three silkscreen prints. The prints reflect the artist's interest in the history of design and literature and reintroduce the exhibition title *Opfer* in a partly gothic font. Next to the printed letters Yan Xing added penciled lines, and the inclined viewer might interpret them as counts: counts of days, victims or sacrifices. While determining their exact number would require some time, the quantity proposed here hints at a significant volume (of time, suffering, victims or sacrifices). The viewer is left guessing and I start speculating about the artist's decision to invite a writer with a German background for this text. The desolate mood transpiring from the highly produced works in *Opfer* does not seem to fit with the generic premonition of an upbeat Brazil. With abundant references throughout the exhibition, Yan Xing seems to address us as the living dead (ghosts, vampires, zombies, etc.) that constantly return to threaten the living.

So while Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* ends with Alexander's delirious decision to set his house on fire—a

sacrifice that releases the mute *Little Man* from the shackles of a discordant family life—that act may not have protected both from the third world war that Alexander feared so much. Likewise, Yan Xing’s homage takes us on a journey through a tale of humiliation and agony, offering the chance to comprehend art as a vehicle that expresses the darkness inherent to human condition. Just like the building that houses the artist’s exhibition, we may possibly escape his spell, yet the apocalypse of downtown São Paulo and of a Brazil menaced by a class of crooked politicians might catch up with us soon. Yan Xing, however, has vanished.