

Kan Xuan: Performing the Imagination



I first experienced Kan Xuan's video work at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and I distinctly remember its sounds echoing throughout the former petrol warehouse that now housed the China Pavilion. In this particular video, *100 Times* (2003),

ceramic cups were thrown repeatedly by the artist into the corner of a room, breaking with a sharp, dry sound while their shards amassed into a messy, colourful pile. This work, one of several of hers in the pavilion, was discreetly nestled between gigantic oil drums and other unexpected locations. In contrast to Yin Xiuzhen's *Arsenale*, an overhead installation of one hundred cloth-covered weapons also situated in the warehouse, Kan Xuan's videos were not always easy to find, but they could be located throughout the exhibition space by their traces of sound and light.

What remained with me was an appreciation of Kan Xuan's unique aesthetic sensibility and her skill at conveying everyday experiences in a light, poetic, and humorous way. Recognized internationally as one of the most interesting artists working in China and abroad, she creates video vignettes that bring a heightened awareness to small, ephemeral moments and sensations that are often overlooked. Positioning the camera as a surrogate for her curious and intelligent eye, she produces whimsical experiences that embody the spirit of a child's delight or the Zen idea of beginner's mind—of experiencing everything fully, as if for the first time.

In the exhibition at Centre A that launched the Yellow Signal project, Kan Xuan's videos are again juxtaposed with more spatially dominant works. Wang Jianwei's four-channel video installation *Position* (2011–12), which explores complex philosophical questions in a series of dramatic acts, occupies the centre of the gallery. Whereas the scale of Wang's projections imparts a cinematic quality to the installation, suggesting its high production value, Kan Xuan's two video works, *Nothing!* (2002) and *One by One* (2005), installed at the perimeters of the gallery, use much more modest technology; her work forgoes grand gestures and epic narrative statements to communicate her sense of the world.

The contrast of these approaches to new media raises interesting questions about artistic methodology and the resulting affect. Whether one artist's approach is more resonant than the other would depend, of course, on the

Kan Xuan, *Nothing!*, 2005, single-channel video, 1 min., 56 secs. Photo: Hua Jin. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

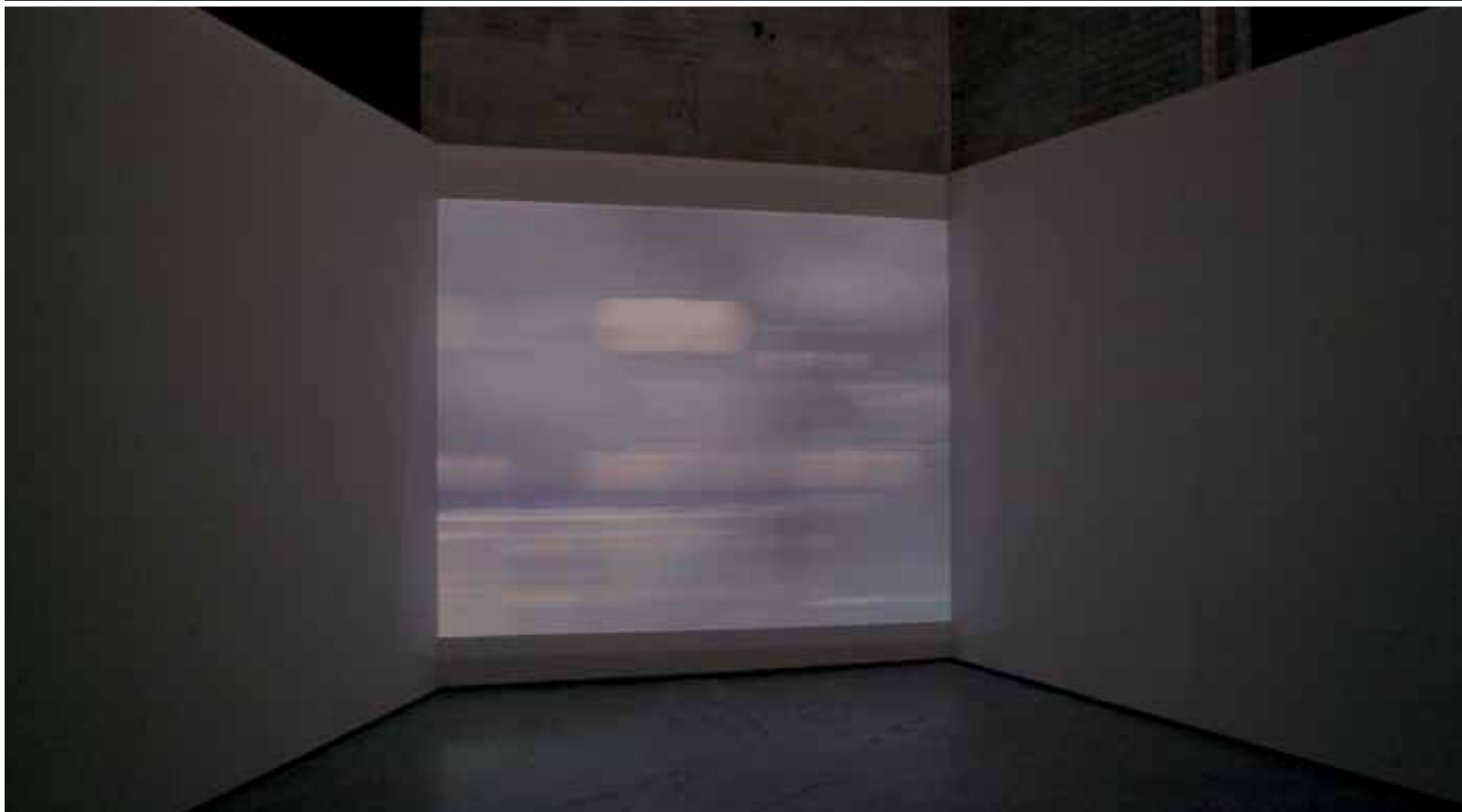
inclinations of the viewer. I have a habitual attraction to the peripheral—the bug that creeps across the side of the screen in an old film; the garbage or treasure left on the side of the road; anomalies that rupture the smooth narratives of our regulated, often highly mediated culture. These provide glimpses of process and in-between moments—the unscripted texture of life. While Kan Xuan’s works may appear here as simpler, “smaller” statements, the unfolding layers of her videos reveal their conceptual depth in unexpected ways.

Nothing! playfully charts a frenetic search into drain holes, concrete pipes, and cylinders, scanning urban territory and occasional scenes of forest foliage. This single-channel video is accompanied by a comical, cartoon-like narration with intonations of continual surprise that are re-sampled throughout: “Hmmm . . . nothing! Wow, geez, nothing! JE-sus! SHIT! Nothing!! Hmmm . . . okay . . . Again!” The frequent, rhythmic cuts—a distinctive aspect of Kan’s videos—are abundantly presently here and create a view of life from the perspective of another creature, perhaps lower in the supposed hierarchy of species than our own. The creature is animated through the camera’s erratic gestures, which also mimic the pace of contemporary urban activity in our hyper-capitalist society—with its internet-fused attention-spans that flit from one tab, video, and social media portal to another and from one source of consumption to the next.

The circular, repetitive narrative structure of *Nothing!* creates an aimlessness that allows the mind to wander. What the protagonist is in search of remains open and unspecified; as Kan Xuan hints in her statement: “Searching for it, crazy about it, and troubled by it, but ultimately as we often see, there’s ‘nothing.’” Yet the human mind cannot handle meaninglessness; we are inclined to interpret, to draw connections among memories, experiences, and present circumstances. So what is one to make of this comical yet frustrating search that produces no results? What is the purpose of creating a video about nothing? Do the incessant proclamations of nothing somehow saturate nothingness into something? Kan Xuan has constructed a riddle, a seemingly empty container that is filled with our own projected desires and illusions.

One by One has a similarly meandering narrative structure, though with a notably different presentation. Here, Kan Xuan explores a row of uniformed guards on a sunny day in Beijing. Zooming past each body at chest height, the camera abstracts khaki greens and leather belts into a homogeneous blur. Occasionally, it suddenly and unexpectedly pauses to inspect little details—the stars on silver buttons, a slightly enlarged belly—before resuming its curious, child-like adventure. Meanwhile, the ambient city noises of birds chirping and the occasional sound of drilling create an ironic contrast to this display of military presence.

As Kan Xuan has explained, it was important to show *One by One* as a larger video projection, so that the repetitive imagery would resemble a wall.¹ The stationary row of bodies can indeed be read as a sort of psychological blockade; bland and impenetrable, it provides no sign of human sentiment. Scanning from left to right, then left again, the camera cannot see beyond this apparently endless obstruction. *One by One* can be interpreted as a



Kan Xuan, *One by One*, 2005, single-channel video, 6 mins. Photo: Hua Jin. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

form of reverse-surveillance, Kan Xuan's imaginative way of turning the gaze back upon those who seek to enforce and control behaviour through their very presence in public space. The camera's gaze, which streams by the uniformed bodies and then pauses like a slot machine, suggests that a sort of game is being played, and that there are certain stakes involved.

By presenting this mundane, repetitive view in a casual, open-ended manner, Kan Xuan leaves the production of meaning to the audience, turning our attention again to the chatter of our own minds and to the act of perception itself. While social critique is not explicit, connections can be drawn between the guards' performance of political authority and a country that continues to be run as a police state, and perhaps too, the growing rifts worldwide between governments' displays of political force against their increasingly discontented citizens. There is an eerie disconnect between the nonchalance of the background noise and the visual subject matter, perhaps not so dissimilar to the gap between China's media propaganda and the many realities that are censored. Kan Xuan also presents an edited view of reality—deliberately framed fragments that require sustained contemplation to grasp the complexity of their associations. What might the title suggest, beyond the literal—the depersonalization and loss of individual rights, one by one?

Kan Xuan now works almost exclusively in video, although she initially studied oil painting at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou from 1993 to 1997. During her studies, she met Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Yang Zhenzhong, participated in the 4 x 100 m² group organized by Yang Zhengzong and Geng Jianyi and saw one of the first video art exhibitions featuring work by Chinese artists, *Image and Phenomena: An exhibition of video works by fifteen artists*.² Her move to Beijing in 1998 brought her in contact with a new environment, new technologies, and new artistic communities; she also worked at a post-production film company to become familiar with the technical aspects of video production.³ It was then that she switched to video as the primary medium to express her ideas, a form that allowed her to find the space between memory and reality.⁴ As she describes it, “videos . . . are neither as real as what we see, nor as fictitious as what we assume. [Their] realistic and virtual aspects create a far-reaching and versatile space.”⁵ Early works, such as *Kan Xuan! Ai!* (1999)—an existential chase where she runs through a tunnel anxiously calling and responding to her own name—and *A persimmon* (1999)—a short study of the fruit being repeatedly smashed to a pulp—evidence her fascination and experimentation with video as a means of capturing everyday experiences and as a tool to shape perception.

Artists inevitably respond to and are influenced by their environments, and this is reflected in their work. In 2002 Kan Xuan moved to Amsterdam for a two-year artist residency at Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, where she was able to further hone her practice. Since then, she has divided her time between Beijing and Amsterdam. The artist says that while life in Amsterdam allowed her to become more free, independent, and brave,⁶ Beijing is a city that provides her with a lot of energy and inspiration; often she will shoot video in China and then edit the material in the Netherlands.⁷ It is interesting to envision her capturing China's rapid modernization and transporting this material across the world and to consider how these

very contrasting experiences manifest aesthetically in her work. Curator Marie Terrieux has read the minimalist aesthetic of Kan Xuan's work as an effect of her living in Northern Europe—a cooler, quieter environment that allows space for contemplation.⁸ I see Kan Xuan's experiences of living in several different places (Anhui, Hangzhou, Beijing and Amsterdam) as forming an autobiographical hybridity that is not always possible to locate geographically but is nevertheless present in her work.

China's rapid modernization has had a profound impact on contemporary art, and the use of new media technologies by Chinese artists over the past twenty-five years has paralleled these dramatic social upheavals. Considering Kan Xuan's work within this history, it is clear that she is part of what might loosely be termed the second generation of artists working with video. Hou Hanru has pointed out that while early video artists in the late 1980s and early 90s were more concerned with presenting reality in an objective, if empirical way, this younger generation is using video to create independent narrative structures as a medium with a language of its own.⁹ The emergence of digital media and computer editing software has also influenced ways of thinking and working with video; through frequent cuts and the use of repetition—a strategy that appears in several artists' works—artists can sculpt time and space with even greater flexibility, assembling multiple images and perspectives to convey their ideas. Working with video in these ways, artists such as Kan Xuan, Lu Chunsheng, Xu Zhen, and Yang Zhenzhong are constructing narratives and social experiments to propose spiritual and philosophical questions about human behaviour in contemporary society. While their approaches and visual syntax are quite varied, they share an interest in expressing the subjective, private realms of their imaginations to convey alternative experiences.¹⁰

Yet, this focus on the inner world of the artist's mind is neither an escape from reality into a space of idealized fantasy, nor an indication that these artists are no longer concerned with the political. Writing on contemporary Chinese video art in 2004, Adele Tan observed that “politics appears to be repressed rather than erased. Politics and ideological constrictions are returned and then repackaged into somewhat less menacing forms. They are de-fanged.”¹¹ Videos such as Kan Xuan's often begin with a simple concept, accessed easily through perception or sensation; gradually they unravel deeper meditations on the relationship between the individual and society. As illustrated in the above works by Kan Xuan, social and political critiques are subtly embedded within the narratives of everyday experience. On the surface, these videos certainly reflect contemporary realities in China, but they also question these realities. By adopting this approach, artists like Kan Xuan are drawing upon a long tradition of the artist-intellectual in the history of Chinese art, who maintained a distance from the state and conveyed critiques through symbolism, calligraphy, poetry, and other artistic strategies. It was not always wise to speak one's mind directly.

As mentioned earlier, Kan Xuan was formally trained in Chinese painting, a practice that rests on the foundation of traditional Chinese aesthetics, principles that themselves have been documented as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907).¹² In closing here, I would like to consider a few of these

principles that resonate strongly in her work. The first is the belief that the artist is required to convey spiritual meaning through visual forms. The second is the intensive observation of an object's principles. The third is the artist's selfless immersion with the object, or subject, of study.¹³ Using the camera as her eye, Kan Xuan invites us to experience this aesthetic process with her in seemingly real time; she takes as her subject the expression of emotions through various objects and conveys the spiritual energy that she sees. *Object* (2003), a minimal black-and-white video showing various quotidian items—coins, hair, milk, honey—sinking slowly in a basin of water, illustrates this practice of sustained looking and of following an object's form to reveal its mystic beauty. Through the mesmerizing aesthetic of the video, the artist also reveals her emotions towards the subject. Whether the spiritual energy emanates from the objects or from her own perspective is perhaps irrelevant, for she seems to have reached that point of immersion—the harmony between individual and world—that acknowledges the interconnectedness of things.

One of the most appealing aspects of the moving image as art form is its ability to evoke an immediate visceral response through the realistic representation and manipulation of form, expression, movement, and sound. As viewers of Kan Xuan's work, we *feel* our way to an understanding; we intuit meaning through the senses, not just the mind. Few words are uttered, few explanations necessary. Through the medium of video, Kan Xuan has created a remarkable intimacy, a sense that there is but a thin, barely visible membrane separating the audience from the experience itself. Ultimately, her practice is about the pursuit of truth, happiness, and freedom—as she says, “the kind of freedom that exists close to thinking and feeling.”¹⁴ Experiencing her work transports us to precisely that state of mind.

Kan Xuan is presented by Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

Notes

¹ E-mail conversation between the author and Kan Xuan, March 28, 2012.

² See Marie Terrieux's "Kan Xuan: Looking for Something Precious," see http://www.muscreen.uts.edu.au/Kan_Xuan_interview.htm for her more extended biography of the artist. The exhibition mentioned above was curated by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie and presented in 1996 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou.

³ Carol (Yinghua) Lu, "Kan Xuan im Interview," *Jahresring* 53 (2006), 158–65. Many thanks to Verena Dreikauss for the English translation.

⁴ E-mail conversation between the author and Kan Xuan, March 28, 2012.

⁵ Kan Xuan, in Carol (Yinghua) Lu, "Kan Xuan im Interview," 161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁷ E-mail conversation between author and Kan Xuan, March 28, 2012.

⁸ Terrieux's "Kan Xuan: Looking for Something Precious" was written for the exhibition *Mu: Screen—Three Generations of Chinese Video Art*, presented June 1–July 9, 2010, at the UTS Gallery in Sydney, Australia.

⁹ Michael Zheng, "Objectivity, Absurdity, and Social Critique: A Conversation with Hou Hanru," *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, September/October 2009, 47–61.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of particular works by these artists, see Hou Hanru, "China Today: Negotiating with the Real, Longing for Paradise," *Flash Art International* 38 (March/April 2005), 96–101.

¹¹ Adele Tan, "Génération Vidéo," *Third Text* 18, no. 5 (September 2004), 519.

¹² Hsieh-Ho, a fifth-century portrait painter, is believed to have been the first to document these principles of image making. See Rudolf Arnheim, "Traditional Chinese Aesthetics and its Modernity," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37, no. 2 (April 1997), 155–57.

¹³ *Ibid.* In his summary, Arnheim draws from two key texts, Osvald Sirén's *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (New York: Schocken, 1963) and Susan Bush's *The Chinese Literati on Painting* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁴ Kan Xuan, in Carol (Yinghua) Lu, "Kan Xuan im Interview," 162.