

The Art of (No) Orders

Yi Dai's new works for her exhibition, *Discarded... during my 20s* urge us to think about order. Order found within our relationships to the intrinsic order in structures around us, and the order in which our lives are governed by. Speaking to Yi Dai in her London studio about this exhibition, I was first struck by the bold, explorative nature in her practice. At some point during the extensive conversation, she mentioned *Kontakthof*, Pina Bausch's seminal work conceived in 1978. Its repetitive elements, whether set to specific segments of music, or simply recognisable mundane gestures, are all woven together in the choreography to compose new, nuanced meanings. Among many of the far-reaching legacies of Tanztheater Wuppertal is how disparate art forms can approach universal themes of vulnerability, in a way that invokes infinite personal familiarities.

As we move to talk about Dai's past works, I note that her projects differ widely in their materials and subjects, yet share a consistent poetic exploration of them. Visceral works in the show, constructed from discarded bodily materials such as nails, hair, and menstrual blood, aim to interrogate, rather than perpetuate, the traditional hierarchy of our body parts. By making those neglected or anonymous body patterns the protagonist of the exhibition, the artist provokes us to think what parts of our bodily existence, other than the classical representation of female shapes, could deliver aesthetic values. Also in this show, she uses construction materials that shelter and surround our quotidian bodily life, such as concrete, steel and resin, to react in dynamic ways to the gallery space they occupy, forming an idiosyncratic contrast to the more intimate materials. Through this spatial play, the artist creates an introspective space, for us to formulate our own reordered meanings.

The act of ordering comes to us early on. Children are often encouraged to play with shapes, building blocks and LEGO® bricks. Studies at the Early Years Centre in Sydney showed that these activities help build strong muscles in the dexterity of children's hands which will contribute to finer motor skills, referring to, of course, writing. Language and its mastery are cemented from early on as a key outcome in a child's acquisition of knowledge. It is easy to recognise the crucial position that a firm grasp of a pencil and, in time, of one's language would play in our lives. Scaffolding for the future.

This preparation isn't simply for the written word. I was also struck by descriptions of musicians and composers sitting down to read scores, as if they were text. And, like text, the reader supposedly hears everything—the voice, the music—in their mind. A poetic thought, but also synaesthetically loaded. We are using words to describe the process of seeing and hearing. Another way to reorder what would otherwise be disparate artistic languages.

As adults, we abide by an unspoken orderliness. We observe a social language, accepted forms of behaviours and gestures, which are then used to formulate our relationships with one another. Language is not only something that everybody uses, but something that permeates all aspects of our lives. Using language, we discursively construct versions of our identities and the world around us, thereby shaping the reactions and experiences of our audiences. Some texts uplift us, while others undermine social conventions or sometimes even institutions. Although we exist within the accepted strata in this structure of language, we often neglect to think about or examine its component parts, its hierarchies and channels of exchange.

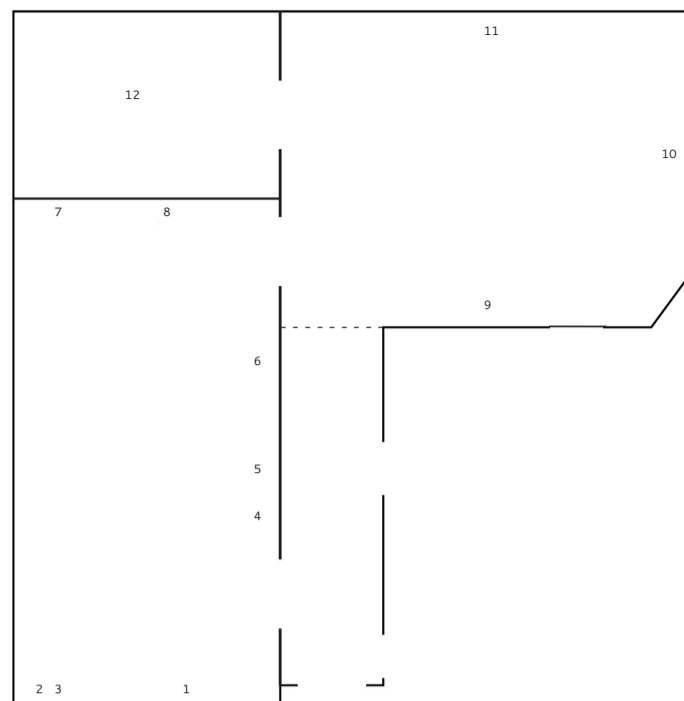
As a non-native English speaker, my own negotiations with language is a rather uncomfortable daily ritual. My knowledge of syntax, grammar, conjugations and idioms build as I use vocabulary to describe and communicate. A foreign body entering into an already codified, structured, and seemingly tidy existence. Some years later, I remember hearing for the first time, phrases like "teaching someone to suck an egg" and something about "brass monkeys being outside". My instinctual sense told me to imagine, as imagery, the possible meaning behind these combinations of words. Visual language to aid a textual one, existing in symbiosis, out of necessity. I began thinking about the tragedies and pleasures within entanglements of words and images; about how I find order in this foreign structure, and what artists might do to order or re-order these complexities.

For Yi Dai, in this exhibition, orderliness within and outside ourselves are being worked and re-worked in spectacular fashion. In *Uniforms*, gridded steel mesh panels hold sections of grey concrete, which provides an unusual frame for the artist's used bra wires embedded within. In another room, the sculptural installation *That distant afternoon when we went to harvest ice* uses iridescent mirrors to reflect light, breaking infinite arrays of light spectrums down to its rudimentary components. Our self-reflections are broken down, too, distorted, obscured into new combinations. In *Everything I discarded during my 20s*, the artist uses an accumulation of 9 years worth of her fingernails, strung together in stainless steel wire, approximately 30 metres long in total, meandering across the walls in the room and pinned in place with occasional fluorescent-coloured screws.

The materials in the exhibition consist of bodily *disjecta membra* we shed or discard in juxtaposition with construction materials, things that surround, contain, or reflect our bodies and images. Building blocks of us within building blocks around us. These unconfined, unidentified, and unnamed patterns, made with the artist's own human remains allows us to recodify, reinterpret and rebuild components of our own existence.

I'm reminded, with her works, that my own body imbues meaning, too. The building blocks or materials that my body exudes and the meanings they can conjure are also not neutral. They are gendered, biased, coloured; but most of all they exist and are housed within a specific context and a specific body. These building blocks belong to someone, they exist within a framework and are used for specific purposes. Even as I write these words now, I am aware that whatever meanings this text and Yi Dai's works might hold for you are yours to build and shape. Orders are left to us to discern and play with, ours to hold, work and re-work, negotiate and re-negotiate, like a never-ending game from childhood.

Ying Tan
January 2019



- 1 *Uniform No. 1*, concrete, acrylic paint, steel, 122 x 244 x 4 cm, 2018
- 2 *Nocturne No. 3.1*, hair, Japanese paper, nylon stockings, birch wood, acrylic medium, 70 x 46 x 4 cm, 2014
- 3 *Nocturne No. 3.3*, hair, Japanese paper, nylon stockings, birch wood, acrylic medium, 70 x 46 x 4 cm, 2014
- 4 *Nocturne No. 3.2*, hair, Japanese paper, nylon stockings, birch wood, acrylic medium, 70 x 46 x 4 cm, 2014
- 5 *Uniform No. 2*, concrete, acrylic paint, steel, 122 x 244 x 4 cm, 2018
- 6 *Nocturne No. 6*, hair, Japanese paper, nylon stockings, birch wood, acrylic medium, 70 x 46 x 4 cm, 2014
- 7 *Uniform No. 3*, concrete, acrylic paint, steel, 122 x 244 x 4 cm, 2018
- 8 *Uniform No. 4*, concrete, acrylic paint, steel, 122 x 244 x 4 cm, 2018
- 9 *That distant afternoon when we went to harvest ice*, acrylic, resin, polystyrene, aluminium, cement, 160 x 450 x 5 cm, 2018
- 10 *Like moss on a stone*, hair, plastic, 12 x 20 x 8 cm, 2019
- 11 *Anonymous*, resin, used menstruation pads, steel, 50 x 10 x 8 cm, 2019
- 12 *Everything I discarded during my 20s*, 9 years of fingernail clippings, stainless steel wire, acrylic, nails, dimensions variable, 2019

Yi Dai was born in 1989 in Changsha, Hunan, China and lives in London, UK. Her practice hinges on the balance between order and chaos.

Her works are the final form of highly-planned and regulated processes that create the conditions for material and chance to create their own images. Each project is made up of a language or code which, when deciphered, reveals stories told through the materials themselves.

After graduating from Kenyon College in the USA, Dai received the Mona Hatoum scholarship to attend Central Saint Martins College in London. Whilst studying there, she won the Kusama Creative Challenge for young artists organised by Tate Collectives and Louis Vuitton. She has also been selected for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries, and exhibited her works at the ICA, London and Liverpool World Museum.

Dai currently teaches art in London and exhibits her works internationally.

Ying Tan is currently a curator of Visual Arts at the British Council based in London, United Kingdom.

She was previously the curator at Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA) since 2013. She is a visiting lecturer for Christie's Education (UK) and a previous contributor to KALEIDOSCOPE Asia and *Randian*, among other publications. In 2016 she was also part of the curatorial faculty for Liverpool Biennial.

Yi Dai
Discarded... during my 20s
19 January – 23 February 2018

House of Egorn
Potsdamer Str 96
10785 Berlin, Germany
www.houseofegorn.com

