

Flash Art

Yang Fudong: Beyond Reality

by Yuko Hasegawa (March – April 2005) [TRANSLATED]



Yang Fudong, *Lock Again 1*, 2004. Lambda digital print.

*Yuko Hasegawa (YH): The first work of yours that I saw was the photograph *The First Intellectual* (2000). In it, a man in a disheveled suit is standing on the street and shouting; it is a scene that seems to take place somewhat outside of reality. Does this image represent a Chinese city dweller having an identity crisis in response to the rapid urbanization and modernization of China? After this work, you made *Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest* (35mm film transferred on DVD, 2003). Does the term 'intellectual' have the same connotation in both of these works?*

*Yang Fudong (YFD): Sometimes the same name or title conveyed through different conditions can evoke a totally different message or emotion. For me, the two works are not the same. *The First Intellectual* comes more from reality, because such a group of people actually exists — these are people who are well-educated but often feel lost in society. They have their own passions and ambitions, but don't know where their road leads or what their final destination will be. They don't even have a clear aim. It's hard to tell who imposes a harsh reality on whom. In my movie *Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest*, I focused more on the spiritual level of people. It expresses an urge to go beyond reality to find complete freedom and openness. The people in the film want to rediscover their beliefs, to find again the Utopia that once existed at the bottom of the hearts of everyone.*

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Yang Fudong. *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, Part 1*, 2003-05.
35mm black and white film transferred to DVD; 29 min.

*YH: While made in classical and Romantic styles, your works also have many extraordinary surrealistic scenes. In *Tonight Moon* (video installation, 2000), several men in business suits chase after birds in a garden and play on boats. As they chase after their friends, their faces are rather expressionless and their movements odd. The scenes are filled with surrealistic behavior. On the other hand, your installation appropriates classical Chinese landscape compositions and their very small-scale human figures. What are your thoughts about Chinese traditional art? Why did you decide to film the work in a classical garden?*

YFD: I chose to shoot it in an ancient garden because they interest me. People often frequent gardens to relax. When I was a child, I went to a garden with my friends. We played, enjoyed the flowers and had our tea there. At that time, the garden represented something special, it was a symbol that people pursued, offering a kind of beauty and way to relax in their lives. It's not a form of beauty that can easily be described. Human beings are the main focus of the movie. Every person who comes to the garden brings his or her own story and places it against the backdrop of an aesthetic beauty that is constantly changing.

The body movements in my works are inspired by the preoccupied state of mind I find myself in during the tea ceremony. At teatime, it's possible for people to make bizarre movements unconsciously or have unrealistic thoughts in their minds. Traditional art can be akin to a sponge. It is difficult to define, it can be heavy, it can be light, it can be big, it can be small, it can be filled with oxygenic water which may nourish a small plant. The artist is that small plant nurtured by the sponge, even though he or she might be unaware of its impact.

*YH: In your works, you often use many levels of perception, as well as the gaps between them. The video installation "I love my motherland" (1999) shows human figures in different areas of Shanghai. The movements of these figures are blurred and never clear. Urban atmosphere, society and human perception of society also seem to be blurred. In *After all I didn't force you* (1998), a man and woman face each other; the man changes into four different people in quick succession. What did you want to express in this scene?*

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YFD: "I love my motherland" focuses on a political slogan. Different people recite it under different conditions at the same moment in the work. When something like belief is repeated mechanically, like a monk pattering in a temple, we hardly know how far away we are from our real selves. Also in *After all I didn't force you*, several people acted the part of the hero. The various images conjure up a distant and blurred mode of expression, evoking a feeling like a man wandering in the winter in heavy snow. It's hard to see the shape of snowflakes or to retain them. Even if the snow falls on your face, it never comes clearly into your sight.



Yang Fudong, *Jiaer's Livestock*, 2002. 10 Channel video installation; 2 synchronized DVDs, 2 projections, black and white, colour, sound, 2 display cases, 2 suitcases, 8 looping DVDs, 8 monitors.

YH: In your video Jiaer's Livestock (2002, unfinished), a murder occurs on a mountain. Afterwards, the clothes are removed from the dead body. Small video monitors in acrylic cases are placed on the ground. Four strange men in Chinese uniforms perform movements evoking dance, violence and death. What do violence and death mean in your works?

YFD: Sometimes violence and death are the places life comes from; they fill life with more hope.

YH: What is the difference between video installations and films as means of expression for you?

YFD: Every mode of artistic expression comes to the same conclusion. They are like nets cast into the deep blue sea, waiting for the moment when the fish come in.

YH: Which film directors or video artists have been most influential for you? What is your favorite film or video work? Do you ever work in — or with — the Chinese film industry?

YFD: What influenced me most are the films I saw during my youth. Even though I may not have seen them in their entirety, and sometimes saw only several broken images, I somehow know they are the best movies I have ever seen. I think everybody has these movies. It doesn't matter which movies they were, whether or not I can remember the directors' names. Fellini's movies also moved me. During my school days, I had little access to original films or artistic video works. But I could read about them, and so I had already formed imaginary movies in my mind, though I saw the real ones years later.

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Yang Fudong, *Mante and Daihao*, 2004.
33 mm film installation, music by Miya Dudu, 12 min.

YH: Flutter Flutter - Jasmine Jasmine (2002) and Liu Lan (2003) each depict a lyrical love story between a man and a woman. The former, which takes place on top of an urban building, addresses the sensitivities and insecurities of the couple. The latter is a stereotypical, sentimental story of an urban man visiting a classical beauty in the country. Do these two stories reflect your ideas about love, or is love a vehicle here for making a comparison between the past and the present?

YFD: The former has a kind of tacit feeling while the latter is more like an encounter. In reality, we are not able to control anything; even if it is put at our service. Sometimes it is like walking on the road — where you want to go is on the east side of the road, but your feet unwittingly lead you to its west side.



Yang Fudong, *Flutter, Flutter...Jasmine, Jasmine*, 2002. 3 part projection; 17min. 42 sec.

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YH: Can you tell me about the thinking behind Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest Parts 1 and 2, which are based on the ancient Chinese story of the 'seven wise men in the bamboo forest.'

YFD: Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest is one of my biggest projects. It consists of five parts. Part One features seven young people against a backdrop of mountains and rivers. The scene is a familiar one that appears on postcards or in the introductions of books, by which I mean that there is always hope in the beginning. Part Two has to do with the city, implying a sheltered life in prosperous surroundings. Confronting the city, you find that the place you really know is a certain corner hidden in it — your home — and you only recognize the various paths that lead to your home.

YH: You belong to the new generation of Chinese contemporary artists, one that comes after that of Cai Guo-Qiang. How do you see your generation's specific character in relation to history, society and Western contemporary art?

YFD: To be frank, I don't think of it as something so big or profound. I know that there is a group of young people in China who endeavor to pursue what they prefer or realize their dreams. I like to think of myself as one of them.

YH: Tell us about the pieces you are currently working on.

YFD: I just finished shooting a video installation titled Waiting for the snake to wake up. It is an eight-to-ten-screen video projection showing the last days of a soldier who has run away alone. This April and May, I will continue shooting Part Three of Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest, which depicts the characters' experiences of coming to the countryside with beautiful landscapes. Here they begin a kind of life to which they don't belong.



Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, part V, 2007, 35 mm, black-and-white film transferred to DVD. Total running time: 91 min.