

YANG MUSHI'S "TAKE CARE OF" AND "BE TAKEN CARE OF"

Feng Boyi

Young artist Yang Mushi's (*1989 in Jiangxi Province, China; lives and works in Shanghai, China) creations from recent years have primarily been grinding, cutting, shaving, and assembling wood, eroding polystyrene foam, and repeatedly covering surfaces with paint. His basic method of labor has been applying processes of sharpening, distorting, and shaping to materials. These installation works possess a certain scale, volume, and numerosity, and constitute the basic form of his first solo exhibition entitled 'Illegitimate Production'. The exhibition shows the entire process of a young artist attempting to approach his limits. The consumption produced by his daily repeated extreme labors and almost cruel processes causes the material to transform into a kind of limited state. Solemn black styling, pure tones, and gloomy visual contrast construct these works' richness and sharpness. Also shown in a hidden manner are metaphors for harm and danger from a young artist concerned with body, action, time, and explosive physical performance.

Yang Mushi has made many different kinds of attempts on these materials and on extending modernist sculpture methods. As a young artist, the experience of his practice and work process is essential for future growth. In my opinion, his recent creations are actually focused on the relationship between materials and the issue of "dealing with and being dealt with". Specifically, he takes simple, rustic, wooden material and works on it as much and as hard as possible. The love of material itself, the material's rustic charm, and art rooted in daily life is the ability to find meaningful things among things that appear insignificant. It is the ability to identify anything that appears anywhere and allow it to ascend to the most important position. That is to say, normal materials must go through the artist's selection and processing in order to be sublimated, but this kind of selection and processing is not done in order to impose meaning upon the material itself. It is done to demonstrate the relationship between material and man. It shows in specific real life situations that the meaning or value was generated in this kind of neutral daily life. This puts forward new requirements on contemporary art creation, because we often over-emphasize art's focus. It seems that clear and realistic criticism is the single foundation of communication between artist, work, and audience. However, Yang Mushi's creation shows more the ambiguous intermediate state of abstraction and more expresses abstraction's polysemy. It reflects anxiety, frustration, boredom, absurdity, and other vain feelings as well as that, even after being satisfied with the 'material', there is a sense of loss of security or habitat. This is not some grand theme about nations or states, but a kind of description of personal experience. This experience, however, is not a simplified reflection of reality. It is gained from a dialectical relationship with the real world. Therefore, he actually achieves the goal of his creation by avoiding simply expressing the complexity of reality. Introspection and coolness towards the noise of reality cause his art to retain these details. They also highlight his visual form, the strength of his language sense, and a tension that is both direct and mysterious.

To people born in the 1960s like me, the phrase "to take care of" is extremely familiar from day to day life. It also always brings a certain kind of fear from my childhood memories. This is because, in my impression, someone who "takes care of something" is someone who holds a certain level of power, such as parents, teachers, leadership, police, etc. It seems that since childhood, we have always been in the position of who or what was "being taken care of". With the onset of years and the expansion of personal autonomy, this kind of active/passive relationship has gradually transformed. I don't know whether or not Yang Mushi has this kind of memory or experience, but I guess he must have certain feelings about this concept and the action of taking care of something. Today's society is changing too quickly. Technology is developing faster than we imagined. The spread of computers and the increasingly powerful ability to "take care of" images cause us to be increasingly far from the original. True nature has been covered by all kinds of "taking care of it". So Yang Mushi says, "I amplify this method (action), enacting an endless extension of the production cycle and repeatedly pushing forward the process' advancement. By alienating and blacking out material, the individuality in reality that I understand is formed."

"Take care of" is an oft-used key phrase in both written and spoken Mandarin and, when paired with other words, creates many different meanings. For example, in "take care of him", the verb phrase has a meaning of power, even containing sinister hints of injury or death. "To take care of something" indicates

a different degree of change to be enacted upon the thing being taken care of, so “take care of” can have many different possibilities and meaning. The materials and methods of Yang Mushi’s “Take Care of” and “Be Taken Care of” have four basic categories. One is to cut, reduce, and combine pieces of wood typically used for construction. The second is to collect old timber, such as trimmings and beams from houses in order to flatten and sharpen them. The third is to collect building materials and compact them into dust before bonding them again. The fourth is to burn and corrode building materials like stone, clay, metal, and polystyrene foam. This kind of destruction, damage, and extreme “shaping” counteracts the materials original form and, through blackening and covering, portrays quickly decaying and varying individuality. Among them, the most important characteristic is how the materials are used. This is not like sculptors of the past who carefully used natural timber. Instead, he reuses construction lumber, old woods, and polystyrene foam with readily available construction substances and second hand materials being “taken care of” again. Tampering, deconstructing, and deforming processes eliminate the original functional attributes and change the characteristics of the media and materials. In taking care of the materials, using residuals of the materials’ original energy undermines their control and so changes the function and direction of their power. Also, these second hand materials day-to-day ubiquity and function are closely related to our urbanization and the problems we face that are resultant to it. They correspond to our reality in society and symbolize the underlying conflict of China in modernity, as well as the entanglements of fate and the destiny of history. In this kind of presentation that has quantity, scale, and complex visual effects, the work’s directness is expanded by imagination’s other dimensions. From this point it is pure, visual, and rare. Yang Mushi has not restricted his expression of history and reality to general representation. He is also not content with merely converting a detailed individuality, history, and reality into figurative visual expression. Instead, focusing on the most daily labored-upon materials puts historical landscape, reality of existence, and personal circumstance into abstract form. It also puts them into many states and undertones that reflect or allegorize the roughness, hardness, and distortions of reality itself.

At the same time, Yang Mushi’s creative process intends to emphasize the process’s operational limits. He consumes daily moods and actions in wearing down second hand materials. When action becomes an endless daily behavior, and when production factories become cramped spaces, the physical hardships and psychological experiences within them become a kind of practice method that increasingly shows a collection of contradictions in stillness and movement, heat and coolness, simplicity and complexity, and sparsity and density. Therefore, in this isomorphic relationship, people feel restlessness in silence, enthusiasm in cold, eternity in impermanence, etc. This is the correlation between tradition and Yang Mushi’s creation, and also directly or indirectly describes the relationships related to people’s contemporary living conditions. Some may say Yang Mushi’s creation has post-modern methods, but these works use more directly effective methods in “taking care of” the materials. In this “taking care of” and “being taken care of” relationship, there is generated a new kind of visual tension. The concept of this tension comes from two things. First it comes from his rebelling against the cognitive methods and narrative rules formed by the material’s past properties and sculptural forms. Secondly it comes from forming an oppressive visual experience that causes the audience to contemplate the effect of his creative or production process while bringing them into a kind of extreme but empty state. This is within the relationship of interactive sculpture. His subverting and dismantling old creative awareness and presentation methods is a new kind of attempt at expression. This is because sensitivity to real culture will lead to changes in older forms and methods of art.

I believe that this is Yang Mushi’s art’s way of “taking care of it”. It constitutes my interpretation of his work. On one hand, it reconstructs the complex relationship between art and reality. On the other, it concerns the specificity of real life. For a long time, not only daily experience but purified artistic language have been neglected by those artists who pursue grand ambitions. Moreover, the values and aspirations they express as well as the sense of possibility they create are also constantly being called into question. In another sense, it precisely gives a reason for ‘art for life’s sake’ to exist, describing that it has a special place in artistic creation or artistic imagination. In fact, it is exactly because the grand historical narrative often plunges into an empty awkwardness that art necessitates and values the expression of daily life experience. So, what Yang Mushi expresses is not only a materialized psychological complex, but

is also a kind of spiritual consumption that stems from projecting the self into the object. To a certain extent, this would shake many great imaginations of the past that were concerned with art. Of course this is my understanding and interpretation of his work's logic in promoting or investigating the banality of materials and reexamining daily life's significance. Yang Mushi's practice, examination, and understanding of painful and broken daily life is both a constructive effort and a result of pressure from the development of globalism and the conflict between different cultures. In addition, it is the rendering of the resultant distortion, fear, danger, and other psychological self-protection syndromes to the point that it becomes a phenomenon we can find worthwhile to contemplate.

Translation: Michael Robert Winkler