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The queer art of Yan Xing: Towards a global visual language of sex, desire and diaspora

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the work of Yan Xing, who has established an international career as a Chinese diaspora artist. This transnational identity, however, raises certain questions, including how Yan Xing's work changed from when he lived in China to when he became a US resident in 2015, and how these changes differ from the globalized art of earlier diasporic Chinese artists. Accordingly, this article first argues that overt references in Yan Xing's earlier work to sex and sexuality shift to an exploration of desire, truth and fiction in his later work that aligns with discourses on queer diasporas and minor theories. Secondly, this article argues that the new generation of Chinese diaspora artists live and work in a different political climate from the earlier generation of Chinese diaspora artists; the new generation works in an art world in which they are not exoticized objects, but actively participates in the making of a global visual language.

KEYWORDS

Yan Xing
Chinese diaspora
queer diaspora
sex and sexuality
truth and fiction
minor theory
desire

INTRODUCTION

The year is 2011. The location is a suburban art gallery in Beijing. A young man with close-cropped hair faces a whitewashed brick wall with his back to

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the audience. A camera captures the back of his head and the graphic impact of his white and black striped shirt and black leather vest, an image that also appears on a TV monitor installed to his right. The young man begins by singing: '[a]t the edge of the sky and the end of the seas, I look for one who understands me'. The young man, who is none other than the artist Yan Xing (b. 1986), then launches into a lengthy soliloquy about fathers and father figures, parents and lovers, the daddy who abandoned him and the daddy of his romantic dreams. This performance, *Daddy Project*, stands as Yan Xing's first work of his mature period (Figure 1). However, it is important to remember that the artist officially launched his career one year earlier in 2010 in both China and Europe. That is, from the very beginning, the artist decided to challenge binaries framed by cultural geography and national residence and to resist categories such as Beijing artist, Chinese artist or Asian artist. Fast forward to 2015, and the artist is now in Los Angeles. Having found his true love, 'the one who understands me', he has relocated to the United States to live and work. An initial question thus arises, how did Yan Xing's work, which ranges across installation, performance, photography, sculpture, painting and video, change from when he lived in China to when he became an artist in the Chinese diaspora?

As a queer artist in the diaspora, Yan Xing's practice also questions what Gayatri Gopinath has described as 'the insistent, obsessive focus on patrilineal inheritance that structures diasporic narratives' (Gopinath 2005: 65). This focus on patrilineal inheritance, with its attendant binaries of homeland

Figure 1: Yan Xing, Daddy Project, *2011. Performance, video and installation. Performance view, Pékin Fine Arts, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.*

and overseas, ancestral place and descendant space, arguably defined *chuguo re* ('the craze for going abroad') that characterized an earlier generation of Chinese artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In contrast, Yan Xing's entry into the diaspora, both Chinese and queer, was not ideologically motivated by political events such as the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989; rather, it was entirely determined by the heart (Obrist 2013: 85). In fact, he maintained a studio in Los Angeles and Beijing for several years starting from 2015, moving back and forth seamlessly between these two locations as well as the numerous exhibition sites in Europe that commissioned his projects. As of 2022, he is based in Brussels, Belgium. In this sense, Yan Xing is a truly transnational artist who treats all sites as pieds-à-terre. But the power dynamics of class that permit the exercise of a translocational identity (Anthias 2020), one in which an artist can claim to be 100 per cent Chinese in whatever location he lands, also raises the second question that shapes the goals of this article.[1] That is, how did the changes in Yan Xing's work before and after his entry into the diaspora differ from that of earlier Chinese diaspora artists, particularly those who moved to the West in the late 1980s and early 1990s?

These two questions – how Yan Xing's practice changed before and after his entry into the diaspora and how his work differs from the previous generation of Chinese diaspora artists – drive the primary lines of inquiry in this article and structure its argument. Accordingly, the first section of this article discusses works from Yan Xing's practice from the 2010s to argue that overt references to sex and sexuality in works from 2013, when the artist was still based in China, shift to works rooted in an exploration of desire from 2016 to 2018, when he 'officially' entered the Chinese diaspora following his move to Los Angeles in 2015. The second section reads key works of the older generation of Chinese artists, including Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, Chen Zhen and Huang Yong Ping, against Yan Xing's practice to argue that the new generation of Chinese diaspora artists live and work in a drastically different climate. In this new climate, there are not only less barriers for artists of Chinese origin to enter the art world, but the idea of China itself occupies a much greater presence on the world stage. Accordingly, Chinese diaspora artists of the new generation are not exoticized objects of the art world, but actively participate in the making of a global visual language. Indeed, Yan Xing's practice provides an excellent case study of this new generation of Chinese diaspora artists since his work is hyper-visible. As Sam Thorne has noted, 'Yan Xing is in the unusual position of having exhibited virtually every work of art he has ever made. This has produced a rare and peculiar form of visibility, whereby his studio practice and exhibitions are almost inseparable' (Thorne 2015: 7).

YAN XING *C.*2013

To consider how Yan Xing's work changed from before and after his entry into the diaspora, it is important to reiterate that Yan Xing's artistic activities do not fall into easy binaries such as East vs. West or China vs. America. The artist's movements have always been organic, and the actualization of his projects took place all over the world, including China. In this sense, the artist's practice never *left* China nor did it ever *move* to the West. Nevertheless, 2015 stands out as the year that he established a studio in Los Angeles alongside his pre-existing one in Beijing. If an artist's work at its most powerful is a calibrated reaction to his immediate environment, one can argue that the overt

references to homoeroticism in Yan Xing's work from 2013 are the reactions of a queer artist primarily living in China, in which such references are still taboo beyond the rarefied worlds of art and academia. Consider that even in 2022, references to same-sex relationships in the blockbuster film *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* were removed by Chinese censors (Hibbard 2022). Nevertheless, there is a wide berth for artists to push the envelope in China as long as they do not critique the state, and references to sex and sexuality would fall into this buffer zone.

An example of Yan Xing's work from 2013 that focuses on sex and sexuality is *Dirty Art*, a video installation shown at the Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing (Figure 2). The work comprises two large cabinets that serve as housing for nine video monitors each. The nine video monitors are neatly stacked into each cabinet. Above the monitors, in the niche created between the monitors below and the top of the cabinet above, the carved inscription PRESCRIPTION DRUGS, EX-LAX appears in elegant Roman type. At the top of the cabinets, a relief carving in the same type spells out the words DIRTY ART I and DIRTY ART II, respectively. Taken as formal sculptures, the two cabinets are perfectly proportioned. Each cabinet takes up the space of two stacked squares, with the monitors providing a solid foundation of images and technology that balances the hand-crafted classical lettering above. The work also makes a clear reference to Edward Hopper's *Drug Store* of 1927, a painting which bears the same text, 'Prescription Drugs, Ex-Lax', but in a different, less classical, type than Yan Xing's work.

Figure 2: Yan Xing, Dirty Art, *2013. Video and installation. Installation view, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.*

The references to Hopper play out even more compellingly when one looks at the black-and-white images on the monitors. Like the eerie sense of alienation in Hopper's painting, which shows a lighted window of a corner drugstore in the middle of the night, the monitors of *Dirty Art* project a similar uncanny mood. The same nine channels of video occupy the two cabinets, but in a different sequence. Among these nine channels the eye is first drawn to the one screen that does not display an image, but a text: the Chinese character for *xie* ('diarrhoea'). This is a sly allusion to the Ex-Lax in Hopper's painting. The conflation of sex with filth, whether appropriate or not, is underscored by the other images on the monitors. For example, there is the image of two men passionately kissing, a naked man urinating before another naked man, a spittoon on a pedestal, three bare buttocks lined up writhing in space, hands carefully handling the socked foot of a muscular leg, a bonsai tree denoting ideas of control and discipline and a limp hand playing with two walnuts as if they were testicles. Finally, there is a video of a video: an image of a monitor within a monitor that plays *Il Decameron*, the 1971 film of erotic vignettes by Pier Paolo Pasolini, which is in turn based on the fourteenth-century literary work by Giovanni Bocaccio.[2]

Another work from 2013 with explicit sexual themes is *Two videos, three photographs, several related masterpieces, and American art*, also shown at the Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing (Figure 3). This work comprises an entire room of images and objects. It also involves a trademark Yan Xing ingredient: structural

2. The references to 'diarrhoea' and *Dirty Art* also recall the backstory to Hopper's painting when the wife of his dealer, Peggy Rehn, initially objected to the work because of its explicit reference to a laxative. She asked Hopper to change 'Lax' to 'Lac'. The painting was eventually acquired by the Boston collector John T. Spaulding, who encouraged Hopper to restore the original spelling, which the painting bears to this day. See https://collections.mfa.org/objects/33293. Accessed 10 December 2021.
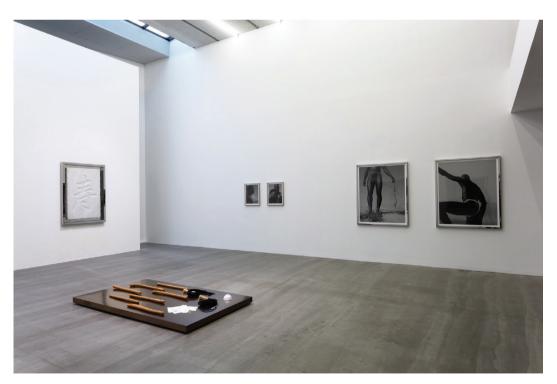

Figure 3: Yan Xing, Two videos, three photographs, several related masterpieces, and American art, *2013. Video, photograph, sculpture and installation. Installation view, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.*

and decorative changes to the gallery space, which in this case includes refinishing the floors, walls and ceiling. The installation includes several elements that not only play on the power dynamics of classification, but also question the hierarchical ordering of visual knowledge according to media (videos and photographs), quality (masterpieces) and nationality (American). The two videos are shown on two monitors that rest on finely carved camphorwood shelves. The floral carvings reference traditional Chinese crafts, while the silent black-and-white videos are a fusion of Chinese and western imagery. One video starts out with an image of two birds in a cage – one that you might find in a Chinese household – that then fades into a Black man playing a flute. The other video begins with a text, the Chinese character for *shou* ('longevity') that fades into two muscular Black men standing one before the other. The reference to three photographs in the title of the work expands to seven if one counts the photographs appearing in the entire installation. Three large photographs of two nude, muscular Black men in classical athletic poses face a wall with four smaller photographs, which show the same two men in more intimate, tender moments.

The number seven is repeated in the number of long wooden dildos carefully arranged on a titanium platform in the middle of the room. Other objects on the platform include two whips, an overturned china bowl and a silk handkerchief, which in juxtaposition with the dildos, acquire strong erotic overtones. Presumably, these are the 'related masterpieces' in the title of the work. With this arrangement, Yan Xing exploits what Philip Tinari has described as the 'knowing alchemy of objects in close proximity' to invoke a backstory of sexual intrigue. The reference to American art undoubtedly lies in the exoticized representations of the Black male body throughout the installation, which alludes to the formally rigorous and homoerotic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe in his *Black Book*, first published in 1986.

Perhaps the most haunting element of the installation is a white marble slab carved with the Chinese character for longevity, the same character that appears in the previously discussed video as well as on an embroidered corner of the silk handkerchief in the centre of the room. The marble is set into a stainless-steel frame that reflects the other images and objects of the installation. Taken as a whole, the precise coordination of erotically loaded objects recalls Rita Raley's discussion of tactical media. She writes, 'in its most expansive articulation, tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible' (Raley 2009: 6). Arguably, the temporary situations created by the materialities and reflections in this work intervene into the normative classifications and hierarchies of art history.

A third work from 2013 that investigates sexuality is *The Sex Comedy*, an installation involving performance and a two-channel video that was exhibited at the Pinchuk Art Center in Kyiv (Figure 4). The performance records a group of actors cum archaeologists who examine and discuss seven wooden artefacts in the form of dildos (not the same ones from *Two videos, three photographs, several related masterpieces, and American art*). The dildos are meticulously arranged on a long table covered with a pristine white table-cloth, and share the surface with a toothbrush, a magnifying glass and various silver vessels from a coffee set. Seven chairs arranged around the table are governed by a strong sense of balanced asymmetry. There are three chairs along one long side; two chairs along the short side and then two chairs along the opposite long side. There are no chairs along the remaining fourth side, but formal
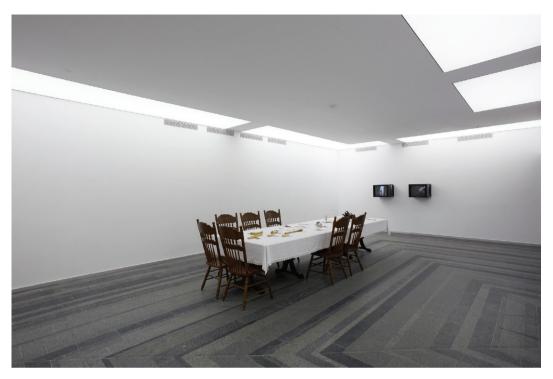
Figure 4: Yan Xing, The Sex Comedy, *2013. Installation, two-channel video (black-and-white, silent; 00:05:56, 00:03:40, respectively), performance and other materials. Installation view, Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv. Courtesy of the artist.*

balance is maintained by the presence of two video monitors on the wall, with one video showing a rod prodding a penis.

The performance begins with one of the archaeologists carefully dusting the silver vessels, leaving the overturned ones in the same state, as if they were ancient objects meant to be preserved in some original context. This is followed by another archaeologist, who faces the audience and talks about the arrangement of the objects on the table. The scenario then moves to the actions of three archaeologists who gingerly handle and examine the dildos with absolute seriousness. They discuss asexuality, bisexuality, circumcision and psychoanalysis, as if these objects were clues to an ancient sexuality. Eventually, another archaeologist appears, and picking up the toothbrush, removes dirt from a dildo and then examines it with a magnifying glass. At this point, the viewer fully realizes that these handsome young men are actors performing the roles of erudite eminences. Neatly dressed with crisp white shirts, neckties and sometimes a vest, these artistic proxies poke fun at academicism and the fetishization of things. The good looks of the young archaeologists also add a homoerotic undertone to the work, with the archaeologists subjected to the same greedy gaze from the audience that they offer to the dildos of their study.

A fourth work from 2013 that explores the problematics of sex is *The Sweet Movie*, a work performed as a collateral event of the 55th Venice Biennale (Figure 5). The performance recreates a pornographic film set where the

second actor never arrives, leaving the director, crew and single actor in a prolonged state of frustration. Other visual cues that this is a performance directed by Yan Xing lies in his signature use of seven (with this number of people on the set), and in his use of a two-channel video playing close ups of the single porn actor. This actor lolls about naked in an elaborate period bed in a room hung with rich damask, which like Yan Xing's other works discussed above provide a humorous juxtaposition between images of precise elegance and themes of primal sexuality. Wandering around the room, the director argues with the crew about lighting and camera angles, while a member of the film crew casually flips through pornographic photos scattered on a table. These photos display two men in explicit sexual acts, including close-ups of anal penetration, rimming and fellatio, and are apparently meant as a guide to how the two actors would have been directed if they eventually got together.

As a delegated performance, *The Sweet Movie* 'is in step with a trend in the contemporary performance art of the past two decades, in which the focus has shifted away from the (suffering) body of the performer and toward the relational space and context of performance' (Gygax 2013: 101). On yet another level of frustration, this time literal rather than figurative, *The Sweet Movie* was cancelled a few days into its performance. Unfortunately, the palazzo in which it was shown was owned by a reactionary Catholic landlord, who objected to the subject matter. Again, Yan Xing used sex and sexuality to push buttons and garner publicity, but this time in a conservative western context.

Figure 5: Yan Xing, The Sweet Movie, 2013. *Performance, two-channel video (colour, sound; 00:04:11, 00:04:51, respectively) and other materials. Performance view, Palazzo Contarini Polignac, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.*

FROM SEX TO DESIRE

Sometime around 2015, Yan Xing's art shifted from sex to desire. That is, his art shifted from direct references to sex and sexuality, to a sublimation of sex into narratives of obsession, frustration, shame, surveillance and control. Taken as a whole, the narratives generated by Yan Xing's work from 2016 to 2018 explore desire as a space between truth and fiction. I would argue that this shift from sex to desire represents the artist working against new pressures following his entry into the diaspora. Rather than presenting himself as a renegade Chinese artist pushing back against censorship both in China and the West, he reinvented himself as a Chinese diaspora artist interested in critiquing more universal claims of medium, backstory and institutional environments through the exploration of absence and desire.

I begin with *Performance of a Massacre*, performed in 2016 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Figure 6). Seven personages, again a trademark of the artist, have gathered on a stage. A producer, two curators, a museum educator, an art critic, an art historian and an actor have gathered to discuss a scheduled performance at the museum. Entitled *Performance of a Massacre*, 37 performers scattered through the galleries would enact various massacres intertwined with elements from their own lives. Unfortunately, the performance is unexpectedly cancelled, since both the artist, Yan Xing, and the curator of the show have disappeared along with the performers. The members of the art world are initially shocked at the un-professionalism of this turn of events and quickly begin to blame each other for the cancellation. The art

Figure 6: Yan Xing, Performance of a Massacre, 2016. *Performance. Performance view, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam. Courtesy of the artist.*

critic accuses the institution of censorship, and of cancelling the performance secretly because the topic of a massacre became too hot to handle. The art historian introduces the possibility that the cancellation was a set up, and that they, the members of the panel, were in fact being used by the artist. As the panel continues to bicker, they begin to reveal what they have at stake in a successful performance, and what they may or may not have to lose with a cancellation. The curators miss out on good publicity, while, on the other hand, the art critic has something to write about. The actor misses out on an opportunity to perform, while, on the other hand, the museum educator has a teachable moment. For 40 minutes, the members of the panel interrupt each other, call each other liars and cowards, and accuse each other of insulting the audience.

Eventually through the ruckus, the viewer becomes aware of the sheer absurdity of the situation and that the curators, producer, historian and critic, while staying true to their roles in real life, are in fact acting out a script directed by Yan Xing. As the tension mounts, the performers begin to leave clues that this is in fact a delegated performance that requires the audience to participate through the suspension of disbelief. For example, the art historian tells the art critic that he should take up acting because he is so good on the stage. The art historian also mentions the possibility that the art critic is a double agent. Finally, the actor gets up and leaves in disgust since no one has apologized to him directly for the cancellation. He is followed by the art historian (the real-life art historian Sophie Berrebi), who ironically announces that she has played the art historian long enough. Finally, the producer reassures the audience that they can get reimbursed for the cancelled performance and walks off with the chief curator representing the museum.

Truth and fiction pull at each other. Even when it becomes blatantly clear that this was an event in which the participants were performing themselves according to a script devised by the artist, the viewer still wants to believe that they have witnessed an actual massacre of the art world. There are thus two levels of desire here. There is the desire of the panelists for the performance that never was, and the desire of the viewer for an actual art world massacre that never happened. As Claire Bishop writes,

> to put it simply: the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is re-conceived as an ongoing or long term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*.
>
> (Bishop 2012: 2, original emphasis)

In its multiple investigations of desire, *Performance of a Massacre* thus challenges the fundamentals of participatory art.

Another exhibition that focuses on desire as the interstices between truth and fiction is *Dangerous Afternoon*, shown in 2017 at the Kunsthalle Basel (Figure 7). The complex backstory to the exhibit centres on a curator who falls madly in love with a stranger's feet. The stranger arranges a bargain; if the curator will let him spend the night with his wife, then the curator can have his way with his feet. The curator must then convince his wife to betray him so that he can in turn betray his wife with the stranger. Exploiting his power over the curator, the stranger puts him into various degrading positions that are

Figure 7: Yan Xing, Dangerous Afternoon, *2017. Photograph, sculpture and installation. Exhibition view, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel. Courtesy of the artist.*

made visible in the exhibition itself. For example, there are shoe scuff marks on the wall about one foot from the floor. This is a reference to the stranger ordering the curator to crawl on his hands and knees along the edges of the room. The curator has then placed a guardrail before one section of the scuff marks, as if to cherish his humiliation. Another guardrail highlights a whistle hanging from the ceiling as another reference to his degradation. Here, the whistle points to the stranger ordering the curator to lick a section of the same floor upon which the viewer is now standing.

Likewise drawing attention to the floor is a huge tray filled with white sand and a long bar of stone. Other objects placed on the floor include elongated copper implements, a curved marble slab and a silk handkerchief, embroidered with the Chinese character for longevity, draped over a large rock. This is the same handkerchief from *Two videos, three photographs, several related masterpieces, and American art*, which enacts a form of intervisuality spanning across Yan Xing's work. The viewer is entranced by the juxtaposition of textures. Smooth silk rests against rough stone and bright polished copper rests against matte marble. On the walls, a few photographs, murky with ink, are scattered across the exhibition. These are images of heightened invisibility, in which the viewer needs to focus to decipher the images. In one image, a man cleans the inside of another man's ear. In another image, the arms and hands of two men hold a potted plant. Also, along the walls of the main space, occasional nail holes testify to the curator changing the location of artworks originally determined by the artist.

In the secondary space of the exhibit there is a worktable with drawing tools, an ashtray, a coffee cup on a pile of newspapers and a silk handkerchief placed around a rod: all signs of the curator's working life. Also, in this secondary space, are grey and white oil paintings juxtaposed with graphite marks on the walls. In one painting, an ominous figure holding a whip stands before two lying figures. The curator in his paranoid delusions takes this painting by the artist as a message that the artist knows the secret desires of the curator. Terrified with the belief that the artist is mocking him, he has removed one of the paintings from the exhibit and has it packed up and partially wrapped on the ground. The final element of the narrative is a monitor playing a video taken by the curator's own shaky cell phone. Here, the viewer sees the stranger and the curator's wife quickly meeting and then rushing off. In another part of the exhibit, here screened on the monumental staircase of the Kunsthalle Basel, is a several hours long film of a dinner party with seven distinguished guests. One of the guests is the stranger, who regales his dinner mates with a story about a curator obsessed with his feet. No one believes him, further blurring the line between truth and fiction that permeates the exhibit.

Underscoring the elaborate backstories interwoven into the objects and markings of the exhibit is the structural fiction of the gallery itself, where the floors, walls and doorways have been refinished in a subtle yet distinctive way that makes it seem that these additions have always been there. As the viewer becomes aware that the floors, walls and ceiling were entirely redone for this exhibit, the viewer is overcome with awe at the vision and ambition of the artist, both the fictive artist of the backstory and the flesh and blood artist Yan Xing. Taken as a whole, the exhibit captures the dark urges and psychological disturbances inherent in the creation and display of art, as well as the desires that constantly threaten to undermine this creation and display.

Another work that speaks to desire as the hyphen between truth and fiction is *Opfer*, shown at the Galeria Jaqueline Martins, São Paulo in 2018 (Figure 8). *Opfer* is the German word for 'sacrifice' and 'victim', and the exhibit pays aesthetic homage to Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice* from 1986. For example, the exhibition includes a grey toned painting of trees, which not only references Tarkovsky's film, in which the depressed middle-aged protagonist plants a tree with his mute son, but also Leonardo da Vinci's *The Adoration of the Magi* of 1481 that figures prominently in the film. In the painting, the Virgin Mary and the Christ child are pictured beneath a conspicuous carob tree, a scene that the film carefully captures with a long shot. In the film, the depressed protagonist eventually sets fire to his house, thereby sacrificing his home and victimizing himself.

The violent undertone of the film is underscored by a bloodstained pair of jeans and a shirt crumpled in the first-floor gallery of the exhibition, where there also hangs a contract between the artist Yan Xing, a fictive collector and the actual gallery. These narrative clues come to a crescendo as the viewer mounts to the second floor, where the artist has transformed the floor into a swathe of terrazzo. Indeed, the refinished interior of the gallery space envelopes the viewer into a web of truth and fiction, a tension that is further attenuated by the juxtaposition of handicraft and technology. In terms of handicraft, there are three silk-screen prints of the word 'opfer' divided into three images of Gothic font. The first image contains the letter 'O'. The second image combines the letters 'P' and 'F'. And the third image integrates the letters 'E' and 'R'. They are framed next to hand drawn graphite marks that the artist has

Figure 8: Yan Xing, Opfer, *2018. Video (colour, sound; 00:20:03). Installation view, Galeria Jaqueline Martins, São Paulo. Courtesy of the artist.*

used in other installations, such as *Dangerous Afternoon*, again enacting a practice of intervisuality between his various works.

In terms of technology, the silk screens are contrasted with a large monitor that plays a series of jerky images. These images seem to have been taken from a hidden view above a busy intersection in the Vila Buarque quarter of São Paolo, a neighbourhood in which both the gallery and the gallery visitors find themselves. In the video, seven actors are interspersed with real passersby. The camera dizzyingly zooms in and out and pans left and right to capture the dramatic and non-dramatic events of people going about their daily lives. Cars and motorcycles have a supporting role as they cruise by the intersection, sometimes stopping at the light, sometimes finding a parking spot. Again, the viewer is not sure what is real life and what is improvised acting, becoming absorbed in the voyeurism of the action.

For example, three men meet at an intersection and get into an argument, with the papers of one of the men eventually getting dropped to the ground. A little while later, on another street corner of the intersection, a woman meets her boyfriend. The couple kiss and hug, but then get into an argument. They try to make up, but they keep pulling away from each other. Eventually, the woman walks off. At one point the holder of the camera answers a phone call and the camera falls to rest, randomly filming through the smoked glass balcony wall.[3] The viewer then sees two boys smoking cigarettes and chatting while walking slowly. One boy is clearly not used to smoking and coughs while holding the cigarette self-consciously, prompting the other boy to take a picture of the awkward boy on his cell phone. Again, the viewer is left

3. Yan Xing notes that the content of the phone call is important because it is the only verbal message in the work. The call to the holder of the phone camera informed him that his grandfather was ill at the hospital, to which he responded in an impatient manner. This creates a contrast between the matter of life and death at the other end of the phone call and the apparent randomness of what is filmed at the handheld end of the phone (Yan Xing, personal communication, 22 February 2022).

mesmerized, wondering what is truth and what is fiction? Who are the real people and who are the actors? Towards the end of the video, the awkward boy comes running up the street, again a clue that parts of the video are fictional, but a clue that grates against the viewer's desire to deem the fiction as truth.

Treatise on Ancient Design, which was shown at Magazzino in Rome in 2018 (Figure 9), also explores the desire to take fiction as truth. Here, the line between what was here before the exhibition and what was created for the exhibition becomes blurred. The viewer is situated into an environment of breathtaking elegance, in which locally quarried, finely installed travertine creates elaborate wainscoting, door casings and jambs in the gallery space. The decoration of the gallery space deliberately interferes with the original functions of the space by radically forcing the gallery's two adjacent spaces into a single articulation. Here, an Apuan green marble path joins the two spaces into one. The manipulative potential of architecture is further emphasized by the architectural drawings on the walls. These images are framed in wood, with each frame bearing its own distinguishing feature – a shallow bevel that appears on a different part of each frame. Joining these architectural drawings with the architectural space of the galleries are irregular yet elegant indentations that appears on the wall plaster beside the framed images. Just as the architectural drawings coerce three-dimensional space into two-dimensional images, it becomes evident that the three-dimensional formations of travertine and marble drive the viewer into a similar fixed position within the
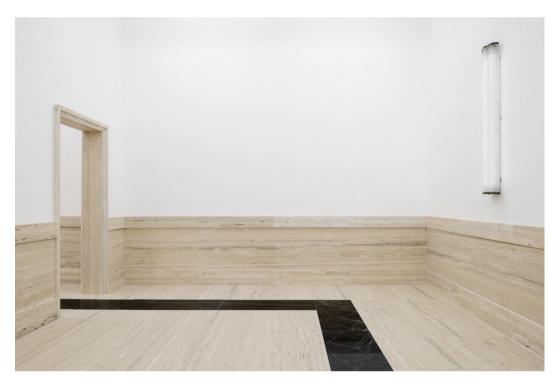

Figure 9: Yan Xing, Treatise on Ancient Design, *2018. Site-specific installation, sculpture, print and drawing. Installation view, Magazzino, Rome. Courtesy of the artist and Magazzino, Rome.*

altered logic of the gallery space. Together, these references to architectural orders and their control of space and movement point to the backstory of the exhibit, which index how Fascist architecture during the twentieth century instrumentalized the classical canon for visual propaganda. Yan Xing's exhibit lays bare how architecture, even as a decorative embellishment, can manipulate the viewer into an awed state of desire. As Xiaoyu Weng has noted,

> Yan Xing does not try to create a single, all-inclusive work of art by using a variety of mediums; rather, he sees the entire exhibition as his medium, through which he is able to deconstruct the rule of medium-based categorization of art.
>
> (Weng 2013: 15)

The above discussion has explored the first question driving this article; namely, how did Yan Xing's work change before and after he entered the diaspora? Comparing *Dirty Art* (2013), *Two videos, three photographs, several related masterpieces, and American art* (2013), *The Sex Comedy* (2013) and *The Sweet Movie* (2013) with *Performance of a Massacre* (2016), *Dangerous Afternoon* (2017), *Opfer* (2018) and *Treatise on Ancient Design* (2018), it becomes evident that the overt references to sex and sexuality that served to push the envelope in Yan Xing's earlier practice, when he exclusively maintained a studio in Beijing, became sublimated into more complex references to desire following his entry into the diaspora. Arguably, this shift from sex to desire reflects new restrictions imposed on the artist following his entry into the diaspora, including art world pressures for him to perform Chineseness through culturally coded images or materials and to display his diasporic injury through cross-cultural elements. Yan Xing resists these two pressures by making desire – as the hyphen between truth and fiction – the central theme of his post-2015 works. Indeed, connecting truth and fiction through desire creates a space for Yan Xing to enact a practice that is queer, diasporic and minor. This minor practice aligns with what Gayatri Gopinath has described as an 'alternative model of visuality, which a queer and feminist re-formulation of diaspora brings into being, by turning our attention to "minor" sites and locations of queer possibility' (Gopinath 2018: 6). A minor reading of desire, truth and fiction also resonates with Huntyle Yapp's analysis of Yan Xing, who writes that, 'Yan produces a minor method that reveals the dominance of particularity, referentiality, and representation that frame his work and minor subject position with the proper' (Yapp 2021: 112).

YAN XING AND THE EARLIER GENERATIONS OF CHINESE DIASPORA ARTISTS

This article now turns to the question of how Yan Xing's work in the diaspora compares with the work of an earlier generation of artists who left China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Out of the thousand Chinese artists who left for the West during this period, this article focuses on Chen Zhen (left for France in 1986), Wenda Gu (left for the United States in 1987), Huang Yong Ping (left for France in 1989) and Xu Bing (left for the United States in 1990). Wu Hung has written that this earlier generation of diasporic Chinese artist is not set apart merely through their fame, but because they 'typify the kind of global/Chinese art that has contributed significantly to the emergence of a decentralized international contemporary art' (Wu 2014: 285). The concept

of transexperience also helps to define the work of this earlier generation. Coined by the artist Chen Zhen, who states that transexperience 'summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one's native place and going from one place to another in one's life' (Chen 1988: 9).

Melissa Chiu elaborates on this by saying that the idea of transexperience, which was developed by Chen to understand his own work, can be extended to understand the work of all Chinese diaspora artists. She writes,

> what transexperience encourages is a more fluid perception of the relationship to a homeland, not only positing it as the past but also the present. This consideration of the homeland as both a residual and evolving influence rather than fixed at the moment of migration also goes against the grain of numerous accounts of diaspora and provides evidence that aspects of the Chinese diaspora may not conform readily to strict definitions of diaspora.
>
> (Chiu 2006: 37–38)

And Peggy Wang writes of this earlier generation that,

> throughout the [1990s] artists and critics complained that Western curators expected their art to serve merely as explanations of socio-political conditions in China. Such interpretations bounded art-work in two ways: they were tied to specific political tropes and further confined to a narrowly construed 'Chinese' frame of reference.
>
> (Wang 2020: 18)

These themes of diaspora and transexperience in the earlier generation of Chinese diasporic artists are found in the work of Wenda Gu (b. 1955), and in particular *The Enigma of Blood*, which was begun in 1989 two years after he arrived in the United States. *The Enigma of Blood* involved soiled tampons and sanitary napkins from 60 women from sixteen countries and addressed ideas of universality from the basic perspective of the human body. The tampons and napkins were accompanied by anecdotes provided by the women about their lives. The implication of social taboos inherent in these used objects was heightened by their placement on specially made cushions or inside Bibles. The installation created enough controversy to have it cancelled from the programme at California State University at Long Beach. Indeed, Gu was taken aback that the shock value of his work was not appreciated and said, 'when I exhibited *The Enigma of Blood*, for example, I was not aware of a lot of the issues being discussed around my work. I was still green here in America' (Chiu 2006: 78).

In Xu Bing's *Case Study of Transference* from 1994, he explores diaspora and transexperience through the mating of pigs. The male pig was stamped with incoherent Roman lettering and the female pig was stamped with similarly nonsensical Chinese characters. Whether or not there was any broader significance to the mounting of the Chinese female pig by the English male pig, the sex act itself was cause for concern. Indeed, the video documentation of the performance captures the audience's reactions, which ranged from fascination to disgust to embarrassment. When the performance was enacted two years later in New York in 1996, the male and female pigs did not mate, but piglets stamped with a combination of English and Chinese words roamed the gallery, as if they were the offspring of the sow and the boar. As Melissa

Chiu writes: 'a *Case Study of Transference* transformed viewers into voyeurs, while orchestrating a symbolic merging of different languages with the idea, through the mating of pigs, of creating a new one' (Chiu 2006: 90).

Chen Zhen explores the frustrating nature of diaspora and transexperience in his two *Round Tables* from 1995 and 1997, respectively. The Geneva office of the UN commissioned the first table to commemorate its 50th anniversary. The table consists of a large round table with the mission statement of the UN carved in its centre. Around this idealistic statement are 29 chairs from around the world that are imbedded into the table, with the seats of the chairs integrated into the tabletop. No one can sit in these chairs, let alone conduct a discussion. The second *Round Table* combines the two tables into a figure 8, the symbol of infinity, with an inscription at the centre reading *yongheng de wuhui* ('eternal misunderstandings'). As Wu Hung writes,

> the work presents the United Nations as a formal device devoid of real communication: although the table's shape symbolizes equality and the chairs stand for different national bodies, no real human interaction is taking place, and the lofty statement about universal human rights remains a suspended, empty text.
>
> (Wu 2014: 288–89)

Huang Yong Ping's *Bat Project* represents a critique of diaspora and transexperience at the highest political levels. Huang Yong Ping became fascinated by an incident in 2001 in which an American spy plane, an EP-3, collided with a Chinese fighter jet over Hainan island, and had to make an emergency landing at a Chinese military base. After intense negotiations, the Americans were permitted to dismantle the plane and ship it back to the United States in pieces. The powers involved wanted to quickly move on from the incident, but Huang Yong Ping decided to commemorate it in art. He started by reconstructing the tail of the airplane for display in Shenzhen, hanging taxidermy bats in the interior as a reference to the spying capabilities of the plane. The work was never shown since the US and French governments successfully censored the work for being too politically sensitive. For the second part of the project in 2002, the artist recreated the cockpit and right wing of the plane as a site-specific installation for the First Guangzhou Triennial. This too was censored by the authorities as being too sensitive. Finally, a year later in 2003, the final part of the plane, the left wing, was recreated for display in Beijing. This too was censored. As Wu Hung writes, 'the negotiation about its removal mirrored the negotiation surrounding the original spy plane, exposing the workings of "international censorship" and the hidden power behind it' (Wu 2014: 294).

Returning to the question of how these works by an earlier generation of Chinese diaspora artists differ from the work of Yan Xing following his entry into the diaspora in 2015, several observations can be made. First, the historical contexts surrounding the earlier generation and Yan Xing are sharply different. Not only does Yan Xing and the current generation of Chinese diasporic artists face fewer barriers to becoming active internationally, but this new generation is specifically affected by the perception of China as a world power rivalling the United States. Second, unlike the work of the earlier generation, there is little desire for universalism in the work of Yan Xing. The visual language that he uses, including the constructed situation and the delegated performance, are entirely international. The borders that are crossed are not those of cultures or nation states, but of medium and space. Third, there is no

need for hybrid imagery or heterogeneous elements for a Chinese diaspora artist who grew up in the internationalized climate of China in the 1990s and 2000s. Yan Xing's artistic influences are all western to begin with. Thus, his work is not about culturally coded materials that invoke some abstract sense of Chineseness, but about the narrative power of objects to tell stories and to transcend their mediums.

CODA

This article has taken a comparative approach to examine two questions. First, it has asked how the work of Yan Xing changes from when he was based in China to when he entered the diaspora. Taking his work in the 2010s as a case study, this essay has argued that the artist's engagement with representations of sex and sexuality shifted after his entry into the diaspora into elaborate back-stories and narratives of desire, truth and fiction. The second question that this article has asked is how the work of an artist who entered the Chinese diaspora in 2015 might differ from the work of an earlier generation of Chinese artists who moved to the West in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Again, taking the work of Yan Xing as a case study it becomes evident that themes of cultural interaction and universal values central to the work of the earlier generation are avoided for backstories that do not reference Chineseness, but rather use visual and material environments to blur the line between the artificial and the actual. Unlike the diaspora of the earlier generation, characterized by the loss of the homeland and alienation from the foreign country of residence, the queer diaspora of Yan Xing is not defined by binaries such as East and West or China and America, but rather takes the minor spaces that are queer and diasporic to generate inspiration for work that blurs the line between the ultimate binary – that between truth and fiction – to actively participate in the creation of a visual language that is inherently global.

GLOSSARY

Chuguo re (the craze for going abroad) 出国热
Shou (longevity) 寿
Xie (diarrhoea) 泻
Yongheng de wuhui (eternal misunderstandings) 永恒的误会

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