

## Situating The Artist: Yan Li and the Interstitial Urban

### I Yan Li and Contemporary Poetry

Yan Li's emergence as an artist, both of the word and image, came at a critical point for China's contemporary aesthetics. In 1968, recently shipped back to Beijing from an increasingly unstable Cultural Revolution-era Shanghai, the thirteen-year-old Yan Li was introduced by a friend to a hand-written copy of "Believing in the Future" 相信未来 by Guo Lusheng 郭路生.<sup>1</sup> The raw subjectivity of Guo's poem kindled a creative spark and, placed in a work unit shortly after graduation from middle school in 1970, the opportunity to develop Yan's own poetic expression presented itself. The opportunity came on the form of the company of many of China's soon-to-be major poets, including Mang Ke 芒克, Bei Dao 北岛, and Duo Duo 多多. This group, working under highly constrained and often dangerous conditions, took to informal gatherings where they shared their poetic works in progress, encouraging one another into ever greater levels of experimentation and departing ever further from ideologically sanctioned verse supplied by official channels. The style was soon to be named Obscure Poetry 朦胧诗, a derisive critical position designed to discredit what was clearly a powerful, long-lasting and anything but "obscure" artistic movement.<sup>2</sup> The group went on to create a literary magazine, Today 今天, which, despite being hand-written and crudely mimeographed, had widespread circulation and impact.

Yan Li, despite having been present at this seminal stage of a new aesthetic in contemporary China, is not widely included as a member of the Obscure poets. In Mang Ke's memoir of the period, he recalls the group's name

---

<sup>1</sup> 还给我, 249.

<sup>2</sup> The alternative rendering of "menglong" is "Misty", a term which does not well reflect the controversy which the poetry generated on its appearance, nor, for that matter, the ponderous nature of the style itself.

for Yan of the time: "Little Shanghai."<sup>3</sup> No doubt conjured in good humor, the epithet still serves to suggest that Yan was thought to come from outside the ranks. To understand this positionality, it is useful to consider the broader context of Chinese letters, particularly of the late twentieth century. The fact that we still refer to Obscure Poetry as a defining and even continuing moment in modern Chinese poetics, even if current work bears little resemblance to Obscure Poetry style, is attributable not only to its critical departure from a Maoist discourse which had a hegemonic grip until the 1970s, but also to the process of charting poetic literary history in stark and usually inflated contrast to precedents. Though identifying and denouncing aesthetic antecedents is perhaps the single defining characteristic of twentieth-century Chinese poetry (from Hu Shi to the present day), in the context of a rapidly changing contemporary China on social and economic levels, the "overthrow" of figures of the past is almost absurd when said figures are hardly established writers and artists themselves. If we take the middle 1980s as the high-point of this phenomenon, what followed Obscure Poetry is what proclaimed itself to be the "New Generation," or sometimes the "Third Generation." This group of writers is indeed distinguishable in terms of life experience, if not also in terms of style. The Obscure work was the first emergence of a politically unfettered (though, of course, politically charged) expression, one produced by a generation whose experience and, more importantly, education was determined by the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. The New Generation continued to create in this relatively open environment, but as the authors are not by and large the "sent down youth" of before, their fields of reference are even more open, creating a kind of generational gap in a very short time. What follows afterward, however, is a dizzying array of New that is much less generational in nature. The Third Generation group, for instance, is soon parsed, in a 1988 anthology, into the "They" poets, "Shanghai" poets, the "Petty" poets, "University Poets," and, as the

---

<sup>3</sup> 瞧！这些人，71.

epitome of the predicament, the "Fei-Fei" or "Not-Not" poets.<sup>4</sup> This grand exercise in one-upmanship has continued to the present day, with each new generation seeming to accelerate the transition between old and new until the task of actually distinguishing becomes impossible.<sup>5</sup>

Yan's tenuous status as member of the central group of poets can be seen as early manifestation of the same dynamic. In fact one of the founding members of the Today group, Yan was well positioned to take an authoritative position in this literary fracas. Yet, his particular aesthetic tendencies, playful, clever, boyant and even humerous, were out of key with the self-important -- albeit in fact important -- tone occasioned by the liberation of lyrical subjectivity from political pressures of the day. The historical Yan Li is clearly a member of the group who laid the framework for the erection of contemporary poetics. Yan's particular nature as an artist, however, edged him towards the margin of a poetic establishment, even if that estblishhment was entirely underground. Yan's remoteness from poetry establishment, it should be mentioned, has had also a great deal to do with his interest in painting, an interest which followed soon as after his early work as a poet.<sup>6</sup> By September of 1979, Yan Li was associated with the Stars art group, a band of experimental artists whose contribution to contemporary Chinese art perfectly parallels the ground-breaking development of the Obscure poets. After much wrangling with the authorities, in the yet uncommonly permissive political atmosphere of 1978-1979 Beijing, Stars artists were allowed to hold a public exhibition by hanging their work on an iron fence in a Beijing park across from National Art Gallery. The following year, Yan and others were able to hold another exhibition, this time inside the National Art Gallery itself, an occasion which brought 80,000 visitors to the door and was

---

<sup>4</sup> Other publications which bear witness to this phenomenon are the 后朦胧诗 (198?), and the 中间代诗 (2003). Spread over roughly two decades, these two publications demonstrate the volumizing tendencies of differential poetics in China.

<sup>5</sup> Today's encampments are increasingly conceived in terms of geography, though the "academic" versus "popular" dichotomy has also served to compartmentalize in recent years.

<sup>6</sup> By Yan's account, he was writing poetry by 1973 and painting by 1979. Wang Ping anthology.

quickly shut down by authorities.<sup>7</sup> In the years following, Yan continued, as much as possible, to exhibit his painting wherever he could, an effort which culminated in a one-man show -- the first ever of an avant-garde artist in China -- in gallery at the Shanghai People's Park in 1984.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after this exhibition, though, Yan decided to take advantage of an opportunity to travel to the United States, where he would stay more or less for fifteen years.

Once in New York City, Yan's work in poetry and painting continued apace. His appearances at The Poetry Project (St. Mark's Church), the Nuyorican Poets Cafe (with Allen Ginsberg), and at Columbia University in the middle to late 1980s attested to his successful integration in the local poetry establishment, while his one man shows at the Feng Gallery (1985), Vassar College (1986), Art Waves (1987) suggest the same for his painting career. At the same time, Yan was developing his own literary magazine, Yihang, whereby he was providing a venue for poets otherwise unable to publish in China. As Yihang grew into an online journal (2001), it has served, among other things, to cut across many of the boundaries, real and perceived, which separated the various camps of artists and writers in China. Yan's contribution with this journal, which is often remarked upon by writers in China today, was to provide a venue for writers who would likely have been squeezed out of the tight spaces established by emerging poets.<sup>9</sup> This contribution is emblematic of Yan's work as a whole. Yan, since his participation as a poet in Today, and as a painter in Stars, has found himself at a kind of periphery of Chinese cultural production. As a poet who left China, Yan was placed outside of the literary encampments discussed above, and as a poet who paints, he is sometimes left out of poetry circles altogether.<sup>10</sup> Yan's well-organized presence online is itself indicative of his achievements, taking the initiative afforded by technology to occupy a kind of peripheral space which

---

<sup>7</sup> Wu Hong, Exhibiting, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Yan, Shihuaji 诗画集 65, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mo Mo, fellow poet, August, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished interart article.

nonetheless intersects in both written text and visual image with numerous centers (Taiwan, China, New York City) at once.

To accurately place Yan Li, then, we need to ground him first at the center of cultural transformation in mainland China. But the *location* of Yan, as I've mentioned, is up for grabs. His positionality is in-between states, genres and eras. If life experience is the operative determinative in establishing affiliations in poetry circles of the past two decades, Yan's numerous places of residence outside of China have placed in him a liminal setting. What characterizes this setting in all cases (New York, Hong Kong, Sidney), however, is its urban quality. It is with the studied reflection on a global urbanized experience that Yan Li returned to Shanghai in 2000. Liminality, particularly as it appears in a myriad commodity-based exchange of high density urban living, is arguably a definitive dimension of Yan's aesthetic. As an artist committed to acrylic material and simple, even cartoonish lines, Yan's visual statements are in a sense superficial (on the surface), quickly apprehended and consumed. His paintings also demonstrate a cerebral bent, images that appear to think out loud. Meanwhile, the sentiments of his poetic lines often whisk by in quips, flashing insight as they go and almost denying emotional force itself.<sup>11</sup> The images and poems are similarly "good to go;" consumable, portable, light.

## II.

Denis Mair observes in his introductory comment to a 2004 collection of Yan's painting and poetry that it is Yan's experience living in urban centers over the past twenty years that has generated his preoccupation with looking out of windows of large structures.<sup>12</sup> If so, Yan is also toying with the notion of the artificiality of the observer herself. Many of these images belong to a series the title for which Yan has borrowed from the political arena, labeling them a kind of

---

<sup>11</sup> A fact which can be observed in the many versions of Yan's poems. Online, for instance, one finds many of Yan's 30 and 40 line poems condensed to 2 and 3 line versions. According to the author, this makes them "easier to remember." Correspondence, January, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Shihua ji 3

"peaceful evolution." A poignant ambivalence is maintained in this formulation, a delicate balance of warm interiors of lush color which invite the human subject, and mechanized significance of the brick which repel. The images thus manage to reach at once towards the comforts which technology provide and to its potential destruction.

In the context of Yan's former paintings, Yan's balloons in the "Longing" series are human subjects freed from the confines of an urban setting, floating instead in a fully natural environment. Viewed from the perspective of Yan's title "longing" itself suggests a curious tension. The balloon subjects of the paintings are as fully ensconced in a longed for environment as one could hope. The alienation is maintained, however, in Yan's still consistent stylistic treatment of the material subject of his paintings. The woods, for instance, are not unlike the highrise buildings of a multitude of urban images (4, 5). In other words, no stylistic break whatsoever is involved in Yan's "Longing" series.

The conceptual dynamics of Yan's visual statements are highly consistent as he moves across from urban settings and subject to the natural, a consistency which mirrors the anthropomorphic quality to his poetic symbolism, but which also pinpoints the ways in which Yan's aesthetic layers human experience over nature in an at once differentiated and yet mutually implicating fashion. The irony of bricks boyant in mid air notwithstanding, the proximity and attitude of the images towards one another binds highly paradoxical implications together with certain force. In the third "Longing" image in particular, brick balloons which seem not unlike children out for a game of hide-and-seek in the woods are as natural as any rendered human could be. Similarly, though, the "Mother and Child" (5) from an earlier series captures well enough a kind of celebration of humanity on superficial, which is to say structured (brick-like), grounds; amidst satisfyingly arranged angles which recede in acute perspective there emerges a mother and her child, whose very bond is as much a feature of the built world as the buildings (and moon) which surrounds them. In this view, the "Longing"

series could well be, as its title suggests, a natural product of the human imagination and poesis, the principal builder.

### III. Polyhedral

Subtleties in Yan's attitude towards nature can be observed in the unlikely location of his Polyhedral Mirror (多面镜) poetry series. This work, which Yan began in 1989 and finished a decade later, is comprised of roughly five hundred short poems which resemble aphorism, were it not for their often defiantly circular signification, and even advertising slogan, were it not so difficult to discern quite what's for sale.<sup>13</sup> The clever turns of phrase which feature in much of Yan's poetry are here reduced in many cases to the mere turn itself, flashes of insight or reflections of the world as the author knows and sees it. Thus the titular image, that of a polyhedral (multi-sided) mirror, suggests the spinning ball of small mirrors one finds in a dancing establishment, providing miniature glimpses of all that revolves around us while at the same time giving off their own light.

On the surface, the collection contains almost anything but poetical reflections on nature. Sprinkled throughout these snapshots of poetic insight, however, are views of the natural world, from the perfectly succinct: "Dreams are the only forest that mankind cannot clearcut" (只有梦想是人类砍伐不尽的森林),<sup>14</sup> to the more involved:

Garbage creeps toward the city's outskirts  
With big gulps it pushes back the edge of grass  
The lyric, pastoral poems of our era  
Cannot help filling up with howls

垃圾不斷地往城外郊移動  
吞食著草地的地界

---

<sup>13</sup> References are to 多面鏡旋轉體 Duomianjing xuanzhuanti [Spinning Polyhedral Mirror] (Qinghai, 1999) The notion of "completion" is in this case somewhat misplaced: Yan continues to compose these short pieces and will likely publish another series when the time is right, interview with the poet, August, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> English translation by Denis Mair. Reference numbers are to his yet unpublished manuscript translation of 584 pieces, many composed after the publication of the Chinese version. Duomianjing, 37.

如今的抒情田園詩  
不得不充滿嚎叫<sup>15</sup>

The principal dynamic at work in the Polyhedral poems is, as elsewhere, an oppositional one, an ecological awareness of a shared space which cannot serve as host to humanity, its products, and nature at the same time. In some cases, as in the poem above, this leads to heightened concern for an impending crisis, the sense that the human-being is a potentially insupportable tax on the environment. Elsewhere, and more consistently, however, is Yan's habit of laying a natural world into the mold of human habit and behavior:

Angels of ecology,  
In order that Nature may get some rest  
How many human beds must we vacate?

环保的天使啊  
为了让大自然能得到真正的休息  
人类需要让出多少张床?<sup>16</sup>

In somewhat extreme cases of this orientation, one finds Yan's nature on a par with the built environment in terms of its oppositionality to the human condition. In other words, once built, the symbolic forests, birds, planets and mushrooms mesh with forest of skyscrapers and other material fixtures of our experience. The technologies which bear modern life render humans agents of destructive but also themselves threatened status

Part of the earth's surface contains deserts and oceans  
Part table tops and town squares  
Part airports and beds  
And the people are no more than specs of dust moving about them

地球的面积里有一部分是沙漠和海  
一部分是广场和桌面

---

<sup>15</sup> Duomianjing, 56.

<sup>16</sup> Duomianjing, 52

一部分是飞机场和床  
人类则是不能算作面积的移动的尘灰<sup>17</sup>

Such orientation makes certain reversals possible in Yan's work, reversals which lead in many directions at once or, as mentioned above, around in circles. In this sense, the Polyhedral series reads like a series of Japanese Koans, where the paradoxical predicaments, when accurately or adequately apprehended, become source of full (整体) experience.<sup>18</sup> The exercise in Yan's poems where nature and, to a degree, society are concerned, is less a matter of release from discursive thinking than release from moral judgment, from blindly valuing what is endangered for the fact of its being endangered. The focus, instead, is on a dynamic of exchange of value and meaning which we share, irrevocably and regardless of outcome, with the natural world:

The environment's conceptual art performance:  
A gallery full of living sheep  
Sporting name-brand sheepskin coats

环保的观念艺术作品  
展厅里展览着一群  
穿着名牌羊皮大衣的活羊<sup>19</sup>

This paradox of alienation from outside and inside is where Yan's revelation about nature and society reside.

### III. Images across the trajectory

three images entitled "Longing for Nature" which Yan produced in 2003. In each case the image depicts two balloons floating up in boldly drawn natural settings. The first, with multi-colored and highly angular falling leaves, is clearly autumn;

---

<sup>17</sup> Duomianjing, 86

<sup>18</sup> Nature being "whole". Correspondence with the author.

<sup>19</sup> Duomianjing, 59

the others are presumably winter (absence of leaves), or early spring (where the color green fills previously beige shapes of the landscape). The balloons are filled with rectangular lines suggesting that they are composed of bricks. This feature, when looking at Yan's paintings of the past half decade, is traceable through a variety of series, principally the "Window Series" (2001), and "Peaceful Evolution" (2003).<sup>20</sup> Observed across the space of these series, we can readily see a kind of brickification of the human agent in the built environment. The series of images provided below provides a lucid account of the evolution of the structured environment, from a frame for human experience and memory, into the figure of the human form itself ("Bricklike Urban Personality" --Image 4).

Yan Li images:

- |                                  |                                      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Memory Outlives Reality, 2002 | 2. Pulse of the City Wall, 2002      |
| 3. Modern Urban Loneliness, 2002 | 4. Bricklike Urban Personality, 2002 |
| 5. Mother and Child, 2002        | 6-8 Longing for Nature I-III, 2003   |

## V. Synthesis: the dynamics of exchange

The discernable distance between us and the natural world one finds in Yan's work, a distance suggested both in the urban-perspective dimension of the symbols themselves and in the ways in which natural symbols reflect principally back upon human predicaments, is erased if we take humanity to be its own kind of natural environment, one which abides by laws most readily discernable in nature. The effect of Yan's approach to natural processes is to naturalize the very elements of contemporary human culture which we consider most artificial and destructive. This, it would seem, is consciously a part of Yan's program, as

---

<sup>20</sup> [Shihua ji](#).

he discusses in his author's preface to the above-cited collection poems and paintings:

As we plan and develop our shared urban spaces we must at the same time learn to clearly express our individual humanity, if enough people can do this we will achieve a more enduring vision which incorporates the conditions of our natural environment with technology and shields us from the negative side effects of technology.<sup>21</sup>

The goal, then, is to incorporate rather than preserve or protect nature. The prevailing Nature of Yan's work needs no protection, itself the indomitable dynamic of desire and consumption which is all encompassing. The location where we are most connected to natural processes is the one which most effectively degrades or consumes nature as we know it. A portrait appears in "Patent on Fortune" 幸运的专利 (avant-garde, 11):

Humanity is very fortunate!  
The sun is so perfectly far from the earth  
Like the balance of sky and ground, vagina and penis  
Humanity can't help but be fortunate  
After sucking flat the breast of the earth  
We now enjoy the sweet nectars of technology  
Video games transform a thousand years of ethics  
In games, the strong prey upon the weak to the amusement of young and old  
The news of humanity, how very fortunate!  
Full page advertisements covered with name brand skirts  
The pop songs of humanity, how very fortunate!  
From just the few hit tunes you hold in your tiny hand  
Can ignite an inferno of a billion in CD sales  
And also that so magnificent dust raising stock market  
The jockeys of humanity, how very fortunate are they  
Each erection can buy innumerable climaxes  
The evolution of humanity, how very fortunate!  
Cloning changed the supply-demand system of sperm and ovaries  
Humanity comes and goes  
Busy picking up goods from inside desire

---

<sup>21</sup> Shihuaji, 3.

Absolutely never again setting up a warehouse for the misleading  
countenance

The fortune of humanity belongs to humanity!  
Humanity can, after making a huge mistake  
Apply for a patent on fortune

幸运的专利

人类真幸运！太阳离地球不远不近  
像阴道与阳具的天地配合  
人类不得不幸运  
在吸扁了地球的乳房后  
如今享受着科技的酥胸  
电子游戏转化了千年的良心事业  
弱肉强食是软件内老少咸宜的娱乐  
人类的新闻多么幸运！  
整版整版的广告围绕在名牌的群下  
人类的流行曲是多么幸运！  
仅仅几首握着你小手的专集  
就能点燃的骑手多么幸运  
数字的勃起能买来多少高潮  
人类的进化是多么幸运！  
克隆改变了精子与卵巢的供求关系  
人类进进出出地  
忙于从欲望里面直接提货  
绝不再设一个仓库来留给虚伪的秋波

人类的幸运属于人类的！  
人类能在闯下大祸之后  
申请幸运的专利

From such a poem we see the ways in which incorporation starts with recognition that the human will finds a way of asserting itself, naturally. In Yan's work this assertion occurs even against the odds of rapidly disappearing resources on the natural level and also in defiance of the usually unintended outcomes of humanity's own unwise decisions.<sup>22</sup> We are our own nature and our task is to understand just that. In taking what is biologically essential to continuation of the species to be simulacra of pop music and stock market exchange, Yan puts humans in their place, and that place both shares endangerment with other species and claims a not fully enviable highground-- the last man standing when all else is lost. Thus, Yan maneuvers between more dire predictions:

Pain is mankind's eternal fuel  
And when petroleum dries up  
Pain as energy source will keep our lives burning<sup>23</sup>

And more celebratory, as in "Sun in the Morning Market":

You see yourself carrying a bag of food  
in the morning market

a bag of hawker's cries,  
a bag of  
fats, proteins and vitamins  
all at bargain prices.

A bag  
filled with weight  
of life.

For a long long time  
I continue standing at the intersection,  
tasting of this life of mine.

---

<sup>22</sup> In a 2001 lecture delivered in Iowa, Yan Li advocates an adjustment to the patent system. For each new invention, no matter how great its benefits, a corresponding invention to undo its partner should be required of the applicant.

<sup>23</sup> #153

Routine is natural.  
The sun carries a bag of its own light.<sup>24</sup>

早市的太阳  
看着自己在早市上拎着一袋食品  
一袋  
各种个样的叫卖声  
一袋  
经过精打细算的脂肪蛋白质以及维生素  
一袋  
生活的重量

很久很久地  
我继续站在路品味自己的生命  
日常是多么自然  
太阳拎着一袋自己的阳光<sup>25</sup>

In the first case, Yan is characteristically connecting oil, which humans blithely draw from the natural environment at what would increasingly seem their peril, to human sentiment. As with birds and mushrooms, which served as mirrors to reflect upon ourselves more completely, oil is little more than an occasion to observe the kinetic or psychologically motivating potential of pain. In the second case, Yan the poet stands on a street corner, surrounded by urban experience, but breaking down the contents of such experience into financial exchange (bargain price) and biological processes.<sup>26</sup> We can easily imagine a Yan Li painting from this poetic image, bricks in hand, in the face of the sun and, though certainly difficult to render, in the light contained in a bag the sun carries. The

---

<sup>24</sup> Translation by Leonard Schwartz and Zhang Er.

<sup>25</sup> (1976-2003, np).

<sup>26</sup> The poem was composed on the occasion of the birth of Yan first child. His preoccupation with nourishment and life then uncommonly acute.

bricks are that from which our bodies and economies, cities and solar system are built.

The symbolized natural scheme which Yan draws most readily into his poems and paintings is that part of the natural environment observable from the urban vantage point. We hear hawker's cries. We buy the groceries. We daydream. The poeticized form of this experience moves seamlessly from natural realm to human because in a sense it never leaves the human, a realm which even at its most artificial is bound to the same laws of exchange which we learn about from nature. On the level of complete abstraction, the same dynamics of exchange are operative, as in Yan's "Song of Darkness" 黑暗之歌

I've seen  
I've seen the darkness  
I've seen darkness darkening still  
15 watts  
30 watts  
40 watts  
100 watts  
I've seen the self confidence of darkness

I've seen  
I've seen the strength of darkness  
What we see in darkness is all called dark  
I've seen the mirror  
And finally seen my independent self  
Who serves no one

I've seen  
I've seen sound  
Whether or not there is light  
Sound  
Can retain its speed  
Just as I see the own (reciter's) voice  
Moving toward your ears

I see power  
The power of light and darkness  
I see the giant marketplace  
That this power creates  
If not for the darkness

Who would buy the light bulbs?  
Who would buy the electricity?  
And what about me?  
Who would buy me?

我看见了  
我看见了黑暗  
我看见了黑还在继续暗下去  
负 15 瓦  
负 30 瓦  
负 40 瓦  
负 100 瓦  
我看见了黑暗对自己的信心

我看见了  
我看见了黑暗的强大  
在黑暗里见到的都叫黑暗  
我见到了镜子  
终于见到了镜子不为谁服务的  
独立的自我

我还看见了  
还看见了声音  
无论有没有光线  
声音  
都能保持它一贯的速度  
就像现在我看见了我 (朗诵者) 的声音  
向着你们的耳朵前进

我看见了力量

黑暗与光明团结起来的力量  
我看见这个力量  
所创造的巨大的市场  
如果没有黑暗  
灯泡  
卖给谁  
电  
卖给谁  
还有我  
卖给谁

The end result of such dynamics is quite open in Yan's work. There could be dire consequences, or we could find ways to sustain. Meanwhile and regardless, the voice of the poet will monitor even minute fluxuations:

Humanity is capable of touching itself deeply  
Humanity cannot do any worse than humanity  
Humanity is just a tool for manufacturing science  
Humanity can't help making sounds  
As it walks on past humanity

人類有打動自己的能力  
人類不可能做得比人類更壞  
人類是製造科學的工具而已  
人類必須發出一些聲音地  
從人類的身旁走過去<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

I leave open the issue of whether or not Yan's view of nature might return us to philosophies of natural balance voluminosly present in Chinese classical

---

<sup>27</sup> Duomianjing

tradition. The disinterested view of biological processes, wherein systems move from invasive to thriving to rare to extinct, is one without values (endangered and thus protected), and a view arguably much indebted to philosophical Daoism. Yan in this sense is not unlike the practitioner of Chinese medicine, reading the pulse of a plastic bottle and proclaiming--"in perfect health!" This position does not deemphasize the concern expressed in Yan's work for the ill-advised choices humans make for themselves and their world. I endeavor to point out that Yan is not a poet of action in the activist sense, but an activist observer. His paintings and poetry suggest problematics which stem from choices we humans seem to have irrevocably made. Such a position, where the natural environment is concerned, suggests an acquiescence to the destructive impact humans have on the planet. At the same time, however, Yan seems to be a step ahead of this calamity. As he looks for the ways in which the destruction itself is part and parcel of "nature" writ large, Yan, with a deceptively superficial and occasionally playful wit, dances around the prospects of heading disaster off at the pass, finding points of collusion between wanton and insatiable desire of a fundamentally destructive species and sequences and mechanisms of exchange present and even thriving in the natural environment. Where these succeed, successful incorporation of our goals, however poorly conceived, and natural systems we hold dear will be achieved. Where these fail, Yan will be there to document the changes in pen and acrylic ink.