

An Interview with

Tuo Wang



Tuo Wang's mythopoeic research investigates and deconstructs contemporary identity, merging together elements from cinema and video art. His refined language rich of references to the classical age as well as to the black and white photography of the 60s

reveals a strong effort to destabilize visual clichés. We have selected for this year's VideoBiennale his work *Vanitas – A Study for Human Opera*, featuring William Corbett, Laura Marris, Mike Hickey, Laura Sichler and Samuel Altekruise. Tuo, could you introduce our readers to this video?

This project is based on two European fictions from the 19th century that I read many years ago, the realist novel *Effi Briest* by Theodore Fontane and the naturalist novel *Thérèse Raquin* by Émile Zola. I transformed the narratives by placing them in a contemporary context. These two novels left a very deep impression on me for many reasons, mainly because of the parallel structures that diverted into equally morbid but different endings. They share a similar plot: an unhappy marriage, an affair, and a subsequent murder. I believe that the stories part ways because they belong to two different movements in literature history – realism and naturalism. These distinct world views within the literary movements are reflected in the characters' motivations and different endings.

The project is mostly comprised of three short films, in which different groups of performers act out the same plot. Each video begins with a man and a woman presenting their monologues in a stream of consciousness about their unhappy union and adultery. However, the process of it is rather like an interview or reality show. These performers are no actors but real people. I did interview with every one of them separately with fifty or so carefully predesigned questions based on those two literatures. By answering those questions with details of their personal emotional experiences, intimate relationships, imaginations, as well as traumas, the performers meanwhile were led to narrate the plot of the respective novels. What the man narrates is based on the story of *Effi Briest*, while the woman's tale is from *Thérèse Raquin*. The narratives are interspersed with an interview of William Corbett, an English professor, discussing realism and naturalism in 19th century fiction, using the two aforementioned novels as examples.

I want to set up a connection between the present human condition and the existing cultural archive, specifically classical literature in this case, to make a new visual archive with

contemporary occurrences – details of lived experience. This project also attempts to reveal a relationship between literature and reality through their shared dramatic, often humorous and absurd moments. In the latter progress of this project, I've also made several series of works including a sequence of videos of performances, as well as paintings, photographs, texts, and objects, in order to add another layer to the narrative.



Vanitas - Real and Natural, video still

Could you tell us the way you use performers in this project? How did you develop your film style?

Performance is a very important feature of my practice. Even my painting is an expansion of my performance, and the images that are produced should be considered within that context. But when we look at the history of performance art, the majority of those artists use their body, or others', as a medium, utilizing an paranoid methodology to explore the boundary of body. It all seems so safe. My interest in the body is when it represents a unique and private

set of experiences instead of a physical existence. I'm not as interested in pushing the body to its limits, nor presenting a set of unadulterated experience as whole. For me, performance should be more than a figurative portrait; a human body is a set of experiences, acting as material in the same way as colors on the palette are waiting to be resolve and reformed.



Vanitas - Real and Natural, video still

In *Vanitas*, I require performers to utilize their own experience as a resource in their acting, while also working within my framework. After acquiring enough materials, I manipulate each performer's experience and put them in dialogue. The performers are making use of their real (and imaginative) emotional experience, intimate memories and trauma to fill the plot structure of the two novels. When William Corbett, the professor, is talking about realism and naturalism, he does not know that his words would produce a critical connection with other performers; he is candidly answering my questions about the literary movements, *Effi Briest* and *Therese Raquin*. As a result, all the participants are telling fictions filled with their realities, provocatively balancing between performance and documentary.

We would like to explore the performative nature of your video: in particular in *Vanitas*, we see the *influence of contemporary theatre*, for example Romeo Castellucci's latest works.

Romeo's practice and theory do influence me quite a bit. He employs performers' unique experiences in a physical way. For instance, in Romeo's play, you can see types of performers that subvert expectations: very aged, disabled, and abnormal bodies. The unexpected actors anti-perform. They bring their physical uniqueness to the stage and let it be their only language. The visual truthfulness and cruelty force the audience to realize the absurdity of performance itself. When I am working with my performers, I want truthfulness and cruelty in their performance as well. Focusing on the physical appearance of the performers, of course, is visually fascinating. Similarly, focusing on psychological states, using real memories to construct a play, also engages questions of performance.

The first time we have watched your works, we have been really impressed by the number of artistic techniques you use. Could you introduce our readers to the multidisciplinary aspect of your art process?

I prefer to build layers to create different levels of reading. Visually, my work is restrained. My videos often function as a trace of narrative, and are surrounded by other media. For instance in *Vanitas*, based on Laurent from *Therese Raquin*, there was a character came out the mouth of the actress – a conceptual artist named Joseph. As a friend of the husband and the lover of the wife, he functions as a thread between the two stories. However, Joseph never appears in the films. I believe the physical absence of Joseph deserves to be present in another way. I had a realization: I, too, as a conceptual artist behind this project, had been physically absent throughout the process. The fictional artist and his creator are in the same situation. We've never shown up.

I've said that it is important for the performers to use their experience, a truthfulness of being, within an established framework, to create a circumstance where lived experience and

structure of archive simultaneously exist and interact. This methodology is fundamental to the project. Therefore, I see there's a reason to place my own experience as a conceptual artist into the structure of identity of Joseph. I imagine and invent a philosophy of his artistic practice, and then examine Joseph's perspective to make a response in art. The result is a series of multidisciplinary work including painting, photography, sculpture and text, on behalf of Joseph. They look like mine and at the same time they're not. So to get back to the topic of my own multidisciplinary practice, I use different media as a means to complete the performance.



Vanitas - Real and Natural, installation view

Your standpoint as a Chinese transplant has a specific role in your artistic research focusing on alienation of cultures: how has your history influenced the way you produce art?

Many people think that as an immigrant artist, the best resource is one's native experience. In the United States, these novel experiences are part of a significant strategy. I have to admit that identity politics is something inevitable in the process of making art or viewing it. And

identity politics are everywhere. A Chinese identity doesn't offer me anything special, possibly because I do not place any importance on its novel qualities. It is still impossible to escape readings about your work that focus on identity. A friend of mine asked me why a person born and raised in China would pick up these subject matters that couldn't be more western, as material to make art. That's when I realized that maybe identity is something you'd never need to do anything about it but you'd been always engaging in it.



Vanitas - Real and Natural, installation view

We have previously quoted Castellucci's theatre: besides him, could you tell us your biggest influences in art and how they have affected your work?

Brecht's philosophy influences my methodology. In his play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, he combined the drama of Chinese Yuan Dynasty *The Chalk Circle* and the story of Solomon in the Old Testament. These two stories share a similar plot, and the Western and Eastern world are familiar with their respective stories. By combining these two into one narrative, Brecht

alienated both of the original stories. In another play of his, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, he places a European story in China. The way he manipulates narrative is really innovative. He didn't create a new story, but he created new meaning by shifting the circumstance.

Thanks for sharing your time and thoughts, Tuo. What's next for you? Are there any film projects on the horizon?

My next project will be a series of web-based videos. It will look very different from my previous work. It won't be as complicated as *Vanitas* and the content will not be as heavy. I will host 12 episodes of a talk show called 'Immortal' where I speak candidly with established artists based in America. I will throw them embarrassing and antagonistic questions about their art, something irrelevant and inappropriate. I consider this surreal (hyperreal) talk show as an attempt to deconstruct the so-called identity of 'contemporary artist.'