

REALISM

On Yan Xing

by Carol Yinghua Lu

On January 15, 2011, Yan Xing (*1986 in Chongqing, China; lives and works in Beijing, China) performed a piece entitled *DADDY Project* (2010) in an exhibition that I curated. In this poignant work, Yan Xing stood facing a white wall, accounting over the next two hours his own experience growing up with a single mother, exposed to instances of family violence, great uncertainties, the lack of recognition and love from his extended family, and ultimately the absence of fatherly affection all through his life. Yan Xing started by addressing his account to his own father, whom he disclosed to be in the audience, but as he continued his narration, it became clear that it wasn't the father he was referring to, but a fatherly figure he has never really had but is always yearning for. There is no doubt that Yan Xing is a great storyteller. Maybe because it was everything he's been through, or that he simply has a great memory, but there was no awkward lapse into silence or struggle for words during his performance. He described his constant rows and competitive relationship with his mother, which reached a point at which she stabbed him. The police were often called in these situations, occasioned by Yan Xing's affairs with his mother's boyfriends. It's hard to imagine that someone as young as Yan Xing would have already been through hardships and pains unimaginable to most and would still remain as hopeful, aspiring, hardworking and eager as he is.

DADDY Project, which is personal and autobiographical, is a prime example of Yan Xing's work at its best. Some of his stronger works have always been self-referential, placing the artist, his own experience and reflection at the very center of attention, examination and discussion and, at the same time, satisfying his instinctive compulsion to be seen, heard and loved.

The centerpiece of Yan Xing's first solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne, Beijing, is *REALISM* (2011), a discussion that can be seen as a continuation of an earlier curatorial project entitled *A Project – Education* (2009). In 2009, Yan Xing conceived and initiated *Education*, inviting a number of his peers and fellow artists to create a work reflecting on issues concerning what education consists of and how each consumes and internalizes the education and information he or she has received from outside sources such as school, the media and other channels.

REALISM is a performative work that Yan Xing has conceptualized specifically for the exhibition. It involves Yan Xing and a group of actors that the artist will place among the audience, who will interact with a large-scale sculpture. The sculpture is an incarnation of Yan Xing's vision of "the most perfect, the most sexy, the most elegant and the most wonderful male figure", modeled on a classic male sculpture made in 1577 and sited in Florence, Italy. The making of the sculpture involves methods derived from Soviet Socialist Realist training that uses naturalistic idealization to portray the working class and farmers as purposeful and well-muscled monumental presences. When finished, the sculpture is a towering, 3.5-meter high, white plaster

monument around which Yan Xing and his troupe of performers will carry out acts that are carefully choreographed by the artist. Although appearing to be randomly discussing things with each other and whispering into each other's ears, the actors are given an exact script to follow, which consists of André Breton's Surrealist *Manifesto* (1924) together with marginal reading notes Yan Xing has written on its pages. These notes are Yan Xing's interpretations, commentaries and contemplation related to issues addressed in the *Manifesto*.

The actors will be instructed to converse about the content of the *Manifesto* among themselves. They will also talk to audience members during the process, asking them questions. In these exchanges, the actors will raise doubts concerning and give confirmation to the content of the *Manifesto*, expressing their feeling of being repelled or excited by its claims. In this performance, Yan Xing plays himself, a professional artist, who will share his thoughts, his opinions of the sculpture in the exhibition, and his reflections on art history with the actors and the audience. The two very different worldviews and value systems embedded in Socialist Realism and Surrealism will encounter each other head-on within Yan Xing's work. Both aesthetic traditions and worldviews were never so far apart from each other as they are usually understood anyway. Both articulate and embody, in their own ways, a certain state of mind that's about desire and ambition. They simply represent two of mankind's incessant attempts to get closer to an understanding of how the world is organized. Having secured their positions in the general art historical narrative, these two ideological interpretations of what art could be have established themselves as sets of artistic laws, contributing to how we understand art altogether, as well as affecting the process of art making. This work is Yan Xing's own attempt to examine his relationship to such artistic establishments and unravel the kind of authoritative influence they tend to exert over artistic practice.

Besides *REALISM*, Yan Xing will exhibit another recent work entitled *They Are Not Here* (2010). It was born out of an effort to respond to an exhibition invitation to create a work in a venue other than the usual exhibition space and at times determined by each participating artist instead of happening simultaneously according to an exhibition opening date. In this work, whose photo and video documentation is on view here, Yan Xing placed seven men in one hotel room, where they would spend an idle afternoon together. No communication was allowed between them. Although stuck in one space at the same time, each of them was completely engrossed in his own world and preoccupied by his respective role designated by Yan Xing. Outside, a sign that read "They Are Not Here" was placed on the door, while inside, three fixed video cameras and a DV camera documented the process of the artist as the director of the scene, filming these seven young men.

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