

# MOUSSE

Rahel Aima  
Basma Alsharif  
Robert Barry  
Andrew Berardini  
Yann Chateigné Tytelman  
Nick Currie  
Aria Dean  
Kevin Jerome Everson  
Fredi Fischli & Niels Olsen  
Orit Gat  
Jarrett Gregory  
Trix & Robert Haussmann  
Jens Hoffmann  
Adam Jasper  
Stefan Kalmár  
John Knight

Erkki Kurenniemi  
Duane Linklater  
Chus Martinéz  
Robertas Narkus  
Kathy Noble  
Hans Ulrich Obrist  
Andréa Picard  
Ana Teixeira Pinto  
Seth Price  
Johannes Raether  
Kitty Scott  
Leilah Weinraub  
Julia Weist  
Elvia Wilk  
Lantian Xie  
Yan Xing

Mousse  
Contemporary Art Magazine

Issue #59  
Summer 2017

*Conquistador III*, a poster  
by Wolfgang Tillmans.  
(Available in the international  
edition and for subscription only)



# A DANGEROUS AFTERNOON

YAN XING IN CONVERSATION WITH ADAM JASPER

Yan Xing is sitting in the garden of a restaurant in Basel, Switzerland. It's starting to get dark, even a little cold. He's wearing a t-shirt and smoking a cigarette. He's under a lot of pressure. He's installing a show called *Dangerous Afternoon* that is due to open in about a week at the Kunsthalle Basel. It will present traces of evidence of a fictional event—a narrative featuring a perverted curator, a manipulative lover, and an unpredictable artist.

Yan Xing's relationship with his actual curator, Elena Filipovic, is good, but still, it's an important show... He expresses himself quickly, in articulate but accented English, sparring with critics, both real and imaginary, past and present. He laughs a lot, tells outrageous stories, self-mocking jokes, but then asks for them not to be printed. We agree not to print the jokes. The interview is interesting enough without them. You can imagine what they were.

## ADAM JASPER

What is Chinese contemporary art?

## YAN XING

It's a fake topic, a product of marketing. No one makes a fuss about "Nepalese contemporary art." I think they speak of "Chinese contemporary art" because in the 1980s there was a bunch of artists who got exoticized in the Western markets by some collectors. I'm not part of that scene. People in China dislike me because they think I'm now an American artist.

My shows were ignored in China. They rarely got reviewed. I used to run a very popular blog, but I was always bitching about the scene, about the critics and the curators and their preoccupations. To be accepted, art had to somehow be about politics or traditional heritage. You had to use art either to make a "political impact" or to "cherish" the Chinese tradition. And neither of those things is of interest to me. I think art should not be the appendix of politics or the appendix of anthropology. It should be its own thing.

**AJ** You once said to Hans Ulrich Obrist (and the statement has been quoted a lot) that all your influences were Western.

**YX** My mom was a fashion designer. For my mother, who learned everything from Western fashion magazines, anything foreign was good. Every shampoo, every shower gel had to be produced in some other country, not in China. So from the very beginning, everything that surrounded me was from Japan, Taiwan, even Germany. I feel fine about that. Why should I work in the Chinese tradition? I'm not even familiar with it.

**AJ** How old were you when you started making art?

**YX** Oh, very young. Maybe ten. I started making oil paintings straight away. Ink art and calligraphy was, of course, celebrated, and the neo-nationalists were heavily promoting these traditional arts, which is what most artists in China learn and where they start. But I never learned those traditions, and for me, painting wasn't "Western art," it was simply the art Mom gave me.

**AJ** So you were studying oil painting, the characteristic Western genre...

**YX** That's because the Chinese education system for the arts was modeled entirely, right after the Second World War, on the Soviets, the so-called "Llya Repin" (a Soviet Realist painter)



*Lenin in 1918*, 2013, installation view at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing / Lucerne



*The Story of Shame*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing / Lucerne



system. Soviet art at that time was modeling itself (really, copying) the grand Western tradition, and the Chinese were copying the Soviets, so what we got was a second-generation copy.

**AJ** Your work *Lenin in 1918* (2013) was a response to this?

**YX** No, I just wanted to show that I could do better, to show that I could take a political theme and focus on the art and push the politics into the background. Politics is then just a container. It's hard to be a Chinese artist and take a work about Lenin and make it primarily about art rather than politics. It was a challenge that I laid down for myself.

The artwork that I am doing now is also a kind of challenge because it is a love story. We have lost this kind of work for a long time. I want to retrieve it, the ability to talk about love. This is the most controversial work that you can do now because it is naive.

**AJ** Tell me about some of your performances...

**YX** They are always different, but there are connections between them, too. There is a part of them that is sometimes public, maybe even resulting in a filmed document, but the major part of what I call the "performance" is not a public presentation or finished product but the discussions for and with the participants or actors themselves, like a private workshop. For my project *Across the River and into the Trees* (2016), I worked with seven students from the Academy in Florence. We stayed on a mountaintop for ten days, in total isolation. It was like Black Mountain College. All of my performances involve seven participants. I think it's the perfect number.

I knew I wanted to do something inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Decameron*. One of the students had told me that when he arrived at the school, he felt he was amongst friends, but that after a while it became competitive, and he felt betrayed. He asked me to create a situation in which he could dominate. I thought that this would be interesting. I would play the role of his professor, who is murdered, and his head is used for fellatio.



**AJ** There are elaborate narratives that sit behind your works...

**YX** Yes, I would love to have been a novelist, actually. I really admire André Gide. But one day I had to admit that I am better as an artist than I am at literature.

**AJ** Why do you prefer André Gide to Jean Genet?

Top - *Caucasus Bureau*, 2015, installation view at 3<sup>rd</sup> Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art, Yekaterinburg, 2015. Courtesy: the artist

Bottom - *Lessons on the Far East*, 2015, performance at Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Quincy Stampfer

Yan Xing.  
Courtesy: the artist



**YX** Gide is more of a classicist, and I think he is more of a storyteller. Genet provokes, and I'm not interested in provocation for provocation's sake, but I do love how Gide tells profound stories in a simple way.

**AJ** Tell me about your new show at Kunsthalle Basel.

**YX** It is about a fictive curator. It is called *Dangerous Afternoon* and is about a curator, an artist, and the exhibition they make. The curator creates a show with a Chinese artist (not me!), but he (the curator) has a problem in his personal life: he's fallen in love with another man's feet. The curator is normally a dominating figure, but here he seeks to be dominated. I wanted to make a show about a curator undone by their desire.

The exhibition will be the show the curator planned to make, but it also includes his mistakes—the mistakes that he made because of his desire to *serve* the feet of this stranger, who is a bit of a bad boy. The stranger will only let the curator suck his feet if he can have sex with the curator's wife. The curator decides that he has to make this possible. In the meantime, his relationship with the artist whom he is working with degrades. This affects the show.

The artist promised four paintings; one of them is a remake of Cézanne's *Afternoon in Naples* (1875), about a man and a woman and a servant. The artist sends it to Kunsthalle Basel, but our curator gets angry. He thinks the artist knows his secret. That he is mocking him. He can't be sure, but he's ashamed.

**AJ** How does this project connect to your earlier work?

**YX** With each project, the context changes, the audience changes, the materials I might use can change, but my working method is always the same. I become fascinated by a story—sometimes it

is just found in a sentence I read somewhere—and it becomes the backstory of a whole body of work.

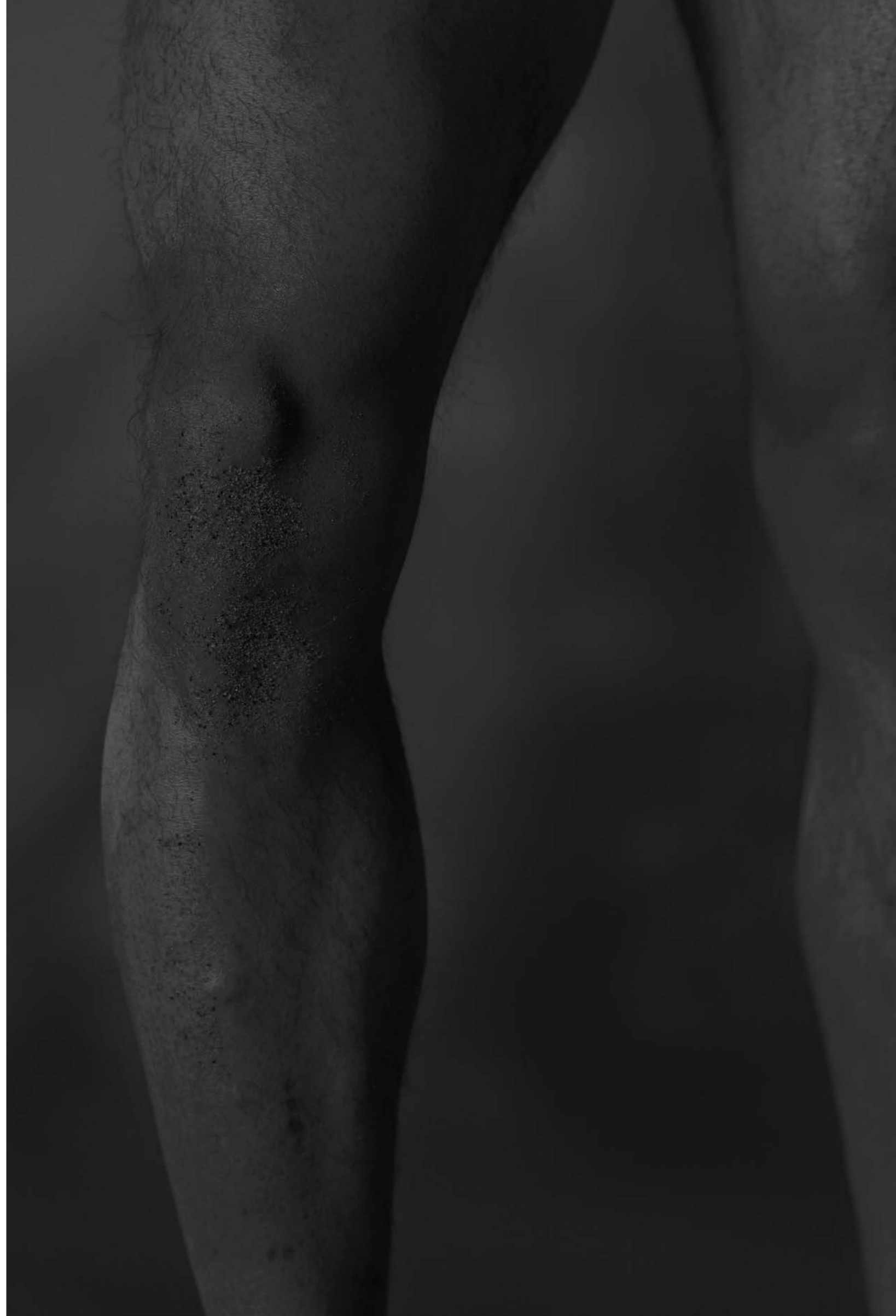
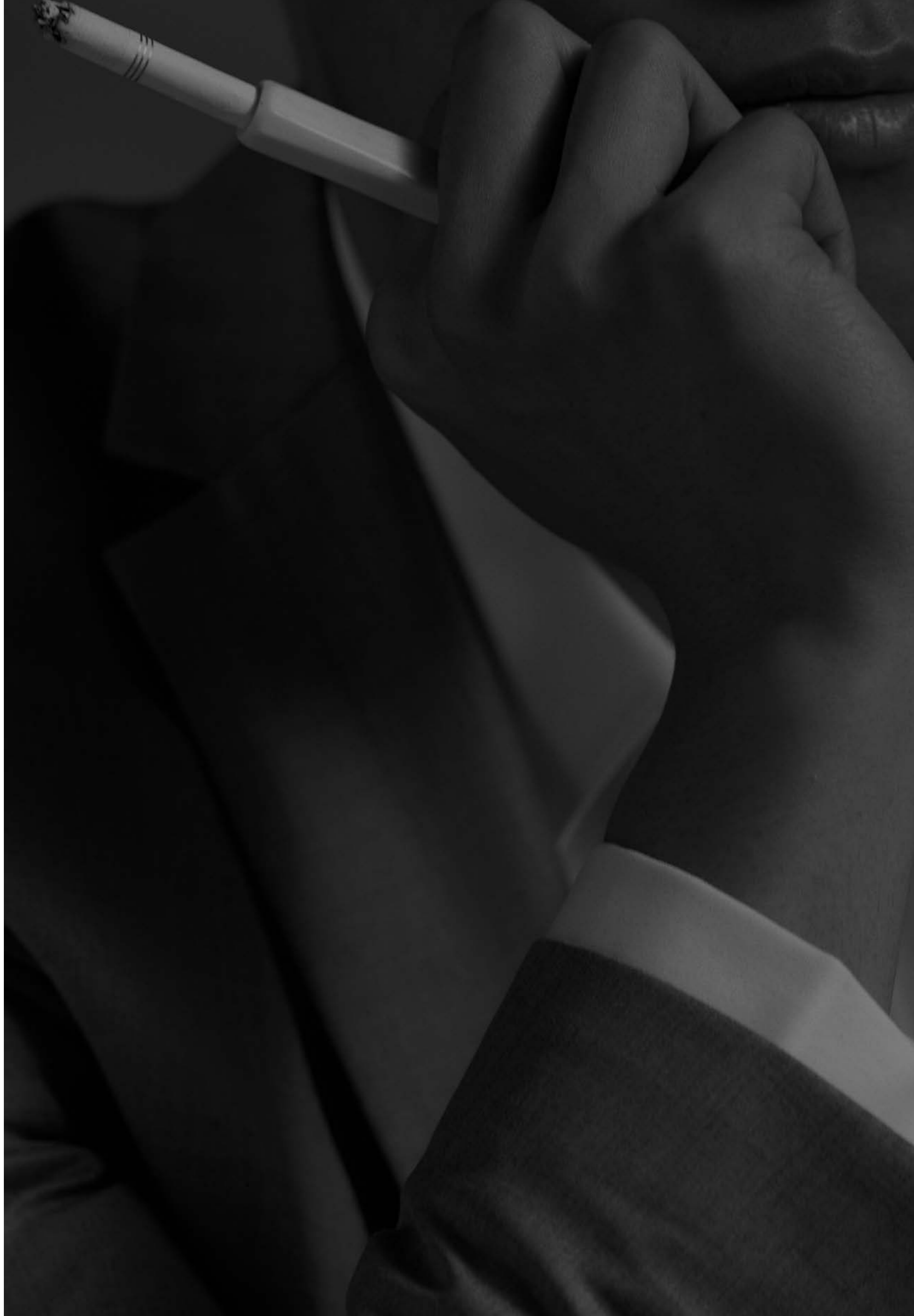
My current project is maybe connected to *The Story of Shame* (2013), a project of mine that Elena Filipovic spoke to me about when we met. I knew she liked it very much. My first meeting with Elena was three hours long and this is unusual. Mostly when artists meet curators for the first time, it's for an hour maximum. We spoke a lot afterwards, and she kept coming back to my interest in making a fake show by a fake curator. I think too many shows are too ambitious, too confident. So I thought to myself: why not have an artist who is presenting an idea that they are ashamed of, that victimizes them?

**AJ** There's a famous quote of George Bataille's, "I challenge any art lover to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe."

**YX** I really love men's shoes. I want to be dominated, under a shoe. But I don't want the pain. So maybe I'm just unprofessional. I've been researching this phenomenon like crazy. To be under a man's feet, this might be the dirtiest place. Maybe even dirtier than the asshole. It's all about being made dirty, without touching the sexual organs.

I'm going to enact a secret performance in the exhibition before it opens. I'm going to *lick* the floor, as if ordered to do so by someone dominating me. But no one will know if it actually happened or not. There will be a caption on the wall explaining what has taken place in the room. When you read the caption, you will already be standing on the floor, the floor that has been licked clean. This will mean you are already in some way complicit, and maybe you will feel ashamed. There will be other small provocations like this in the show. *Dangerous Afternoon* will be very sexy, but without any explicit sexual elements.

Let me ask you a question: do you want to use your feet to control a person?





Above, top - *Across the River and into the Trees*, 2016, performance at Tenuta Dello Scompiglio, Capannori, 2016. Courtesy: the artist

Above, bottom - *Daddy Project*, 2011, installation view at Pékin Fine Arts, Beijing, 2011. Courtesy: the artist

**AJ** No.

**YX** No?

**AJ** No, not really.

**YX** When you are licking someone's feet, you are nothing, you are dust. I am very interested in the dark side of human sexuality. I'm interested in being dominated. But actually, I am the queen. I usually give the orders in my normal life. To design a game which makes a slave happy is a difficult job. Who is dominating whom? The master isn't always dominating the slave. The slave can control the master.

I think that steak tartare is like European sashimi. I love steak tartare and anything tartare, actually. I love it so much that I once went to Tatarstan, because I thought it must be the national cuisine.

**AJ** That was why you went? How old were you?

**YX** I went in 2014. I decided to go to the Caucasus, to live in Armenia or Georgia or Azerbaijan. There are a lot of Chinese artists trying to explore the Western world. But I decided not to go to London or to Paris. I wanted to go someplace further, a place even my mom had never heard of.

**AJ** What is your relationship to China now?

**YX** That's a big subject. I tell people in the United States that China is not the thing they think it is; at least it is not the China I know. I was trained in the Chinese system. I graduated there. I didn't do my MFA in the United States. But I didn't move to America just to say: "China is bullshit, America is great and Europe is great." This doesn't need to be repeated. It's too simple. When I was living in China, I was very critical of the country, but now that

I live mostly in the United States, I am confronted by things that I find different but equally problematic, and I don't think Westerners want to hear that. In truth, China is a very complicated place—although I know there is a great expectation that I will condemn it.

After all, who needs me to come to Europe to talk about censorship in China? Although it's all people seem to want me to talk about. Of course, it's true: censorship exists. But you cannot sacrifice your entire life to complaining. There are too many Chinese artists who like to complain that the reason that their work is mediocre is because China is the problem.

Every country has its own limits. I don't need to wage a war against China nor against American stupidity. Chinese artists are expected to talk about the social condition, the urban condition, the global condition. I think an artist can speak about power and authority and the most profound things about the human condition without making art that makes a show of being political art.

**AJ** Tell me about your father.

**YX** I didn't know him, really, although I made a performance about him in 2011 called *Daddy*. It was like a portrait but a portrait of someone I was imagining and maybe fictionalizing, because I didn't have memories of my own of him.

**AJ** What do you know about him?

**YX** I know that he loved paintings. That he was a drug user. That he was very handsome. Famously handsome in town, a kind of playboy from a very good family. But I only met him for the first time when I was ten and saw him only a handful of times in my life.

**AJ** What did he do for a living?

**YX** I don't actually know. His money maybe came from his family, or perhaps girlfriends.

**AJ** And your stepfather?

**YX** My mother dated around. We moved frequently, although always in the same city. We were often in some new apartment with my mother's boyfriend of the moment. I loved it. I really enjoyed it. Maybe people feel sorry for me, but it gave me access to so many different energies.

**AJ** It gave you an ability to read people?

**YX** Maybe, and it taught me that everything is temporary.

**AJ** Did you have any bad experiences?

**YX** No.

**AJ** I read somewhere that your stepfather was violent or abusive.

**YX** I think the person who wrote that article never saw the performance I made or the film that documented it. On the one hand, secondhand stories spread faster when they are nasty. I think people project a lot of things onto me, but I make an effort to never really reveal myself so that all my work can be fiction.

**Yan Xing** (1986) is known for his multi-component, interdisciplinary projects that combine diverse media such as performance, video, photography and installation. Yan Xing has exhibited and performed extensively, at venues such as the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing; Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston; Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco, and others.

**Adam Jasper** is an art historian with eikones NFS Bildkritik in Basel. He is a regular contributor to *Cabinet* magazine.