

Dissociative Sociability and the Mirror Effect: On Xing Danwen's Socio-Optics



A mirror reflects as it flips, turning left to right, one to other. It is also a weird mirador, its own view from nowhere onto whatever, a mercurial portal that reflects more than it reveals to a single glance. This is how a stationary mirror pans when the eye, unfixated, passes before it. Stilled or in motion, one looks in the mirror to fix the “I,” or else to see—obliquely—elsewhere. In the first instance a mirror might ground its beholder in self-recognition, alone or among other beings, places, and things turned together in its sheen. It may (also) break this recollected self down as wanting or unrecognizable. (See the idiomatic American admonishment: “look at yourself in the mirror.”) Though Renaissance figures like Parmigianino famously parried with mirror optics, the troping of the mirror’s left-right reversal in paintings depicting scenes of self-portraiture didn’t enter into currency until circa 1860, at least in Western art.¹ Perhaps this is because the mirror, beyond being a mere site of subjective world-making—to finally cite the psychoanalytic account of Jacques Lacan—is also an object of acutely modern social dissociation, detaching the mirror-gazer from their interior sense of surround by exteriorizing them as objectively surrounded.

Xing Danwen, installation view of *Captive of Love*, 2017, Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

What was “modern” about the (re-)thematization of the mirror reversal in nineteenth-century European art was its specificity to shifts in the depictive confection of individuals and groups in the throes of urban and industrial capital. Contemporary conditions of globalization might find that mirror shattered, its imperatives operative everywhere and nowhere: newspapers chronicle alienated individuals and “precarious” communities even as technologies of personal imaging reach new heights and fugitive solidarities emerge unexpectedly. Both social and antisocial, what I will call “dissociative sociability” in the art of Xing Danwen mobilizes mirrors and the mirror effect to travesty by repetition the old modernist problems of representation (and photography) in order to propose a demotivated visuality, an eviscerated realism for the discontinuities of our long end of industrial modernity. These affects and effects are registered—especially in her later works of the last century and the present one—by an often mortuary palette and deadpan facture. A crackling coolness, as though the heatmap of a bodiless burial ground.

Xing Danwen, *I am in the Mountains*, 2017, coal coke and mixed media, 600 x 400 x 120 cm, installation view at Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.



The occasion for my reflection is Xing Danwen’s 2017 exhibition, *Captive of Love*, at the Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing, curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh and titled with reference to the Jean Genet book *Prisoner of Love*. Encompassing much of the Red Brick Art Museum’s riotous re-modernist pavilion (its design is after Carlo Scarpa), this essay—arriving as it is over a year after the closing of the exhibition (though a catalogue is forthcoming with Prestel publishers), will focus less on restaging descriptive facts of the intriguing presentation² and more on identifying how certain works included in it played with this curatorial framing, so unfolding the dissociative sociabilities that have variously manifested themselves in Xing Danwen’s practice. These works evince a remarkably consistent trajectory, one that has some bearing on an apparently similar affect-effect that has been recently commented on by the American critics Tony Hoagland and Lauren Berlant. Pushing earlier accounts of twentieth-century subjective abjection forward to the moment of global neoliberalism, Berlant has spoken of “a life which is ‘blanked’ rather than ‘bare,’” one where sociability is withdrawn and instead people exist “in proximity but not in



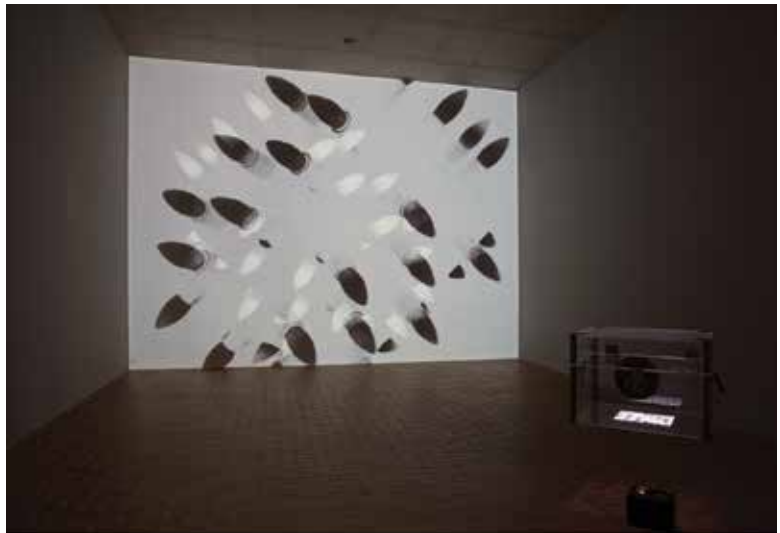
community.”³ Previous thinkers have preferred catchalls for negative or cancelled being, like Theodor Adorno’s “damaged life,” Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life,” and Judith Butler’s “precarious life” (which itself owes a debt to Hannah Arendt), but the at times corruscating catastrophism of these terms, while capturing a vital élan of the twentieth century’s bloody biopolitics, is at the limit too inhuman, sidelining vision, visibility, and all other bodily sense and feeling that might surpass the logistics of domination. This is not to make straw men out of these caricatural theorists (and indeed some of them have addressed this very problem), but rather to sound a term that doesn’t evacuate the agency of those whose lives it describes, a term with which Xing Danwen’s twenty-first century aesthetics can be thought.

Tony Hoagland has offered a particularly evocative description of what he calls “disassociative poetry,” which he describes as sharing a common trait of estranged or detached reflection, an “intention to hold narrative up for our inspection, at arm’s length, without being caught inside its sticky web.”⁴ Going further, Hoagland all but names the mirror as the specular device of this thing called “disassociation,” in arguing that “the aspect of self such poems most forcefully represent is its uncatchability, its fluttering, quicksilver transience.” Yet Hoagland stumbles somewhat when it comes to his diagnosis of the social origins of this tactic, offering the generic

Top: Xing Danwen, *Thread*, 2018, 2-channel video, 11 mins., 30 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Xing Danwen, *Personal Diary Series*, 1993–2003, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Xing Danwen, *Sleep Walking*, 2001, video, 10 mins., installation view at Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.



culprit of postmodern control-society malaise (“We have yielded so much authority to so many agencies, in so many directions, that we are nauseous . . .”).⁵ Contrary to Hoagland’s melancholic accounting for this style in American poetics, dissociation operates differently in the work of Xing Danwen. There is a fugitive sociability on the other side of her dissociative mirrorings—and this is where Jean Genet’s *Prisoner of Love*, and noted novelist Ahdaf Soueif’s contextualization of Genet’s project, come in to play. These are the two intellectual avatars of Tarek Abou El Fetouh’s curatorial framing at the Red Brick Art Museum show, and it is at this conversational horizon between their writing and Xing Danwen’s art that we shall arrive after making our way through the exhibition’s relevant content.

What is arguably Xing Danwen’s best-known body of work, the *Personal Diary* series (1993–2003), presided over the exhibition’s largest gallery, operationalizing the mirror portrait as mechanism for group formation and testimony, diss(ass)embling her authorial “I” within a project of “we,” each generating the other—collective documentation of Beijing’s early 1990s East Village art scene. Here the mirror is a stage of sociability at a moment of group invention in the ferment of a particular historical formation of young artists at the end of the last century. But Xing Danwen’s appearance in the mirror among her cohorts is as both individual and apparatus, group and artist in one: On the other side of her lens’s reflection among friends is the mirror interior to her authorial device, a single-lens-reflex camera. The process by which dissociative connection operates more abstractly is further hinted at in her *Sleep Walking* video installation, of 2001, in which the embodied state of dissociation in somnambulism is used to reconnect disparate times and places, juxtaposing urban Western scenes with traditional Chinese soundscapes.

Similarly, her *disCONNEXION* photographic series (2002–03) shifts the locus of dissociation from the individual or anthropological “connector” to the infrastructural level of communication and civil engineering. These



Left: Xing Danwen, *disCONNEXION*, Number 5, 2002–03, C print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

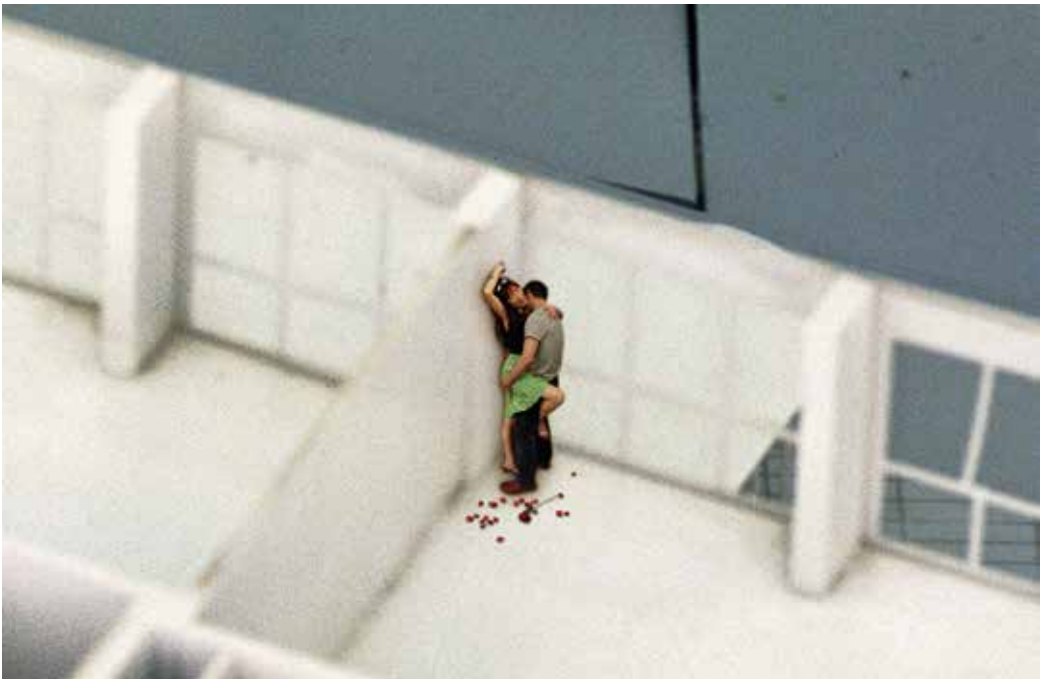
Right: Xing Danwen, *disCONNEXION*, Number 4, 2002–03, C print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Xing Danwen, *Wall House* (detail), 2007, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

tightly composed photographic details of telecom-industry detritus would seem to leave the human behind to advance an abstracted contention on the way left-behind things choreograph bodies. Nothing if not too literal, these are the photographic warrants for an electronic social fabric built on the back of total estrangement—the reconfiguration of human ecology by landfills and economies of waste. This series presages, too, her more recent installation *Because I am in the Mountains* (2017), another ecologically-inflected work that turns one of the primal materials of industry—coke, i.e. superheated coal—into the primary material of the desolate industrial “mountainscape” it depicts. But the work returns us, radically, to the root of the problem of the mirror-effect. Xing Danwen has indicated the work’s referentiality to a conceptual problem raised by Mount Lu, an eminence both topographical and intellectual in Chinese history, and in particular a well-known reflection of the eleventh-century poet Su Shi, who wrote of it:

Viewed horizontally a range; a cliff from the side;
 It differs as we move high or low, or far or nearby.
 We do not know the true face of Mount Lu,
 Because we are all ourselves inside.⁶



Top: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction No. 13*, 2004–05, C print, 227 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction No. 13* (detail), 2004–05, C print, 227 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

While a fulsome discussion of this evocative fragment is beyond the capacities of this essay, it becomes clear that here the problem of self-envisioning, of the difficulty of seeing oneself objectively and subjectively at once—in other words, the problem of the dissociative aesthetics of the mirror effect—is decisively summoned, anchoring itself at the level of our picturing the world ecologically as nature and ontologically as self.

Two more recent projects animate her continued working-through of the mirror form's capacity for embodied reflection. The photos and



Xing Danwen, Xing Danwen,
I am a Woman No. 5, 1994–96,
photograph. Courtesy of the
artist.

video comprising the *Wall House* project of 2007 are a twice-untimely collaboration with the American architect John Hejduk (1929–2000) and his posthumously constructed Wall House II (built in 2001) in the Netherlands, in which the relationship between public architecture (the city) and the private self (the domestic interior) is fissured and reassembled. Writing in an introduction to a book of Hejduk’s collected poetry, the critic David Shapiro charges his then-unbuilt Wall House series with cementing the architect’s status as “a wild original of the American anti-sublime.”⁷ The “anti-sublime” to which he refers is a capacious category, but it is surely not exclusively American, as Xing Danwen’s deadpan theatricalization of its interiors vividly demonstrates. Finally, *Urban Fiction* (2004–ongoing), a series of photographs of real estate developers’ marketing architectural maquettes staged or digitally manipulated to reveal spare in-media-res scenes of action or intrigue (introducing the viewer to an apparent murder, a solitary smoker, lovers in passionate embrace). The “total” representation implied by the maquettes, charged with the harmonious consumerist sociability projected by the developer-authors of these particular real estate developments, is here undone dissociatively, as though the wholeness of the

architectural maquette is merely the dissociative projection of a lonely and marginal actor (or actors) located within its otherwise empty expanse.

Writing in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* in 2006, Shanghai-born photographer and scholar Gu Zheng placed Xing Danwen's early *I Am a Woman* series of nude photographs (1994–96) within a feminist logic of the mirror in Chinese art, specifically connecting the use of a mirror in one of her photographs to the earlier example of Wen Yiduo's *Facing the Mirror*, painted for Pan Guangan's 1927 novel *Feng Xiaoqing*. He explains:

In the work of Wen Yiduo, the image of the character in the novel, Xiao Qing, was represented in the mirror. In the picture, though, it was the lead character Feng Xiaoqing who was watching herself in the mirror, and there is indeed another pair of eyes watching behind her back. Here, it is a privilege of the man to imagine the woman and structure her image, and it is the man who is motivated to watch and present it. However, in Xing Danwen's work, the same picture of a woman facing the mirror is of a woman watching a woman, a woman defining the emotion and body of a woman.⁸

Oil painting girl uses Colgate dental ribbon paste, *Funü zazhi* 11, no. 2 (February 1925).



In expanding the scope of Gu Zheng's trenchant observation, my aim is to generalize the mirror effect as belonging to a more broad-based procedure of social dissociation, where the terms of Gu Zheng's argument still hold, but the implications move beyond the visual culture of Chinese feminism and into the broader terms of spectacle after modernism, a hollowed-out relation to the real. A Chinese advertisement for Colgate toothpaste, roughly

contemporaneous with *Facing the Mirror/Feng Xiaoqing*, demonstrates this parallel frame.⁹ Recently commenting on this advertisement, the historian of modern Chinese feminism Tani E. Barlow helpfully enlarges the mirror's implications, writing that "no better illustration of mimesis is imaginable: girl, mirror, commodity, and self-representation, gazing at the self in the mirror while setting up the mise-en-abyme of the real and its representations."¹⁰ If what was straightforward in the mirror's apparition in the *I Am a Woman* and *Personal Diary* series was its faithful optical mimesis, Xing Danwen has in the other works we have discussed—*Sleep Walking*, *disCONNEXION*, *Wall House*, and *Urban Fiction*—destabilized the straightforward optical operation of the mirror effect, moving from mimesis to dissociation, from individual to social, and the dissociative ways in which people are, to return to Berlant's motivating lexicon, *proximate*.



Xing Danwen, installation view of *Captive of Love*, 2017, Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

Writing in her introduction to a translation of Jean Genet’s beguiling, if difficult, final testimony, *Prisoner of Love*, Ahdaf Soueif—who was brought to Red Brick for the exhibition’s opening public program—calls Genet a “subversive image-maker,” one who works against the monolithic and for the *fragmented-together*, which for him is the ultimate form of the Palestinian liberation movement as he participated in it. “It could be said,” Soueif remarks, “that for Genet the enemy was always the rigid form.”¹¹ Schematic as this connection may seem, there is in it a sense of the possibility of sociability on the other side of alienation or dissociation, a radical openness that can be seen, too, in the works of Xing Danwen as they approach the mirror effect asymptotically. I don’t wish to advance too sociological an argument here, concerned as I am not with any historical particularities but with the formal and theoretical life of Xing Danwen’s long relationship to the mirror. But, like any good looking-glass, I hope that the reader can see, in this critical fragment on Xing Danwen, that her work tells us something about how the social and optical possibilities of dissociation might be refracted together (again).

Notes

1. The art historian Michael Fried, citing Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp, 1550–1700* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 202, has made much of this point. See especially *Manet’s Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 371–72.
2. For a dutiful review of the exhibition’s layout and basic themes, see Tom Mouna’s contemporaneous online article in *ArtAsiaPacific*: <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/XingDanwen/>.
3. This work by Lauren Berlant is in process; the author has heard Berlant speak at Princeton University (USA) but relies for these citations on Darren Byler, “Walking Around in Lauren Berlant’s “Elliptical Life,” *SCA News, Cultural Anthropology*, December 10, 2012: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/32-walking-around-in-lauren-berlant-s-elliptical-life/>.
4. Tony Hoagland, *Real Sophistkashun* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2006), 176.
5. *Ibid.*, 186.
6. See Zhang Longxi, “Lessons from Mount Lu: China and Cross-Cultural Understanding,” *Cultural Dynamics* 27, no. 2 (July 2015), 285–93.
7. David Shapiro in John Hejduk, *Such Places as Memory: Poems 1953–1996* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), xiv.
8. Gu Zheng, “Projecting the Reality of China through the Lens: On the Artistic Practice of Xing Danwen,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 5, no. 1 (March 2006), 93.
9. Reproduced in Tani E. Barlow, “Buying In: Advertising and the Sexy Modern Girl Icon in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. A. E. Weinbaum (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 309.
10. Barlow, “Buying In: Advertising and the Sexy Modern Girl Icon in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s,” 308.
11. Ahdaf Soueif in Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2003), xiv.