

INDIVIDUAL INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION—SELF-REFERENCING IN THE CREATIONS OF YANG MUSHI

by Yang Zi

Yang Mushi spent three years between 2013 and 2016 to complete the work *Grinding*. He scavenged and purchased discarded wooden tools from online sources, secondhand markets, waste transfer stations and roadside scrap dealers on the outskirts of the city, cut them into basic geometric shapes, filled any uneven spots with sawdust and putty, carefully ground them down, sprayed them with a base coat of paint, polished out any granularity in the paint coating, and then coated them in a black finish. This process was repeated three times before he completed the artwork, which is roughly thirty centimeters along its longest side. A common presentation method is to place the objects on a black aluminum plate close to the ground, with objects grouped by similar shape, arrayed in rectangles embedded within a larger rectangle, appearing like stones or plant shoots sprouting through the ground. Recently, in his studio on the outskirts of Shanghai, these objects have been sorted according to the same principle, with similarly shaped objects placed on different levels of black metal shelves, where a blazing white artificial light exposes every last painstaking detail.

Grinding has its origins in a concept akin to an industrial thought process, being the infinite reproduction of something approaching “individual things” within a “world of ideas,” but all of them belonging to an ultimate form, eventually presenting this “black production.” The orderly standard has been subtly distorted, with each object slightly different from its neighbor. Meanwhile, through the exhibition layout, order has been maintained, with these similar yet slightly different “brothers and sisters” intentionally placed together. Oddly, the fine details of these objects have been carefully rendered, showing that it is not entirely impossible to create wholly identical objects through this process.

This contradiction is perhaps linked to Yang Mushi’s experience living and working for long periods of time in furniture and molding factories on the outskirts of Beijing and Shanghai. He has personally witnessed the process of mass production in China amidst rapid development and the pursuit of speed. “Made in China” perhaps doesn’t quite count as “regular.” It always requires constant improvement in the process of adaptation to demand, and often falls short of the standards of high uniformity. Faulty procedures are often unpredictable, falling somewhere between control and serendipity. Yang Mushi embraces errors, using sculptural skills to aestheticize and sharpen these errors to intentionally emphasize the oxymoron of “perfect imperfection.” It is in no way an exaggeration to describe these works as a projection and transformation of reality.

Even so, Yang Mushi employs an individualized work approach. He personally crafted each object in *Grinding*. He expended great effort and time to slowly process these discarded materials. (Interestingly, the flawed artworks that are produced symbolize the waste material before processing, forming a closed cycle between signifier and signified. Perhaps this is one of the reasons he describes it as “illegitimate.”) The other works featured in *Illegitimate Production* are all titled for the actions taken on them, such as *Cutting in*, *Subtracting*, and *Eroding*. When we stand next to these works and read out these names, the past labor wafts around the works like an indelible ghost (viewers may also think of Marx’s teaching that labor bestows natural materials with the vitality of value, though the identity of the laborer has always been obscure in his theses). It is as if to remind us that these works are the rich fruits of his behavior, as well as the pointless superfluous products of his behavior—the illegitimate flaws are the evidence of the consumption of an individual’s life. In formal terms, his works are abstract reprints of the superficial appearance of reality, and have a certain tone of spectacle. On the level of practical operations (we could call it the level of “production relationships”), he establishes distance from the production relationships in real life, retreating from the production processes of China’s rapid urban development (processes that have become cliché in Chinese contemporary art) toward a self-oriented, solitary and even ridiculous individual action. As a result, he has gained a kind of right of silent interpretation—only he, and not those universal judgments about “what is happening in the world,” can preside over this symbolic ritual.

At the same time, Yang Mushi’s works have never indifferently or neutrally “reflected” the properties of the material, but have instead given off an air of dejection and inhibition. If we gaze at the sculptures for a while, the black of the surface continually contracts, collapses and falls. Other, very large works (such as *Eroding*, 2016) squeeze the space, provoking a sense of unease and intimidation in the

viewer. The sense of pain evoked by those sharp objects, even when blunted by the sense of rhythm in their overall layout, are all the more persistent, piercing and repetitive in reminding us of the trials the artist's body endured in the creative process. In his latest solo exhibition *Vanishing into Thin Air*, this sense of pain has been transformed into a dazzling brightness. In the *Illuminating* series, which forms the main body of this exhibition, white neon light tubes are twisted into shapes resembling the previous sculptural works, with some of them stacked together. The light radiates outward in every direction, and lands on the plates hung on the walls. These wooden plates, coated with a liquid stone finish, refract the light, and seem even to swallow it.

Following the industrial production line layout of the previous solo exhibition, *Illuminating* is hung on the walls in a loop around the exhibition space. These neatly-arranged, white, geometric radiating bodies are jarring, like the walls surrounding government offices, like party propaganda slogans appearing in commercial centers, like bars on windows in residential districts. To light them is to touch off allure and alarm at the same time. This compels us to wonder about the title of the exhibition, *Vanishing into Thin Air*—who has vanished? Why did they vanish? Where did they go? Through the lens of the art world's accustomed sociological formal symbolic methods, it can provide an answer to the rise of nationalism and immigration issues in recent years, and the measures relevant organs have taken in response to the swelling urban population. Yet, when the viewer approaches the work, and feels the faint sting of the heat on their skin, their thoughts will turn to the black bodies of Yang Mushi's previous creations (even as this current scene resembles a negative image of them). Of course, even more inescapable is the lonely image of the artist soaked in sweat as he works.

Translated by Jeff Crosby