

no rent interview
yan jun (november 2023)

Questions from Jason:

q: Can you start by giving us an overview of your artistic journey and how you became involved in the Avant-Garde art scene in China? How about internationally?

a: i started from writing poems when i was 13 years old. three years later it became serious when i heard the poet haizi committed suicide. modern and post-modern poetry were part of the so-called avant-garde culture in china back then. that was a somehow revolutionary time for me.

later in 1996 i started to write music reviews without any knowledge of notations. it's mainly about underground rock. in my city there was a small mixed circle of painters, performance artists and rockers. i started to live in a rocker's life and also organize gigs a few years before this critic journey.

in 2003 i started making my own music from field recording. there was only a small bunch of experimental/avant-garde musicians in china and we all did a lot of organizing and publishing. everybody was a friend of everybody.

in general in china "the art scene" only means visual based or visual minded art. i somehow organized and performed as musician for some occasions when it was blooming in the early 2000s but only till recent days i'd say some real merging between visual, performance and music arts finally happen.

as an organizer i met many foreign artists and they helped my early gigs in their cities. then i traveled a lot everywhere like a nomad after a period of intensive organizing (2005-2009). during 2016-2017 i made the daad artist residency in berlin. this is important.

q: Can you share some insights into the cultural, historical, and contemporary influences that have shaped your artistic vision?

a: as a teenager i have read some surrealism text, alongside early chinese rock 'n' roll, zen stories, break dance and poorly printed avant-garde art images, and of course poems of those brave young poets. that means shock after shock. in addition some political shocks and adolescent emotion shocks as well. they were all burst far from average cultural environment. i think that made my understanding of life a different way. i believed that i can live in a higher quality life through creativity. i believed in art.

i'd admit that my basic mind is pretty chinese way. i take chinese herbal medicines mainly because i like to think that way. but i don't agree with those scholars who cut chinese traditions into a narrow high culture. my family have roots from bottom and also kept some buddhism belief. endless barren mountains, mad men and ghosts are always part of my tradition. then of course i swallow western/contemporary food as much as i could. recent years one of my interest topics is how the world turned between later 19th and early 20th century. modern is a crucial fact that formed today's human mind and its environment. everything includes traditions we understand is based on such a modern complexity.

and my hero since teen is lu xun (鲁迅), who created a blend and contradict style of modern writing/mind. btw he hates chinese herbal medicines.

recent years i spent more time on zombie/horror movies and black metal music than other interests. i wish i had more time. the most interesting aspect of zombie is that it's reduced

human being who lost its chance to come back. what important to us is not the human shape but the chance. and so do the other things and lives and arts.

q: Can you tell us about your early experiences and influences that initially drew you towards the arts? What sparked your interest in pursuing a career as an artist?

a: as mentioned above, the driving force was not clear but maybe to live in a free and creative life. i have never thought to be a professional artist though. after 4 years of working in a local newspaper i quit my job for good. i haven't try other ways of living my life. i have no time to live in other kinds of life which are maybe also good.

q: Are there pivotal phases or projects in your artistic development? Have travel experiences or cultural encounters left lasting impressions on your artistic vision?

a: during 2005 and 2009 i have organized about 300 concerts and festivals with a group of friends. it was also a kind of social experiment for myself. i regarded the end as a painful failure but my wife told me that i think so only because we have tried it and that's the most important fact. ok... it was a hot time ended by losing friends or even turning some to enemies. i think i'm still growing from it.

after that period i spent a lot of time to travel and tour alone overseas. it's hard and drifty but good for rethinking everything i once believed. it was a cold time that my music also turned cold and dry.

i learned different ways to observe chinese culture and reality while i was away from the land and the language.

my living room tour project was actually initiated because i couldn't find good speakers at venues in china (now it's much better though), compare to what i used in europe. i decided to play with any condition instead of a professional system. and those drifting days in beijing and overseas also given me chance to do stupid and wrong things. you are free to do anything if you have only 2 audience members.

q: Your work often blurs the boundaries between art and daily life. Could you elaborate on how you aim to integrate art into everyday experiences, and what role you believe art should play in society?

a: maybe because i have never got a professional training? i always feel pity for those perfect, isolated, purified maestro arts because they are great but people couldn't see that they are as great as the other things such as bad arts and a plastic bag. maybe cliché but allow me say this again: you don't see buddha anywhere if you don't see buddha in a piece of shit.

i believe the term art is not enough or is just temporary. but still i see it as the best way of life. everybody should live in a creative life. everybody should be able to live in an artistic way. it's not important if someone doing art or consuming art but it's important that a society should give people opportunity to develop their existence under a basic condition. art is now a small but vital help for us toward such a society. human are slaves of fear and linear time. it's fun to play with all these fears and desires and limits but art is eventually about beyond. and i

also believe that the term society is too narrow to let us see ourselves as a whole.

q: Your work combines different forms, such as music, poetry, and performance. How do you see these forms intersecting in your creative process, and what message or emotions do you aim to convey through this fusion?

a: actually my poetry is not combines with music and performance that much. i'm not in the field of sound poetry and action poetry. my reading often being performative, though. that's nature because i believe it's a performance anyway when you are on a stage. you can't say i'm here only for reading. no you are performing a figure and forming an image. you are playing a role of so-called yourself all the time but especially when you appear with an identity of poet or artist. we are performing ourselves all the time.

music was a whole thing with the performers' presence, the sound and bodies, the space and the wind, the invisible worlds... pure listening was once popular in the electronic music scene but i would say it's expensive to build a wall to protect a pure environment for it. you need powerful sound system and social system to defend the refugees of sound and the other existencers.

i'm doing art instead of sound art. or i'm doing music which only has been a pure sound/listening phenomenon since a very short time and it keeps the whole nature in my understanding.

when we use language for talking and writing we are not only deal with symbols but also sounds and the bodies. language is reacting to things and experiences. it's true that writing is a special job and music is another but i believe human potential is much more capable for both.

when i say forms i don't mean music, sculpture, poem etc. but the forms of a straight line, or a curve, or a vibration, or a solid hard piece... the form of the waves of the yellow river and mountains of the loess plateau where i grew up are as same as one long vibrating feedback noise drone.

q: Many of your performances and installations are known for their immersive and interactive nature. What are your goals for audience interaction?

a: i'm not particularly interesting to interact with audience. that's a side effect of connecting to the situation, the space and being improvised. i clearly don't like the democracy myth about interactive art and immersive art. all arts should be interactive and immersive and the trendy immersive art is a shameless plunder from those artists-technicians.

chinese water ink painting should be hold and unfold in hands.

q: Please explain the personal, in house performances you're known to perform. What are the intentions for those?

a: that's the living room tour project i have mentioned. when i started it 12 years ago i brought instruments and ideas to audiences' home. later i decided to not bring any. the only condition is that the place should be a real place that people live there. it's about the belief of music. it could happen at any place and in any form. and of course there are always drinks, food and

friends. the point is revealing the hidden level of an ordinary reality instead of bringing anything higher from above to the reality.

q: Collaboration seems to be a significant part of your artistic practice. Can you discuss some memorable collaborations you've been a part of, and some of the different ways you've structured collaboration?

a: maybe fen is the most important collaboration for me. all the members have talked the same story many times. in short, one day otomo yoshihide invited me to meet and play in marseilles with ryu hankil and yuen cheewai who i have never met before. i really learned a lot from them since then. and that friendship is important as well. this band started when i was so lost.

later in beijing i started to work with some musicians who are one generation younger than me. they are slow, quiet, non-muscle and passionate and open to unknown kind of music. we haven't stick closely together immediately but spent 10 years exchanging feelings, ideas and natures slowly. for example li qing (李青), li weisi (李维思), ake (阿科), zhu wenbo (朱文博), zhao cong (赵丛), yan yulong (闫玉龙)...

i have a project called linear duo. it's for two performers share same amount of time which divided by a chess timer. we will play in turn, in other words we never play at the same time. this is a way to refresh the safety and time perspective of improvisation.

basically collaboration should be based on spending time together. for tea or food or whatever but never too much time on practice a plan together. there are many ways of collaboration but this is our one.

q: How do you communicate your artistic vision and intent to collaborators, especially when working with a medium like feedback that may be unfamiliar to them?

a: as improvisers we always play with newly meet ones. it would be difficult if the other musicians run away with two hands on ears during my sound check. it's true some people are more sensitive on high pitches such as a 15khz noise. i can't explain to them. i smile. yes i'm a smiling person who is carrying strange habits. it's a strange world full of all kinds of people, no?

q: As an artist, you have also been involved in organizing events and platforms for experimental art. Can you tell us about some of these initiatives and their impact on the community in China?

a: if you mean visual background art context i'd say not so often. there was a time they invited us to perform or organize but no more once the so-called chinese contemporary art market cracked. that was based on an idea that contemporary art should work with contemporary music but later they realized that they actually prefer singer-song writers and djs.

now with young artists outside of mainstream we have no boundaries between music and performance art and other arts. since the miji concert series moved to my studio we take this as a platform for any stupid performance especially the ones you can't perform at other places.

i invite artist who has no music experience and i was invited to join performance art events. it's exciting. my feeling is that mostly musicians and noisers don't like performance art or boring conceptual art. but we are blurring the distinctions now. new faces from 16 years old to over 30 years meet on stages where no one cares if it's art or music or if it's good or bad. sometimes museums also provide such stages. i guess the impact is being free to do small things instead of being giants.

q: How do you see the role of Avant-Garde art in shaping contemporary Chinese art, and are there other artists you admire in this context?

a: still, if we don't use the term art as art in general but focus on visual based art, you will see the changing of terms from avant-garde art to contemporary art quite interesting. avant-garde art back then means underground but full of energy and passions. contemporary art is more or less a narrow idea about being professional and it's rather competitive than creative. of course this is a too simple description and there are always exceptions.

avant-garde is still alive here, with some visible establishments and invisible young outsiders. there is no more ministry of culture in this country. art is not popular at all. i feel strange if we only talk about a few thousands of artists' names. i guess avant-garde is about building a direct connection to the reality. it doesn't follow the modernism or anti-modernism minds or whatever driving us in a loop, such as in art history books. it changes a few people and their life vividly. this is more important than changing chinese art.

i would say ake (阿科) is one of the artists you can see strong spirit of avant-garde. pan chennong (潘晨农) is one of a group who are brewing low-form or less-form performance art nowadays. in the visual based art scene zhuang hui (庄辉), zhang peili (张培力), geng jianyi (耿建翌), liu chengrui (刘成瑞), zhang yunfeng (张云峰), yu ji (于吉), kan xuan (阚萱) and chu yun (储云) pop up from my mind at this moment. ok there are painters such as mao yan (毛焰), zhang hui (张慧) and qiu xiaofei (仇晓飞) as well, despite that people might say oil painting is over. and i really admire a water ink painter in lanzhou, du yuan (杜元). he is relatively traditional and out of time. he has a kind of quality that wordlessly being avant-garde.

q: Your use of pure feedback in your artistic practice is distinctive, especially considering that feedback is often associated with "brutality" or malice. My initial impression of your work was that it was incredibly rare in that you used pure, piercing and doubtless extreme feedback but with a total absence of malice. Can you share your thoughts on why you are drawn to this medium as a means of creative expression, and how you manage to imbue it with a non-violent intent?

a: i'm not good on playing instrument or computer. that means i'm not good on adding or bringing things to this world. feedback is something like field recording. it's there out of my control. it's a phenomenon instead of my order. in different set ups i could assume 30-60% of what will happen in the feedback system. i follow it more than i direct it. this is much more excited to me.

i really don't like to be busy on the stage. the more capable i have showed the more shame i

feel. in the best case i could just sit there and hear the feedback sound change with my breath and the wind.

i think noise is basically the new rock 'n' roll today. it's not possible to be that extreme or brutal as before i'm not sure what kind of brutality and malice you mentioned. i think mostly it's a kind of gesture or aesthetic movement. there are feedbacks in atrax morgue's music. they are often small and free but they are always killers among the constant pulses. alvin lucier's bird and person dying has brutal noisy sound but it's such a calm piece.

if you use guitar amps you have narrow frequencies and warm distortion. it's totally not bad but there are always different kind of brutality than most people imagine.

i like to have high pitches on high volume which sounds not that loud. if it's a group of high pitches its psychedelic aspect would be more aware than its drilling aspect but it's still drilling there. if there are more events of low frequencies at same time its sharpness will be more ignored. ears take it as a default environment. compares to violence i prefer strangeness so i would keep the distortion rawer rather than warmer and grainier and i don't use distortion pedal. i think it's less about developing it musically but more about keeping the idea strong and keeping the instinct wild. being violent (or peaceful) is not important compares to this aim.

q: Your work challenges the typical negative connotations associated with feedback, turning it into an artistic language. Could you discuss your intentions behind recontextualizing feedback in this way and how it contrasts with its conventional associations?

a: for me feedback or noise is not a way of expression. ok maybe when i play in the bands such as ghostmass and fen it's more expressive. but anyway it's more about an idea that i don't have a great or powerful or brutal self to be expressed. feedback is not an instrument or a tool of mine. i'm not another jimi hendrix. negative or positive that's how the maestros wants it. when i started with feedback i thought some of the sounds were terrible but i haven't improved them. i changed my attitude of trying to be the master or composer of sounds. no my personal plan is a less important role when music happens. i always think once the concept strong enough the rest would be all fine. for example i think bruce nauman's violin has the perfect sound. it's as perfect as bach... and actually sometimes my feedback could be really violent, such as straight chopping knives between 7k-9k hz, and i'd follow the situation.

q: In a world where technology and electronics often symbolize control and precision, your use of pure feedback introduces an element of unpredictability. How do you strike a balance between maintaining control over your art while also allowing for spontaneity and exploration?

a: the most perfect controlling is anyway a poor ambition compares to the nature. the nature of wind and garbage and people. but of course we are not talking about a meditation workshop here. we act actively with feedback. but the aim of actions is to find out the vital joints of things, click it and let it happen in its own way. this is the chance i have mentioned, in chines: 机. the dream of being a controller is originated from a hurt little boy.

controlling is about design and pre-determine things on a linear time line. the only thing definitely will happen on this line is death. it's self-contradicted as to control is to arrange

things for defeating the death but eventually fall into death's hand. technology is not a tool but a part of the nature. the fear of death makes people treat it as a tool.

q: Do you differentiate vocal and noise elements in your work?

a: my voice carries more humanity or culture colors as it's been less instrumentalized or neutralized. but i'm not a master of any kind. i do it as people in countryside or in remote ages do.

i have tried to reduce the colors in my vocal. now i'm fine with it. it's maybe too easy to say that i'd see my self as part of the objective elements. but it's true this is a worthy challenge about one's own body, personality, emotion, habit and so on. the only way to overstep is going on to observe myself while the i in present vividly. that's also part of the understanding i had in the album lanzhou. i'm trying to see electronic sound and voice on the same levels, both organic and mechanical (you will see there is the same 机 in both words' translation in chinese: 有机 and 机械. as they are both about a system or an installation of chance).

q: Feedback is a medium that can be jarring and disorienting, yet your approach invites listeners to engage with it on a deeper, thoughtful level. What emotions, responses, or dialog do you hope to elicit from your audience? What response do you see most often in your audience?

a: i always like to hear non-aesthetics reactions. such as being sleepy or sober. i feel so happy if people tell me that they feel lost. and happier if they enjoy being lost. i know what response most often happen from the audiences but i wouldn't tell you. that will be an influence for the next audiences and i'd avoid it.

q: Can you share an example of a particularly powerful or transformative moment you've witnessed in your audience's reaction? Or can you share about a really good show you've played?

a: there were many nice shows. even some failed experiments reveal transformative moments. once in cologne a leader of a big new music group invited me to join them. right before the concert i realized that he prepared a scores for each of us. i don' read score and my instrument is not possible to deal with notes. so i stood up and directed them.

q: As an artist who challenges conventional perceptions, how do you see the potential for your work to change or expand the way people think about technology, noise, and unconventional mediums in art? Is that a goal of yours?

a: it's not my goal. the first thing is to develop myself and enjoy the show/the work. there are those moments i share with audiences when we are somehow a whole. i don't know if that means changing or expanding. those moments exist and will never be erased from our lives.

As an established artist, what advice would you offer to emerging artists who are navigating their own artistic development and finding their unique voice in the art world? Do you feel a responsibility to be a positive influence for emerging artists, or do you create primarily for yourself?

i'd say do what you need instead of what you like. do whatever stupid but you want.
i don't take that responsibility. i prefer make myself stronger by devouring them.

q: I feel like you receive more than your fair share of criticism. How do you respond to it and how does it affect your creative process?

a: i feel painful. but what can i do? the solution is going more orange if people say you are too much orange. that means going orange is my nature and i'm not yet orange enough.

q: What projects or ideas are you currently working on, and what can we expect to see from you in the near future?

a: i'm spending a lot of time on listening to sleep recordings these days (sleeping.org or sleepingsorg.bandcamp.com).

in july ghostmass have recorded 3 albums plus 1 long track for a split and a short one for a compilation. we will release the albums on dying art, dusty balls and wv sorcerer. reading group will release my solo lp in later november. a duo with kai fagaschinski and a trio with sven-åke johansson will be released by ni-vu-ni-connu. another duo with eric wong on vintage vinyl. a cassette of voice solo on tatami registros.

from middle of october i will tour in us-argentina-uruguay-switzerland-france and i hope nobody will see me except my wife after this for a good while.

q: In a perfect world, what would you like your legacy to be?

a: it's meaningless to think about it if this is not a perfect world.

Questions from Syd:

q: Your noise is highly abstract and nonfigurative, yet I have always been impressed by the clarity with which you explain the concept of your albums to me. What role does abstraction play in your art? Do you abstract your concept, or does your concept emerge from abstraction, or do you think of it in totally different terms?

a: i haven't think it with abstract. for me this is more a visual art term. my music is not representation or recreation of something else. it's always itself. i hope it doesn't bring the listeners to another place than itself. for me this is very concrete. back to the visual mind, the term figurative sounds like a piece of art work as a copy of something else but actually it's a key to open that thing and letting us go through the appearance of that thing. to mimic animals or nature sounds by music was a lovely trick of little boys and that's all. in the old times people mimic animals for evoking potentials. the point is not about abstraction but transformation.

q: Breath, vocals, and the minimal, natural sounds of the human body are a key feature of some of your work. What was your relationship with your body and its sounds before you used it as an instrument? How has that relationship changed as you've integrated it into your art?

a: yes there was a time i was also into the so-called pure listening theory. especially i wanted to quit from my early style of performances which was very rock 'n' roll. i have tried to be cooler and therefore distinctly run with sound away from the rock hipsters and their vjs. but of course i found out that there is not only sound but also a performer's presence. and there is time, too. it's true that body worship is a poor myth of anti-modern. but dividing sound from the whole is then definitely a symptom of modern.

now i see my body as an interface (ok this is a different term than medium). it's not a tool of mine. i try to see this body as an interface between desire and language, potential and facts, freedom and society, etc. both sides are not me/myself. and this interface is only a temporary and ever-changing installation between the two sides. when i scream or breath i feel the very individual body of mine. but i also feel that i don't really own it. the more i listen to my voice recording or see my performance video, the more i see it from a lovely distance.

it's strange that i love this interface so much. i still love it while i feel strange.

q: What guides your sense of duration as it pertains to the length of a track, or a performance, or a moment within either?

a: of course a watch or mostly a smart phone. in the case of linear duo a chess timer. i need it to check with my inner clock. i always follow the stage rules according to timing. if it's strict i'd use it as a rule for playing game with the common time. otherwise i follow my own nature. normally i play short, despite there might be a lot of long minimal phases. i really don't like artists who stay on stage forever. masturbation in most cases. for the intended long events i enjoy the extremity of time discovering.

there are always different intensity and weight of time. there are always breaths and paces of

time. when we say 30 minutes each set it's only to respect the common sense. it's fun if we prove that the common time is doubtable.

q: As a video guy, I have to ask. How do you use video as a medium, in a documentarian sense and/or an artistic sense? What does it offer as a companion/component of your music, and what are its shortcomings?

a: in most cases i prefer not work with vj or video artist on stage. it's a kind of cheap and powerful magic to turn audiences into dummies. it's a conspiracy of beer companies.

yes video is a magic. vj softwares abused it as loopstation abused the magic of time in sound.

i do some video works. i upload my live documents as they are double layered art works. the difference is the later mostly are out of my control. there are many paid or not paid camera operators and we often just set a smart phone wherever it fits. then you see many different eyes and technical conditions join as parts of the work. we are not seeing the world through video. we are seeing a world full of eyes, videos, pre-videos and their reflections. for me this reveals again that my body and my performances are ultimately not true.

we work on magic with passions and understandings. the more powerful it is the more energy we spend. that's how you and i work together on those videos.

Questions from NRR Listening Party audience members:

q: What sort of poetry do you read; are there particular poets you read that influence your musical form? - Jason Loeb

a: not many. i read my friends hsia yu and che qianzi. i read some random poems from social media. mostly written by my friends. from time to time i read some classical poets such like w.h. auden, wallace stevens, ashbery and tranströmer because they are everywhere. i like to read some unpolished poems by unknown poets when i see them by chance. one example is meng ziwei (孟子为). compares to great poems, i always recall the feeling and fragments of poems i have read when i was 16-18 years old. the feeling that words and the papers and landscape and the air and the lights and everything are merged together.

lu xun's writing (but not poems) influenced my music for a while. when i perform feedback by moving a parabolic mic i change sound in a way he turns the meanings and rhymes.

q: How do you see the creative act as a tool? Are you used by the creative act or do you use it? Do the objects you use to create influence you? Are you also an object of your creative act? When you compose and perform, do you look inward or outward - Marie Rose

a: i think all tools deserve a moment to be as itself.

it's not possible to use an act and vice versa. at least for me it's not possible. i can only do it. to do means to be.

when i am objective enough i am then free to be an object of nobody. it's about some very rare moments but it's possible. even we are talking about to live in a world that people try to objectify everyone and everything. even i am a person who carries strong emotion and desire and personal gestures.

and therefore there is no in and out because i have to be when i do. we can't divide that.