

RACING GRAVELS

KAN XUAN

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Kan Xuan, a video artist, splits her time between Beijing and Amsterdam. Departing from her personal experience, Kan aims to unveil the complex relations between objective reality and subjective emotion. She has gone from exploring identity politics in the dynamics of mainstream ideology and social custom, in such early works as *Kan Xuan! Ai!* (1999), to interrogating the objecthood of commodities in the global economy and the consumer culture in which they circulate, to investigating and revisiting the vanishing ruins of ancient settlements time and again in the recent work *Kū Lüè Er* (2016). Precise, empathic, witty and biting, Kan's singular visual lexicon merges playful subtlety with metaphorical profundity.

This exhibition assembles a series of new pieces informed by Kan's parallel career as a commercial director who has worked with automobile manufacturers, internet companies and information technology businesses from China and beyond for nearly two decades. Naturally, such continual exposure to brands and technologies has imbued her with related interests, urging her to explore the rites of commerce, technological ethic, and economic policy behind these commercial enterprises. Rejecting metanarratives, Kan opts to examine the most mundane and seemingly trivial moments from a deeply personal perspective. To Kan, her work is devoid of ostentatious, assertive critique, but nonetheless attempts to expose, without mercy, the devils in the details of our consumer society, alienated into spectacle.

In Guy Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle, individuality is hijacked by a whirlpool of extrinsic needs and visual images through the varied channels of advertisement, entertainment, news and technology, leaving us trapped with no escape. The curse Debord describes still plagues our world today, of course, and has metastasized due to the increasing saturation of technology. Digital windows and interfaces are constantly awash with an endless tide of images, enabling commercial information to force its way into every facet of life. Kan clearly does not intend to be an accomplice to this mode of image production; she remains alert, with an artist's intuition and acuity, to the violence and absurdity therein. In 2014, she shot a documentary about the Maserati China-Italy Centennial Rally for the renowned Italian luxury

Times

Art Center

Berlin

vehicle manufacturer. Six cars set out from Beijing to traverse Eurasia, finally reaching Modena, Italy, after 37 days. In *Racing Gravels* (2018), Kan reedits night-time footage of the cars passing through Chita-Ulan-Ude, a region of Siberia, to expose the difficulty of handling these luxury vehicles on sandy, gravel-strewn roads. Meanwhile, *Imaginary Borders of Ritual* (2018) attempts to nullify the commercial spectacle through abstraction: once the stylistic and ornamental details of various products, meant to seduce customers, have been removed, cars—now reduced to three-dimensional blocks—roam invisible roads, a further distillation and emphasis of collective movement. A similar sense of ritual abounds in *Walking, Walking* (2018). Leading a row of its kin, a cucumber loudly protests the ordinary home-cooked dish, smashed cucumber salad.

“We Recycle Long Hair~Used Phones~Used Phones to Swap for Kitchen Knives Scissors Pots...” is a spam text shown on the screen of a used Motorola V70 (Kan shot the print advertisement for the model back in 2001). Extracting the text from a punchy slogan used for peddling, then converting it into an image, *V70* (2018) can be read as a compressed history of advertisement in the age of technological revolution. Exchange is the process through which things become commodities; one can already discern this concern with commodification in Kan’s early work. In the four-channel video installation *Island* (2007-2008), several coins—worth two RMB, one Euro, one pound and one US dollar, respectively—each occupy a screen, together with an item of the same worth found in a dime store of the respective country. The juxtaposition invites a contrasting association with the places where commodities are manufactured—China, in every case—as well as with the global trade network in which they circulate. Meanwhile, in *Jumping Taste* (2010-2018), Kan considers commercial symbols as exotic cultural exports; as the advent of a digital economy has liberated commodities from the confines of objecthood, the values and lifestyles proposed in early 2000s’ commercials and business campaigns have become a reality for the majority (*Millennium Technology* and *Turning Over a New Leaf in My Life*, both from 2018). In many cities across China, ¥2 discount stores have become part of history, internet shopping has become the primary mode of spending, tangible currency has been replaced by QR codes...

The transformations brought on by technology are not always positive. In a series of 2D animation videos, the artist associates a range of professional jargon with her observations of personal life: “data spreading,” which refers to the overwhelming amount of data produced by multiple operating systems, and problems of “management in the Age of Big Data”; “99.999%,” the most common approval ratio for industrial production, and the movements in a daily health check routine for women; the widespread implementation of facial recognition technologies and facial massage, and more. The apparent disconnect between the terms and their accompanying actions is a deliberate tactic; “here, I draw a link between each of these terminologies with a real

Times

Art Center

Berlin

physical movement, because the gap between reality and uncertainty is, to me, fascinating. Human figures are relatively abstract, unlike physical movements, which are so real.”¹The artist performs her interpretation of these technical vocabularies, then converts her movements into perky animations. Kan calls this “the cute effect”: we are always seduced by the appearance of entertaining effects, while overlooking the dangers hidden therein.

Kan Xuan’s work has an irresistible charm, a singular style at once composed and precise, straightforward and humorous. Her frequent use of personal experience allows her work to evoke powerful emotional responses from audiences. At the same time, it raises alarming questions: who exactly are we in all this? Are we the headless cucumbers shuffling and roaring in a queue, or the metal washers spinning endlessly on an industrial screw-rod (*New Middle Class*, 2018)? Can the *détournement* of quotidian life still suffice as an effective, critical tool? Through her unique artistic language, Kan Xuan articulates vivid situations filled with contradictions: a metaphor for China, for the entire world, for us who are living in the society of the spectacle amidst rapid commodification and technological acceleration, heading towards an inexplicable end, like automobiles racing through gravel at night. The essence of life lies, perhaps, precisely in this enmeshment of absurdity and reality, speed and obstacle, joy and helplessness, disappointment and hope.

(A range of works on view are new commissions for "Walk Strangely, Stay Strangely—Sora Kim vs. Kan Xuan: A Double One Woman Show," presented at the Guangdong Times Museum, from December 15th, 2018, to February 1st, 2019.)