

# Fan Xi | The Light and Shadow May Have Disappeared, yet I am Still Here

By Feng Boyi 2016-08-25



As people' s lives and works are transformed by the use of computer and the internet, the most significant change occurs in our reading, communication and modes of expression for which a lot of energy is invested in replacing the traditional ways of communication through language by images. Moreover, artificial intelligence and its provision to the biophysical and technical environment of these user groups, particularly of the younger generation are becoming more reluctant to read texts, instead diving into the dissemination and consumption of images. "Time of image reading" is upon us. We are not only extracting information through images, or seeking out the multiple realities they represent, but rather to confront, judge and manage those images that are

invasive to multiple realities. The notion of photography has become a common social behavior with access on mobile phone and other portable digital devices that allow the user to snap and share the images captured. People are used to snapping pictures and being photographed – an enthusiasm for a particular aesthetic has become the reality in feeding one's narcissism. For this reason, its ubiquity, abundance and consumption in the "time of image reading" usher the general public into a fever that terminates the "heroic era" of photographic art, leaving photographers to ferry as they seek out other means of survival in the sea of photography. Then, in a future attempt to transcend experience and imagination, what is photographic art for? Are photographers the windows through which the outside world may be reflected, or a projection of an individual's creativity? Or perhaps, the issue in the art of photography is not only a matter of how to confront reality, but how to return to an understanding of the self and awareness. Although the light and shadow may have disappeared, yet I am still here!

One's issue, whether tormented by one's inner feelings, or being in certain mood or emotional state of being, is often provoked and inflicted by the rapidly changing reality which one is immersed in. Young photographer Fan Xi has been exploring the possibilities of photography through various channels of experimentation. The idea of "experimenting" comprises of the artist's position and attitude towards art, expands from content to form, from the vernacular to medium. Of course, we can claim any artistic practice is a way of experimentation, yet we can make two basic distinctions in the ways they are carried out: one is within the tradition of a particular medium, and the other occurs beyond the medium. Experiments within the tradition of the medium is aimed at ameliorating and diversifying its own vernacular and style; whereas experiments beyond tradition focus on redefining existing system of photographic art, to mutually break out from traditional modes of expression and aesthetics, including the so-called redefinition of photographic language. In other words, it's not only an amelioration of certain photographic aesthetics or

vernacular, but exemplifying a revolutionary purpose. Based on my observation, such "experimentation" is my primary reference in interpreting Fan Xi' s photographic endeavors. In my view, Fan Xi' s experimentation is driven by her doubt in the common mode of photographic expression, a rebuttal to the popular "private discourse" and "light and refreshing" trend among the youth generation; her attempt is to discover a visual sensibility beyond visual experiences under their given context, that would allow one state to immediately and directly incur other sensations, rendering into fictional scenes in an existing environment, thus capturing and preserving this illusory moment through photography. In Fan Xi' s statement, "I' ve always been searching for a point of entrance, that would allow me to traverse the crevasses on the image and entering a broader field, breaking through fragmented forms, to arrive at the backside of the instant and surface."

Fan Xi' s work on the subject of "The Tree" are seemingly photographs of trees shot in different seasons, in fact, they are hundreds of trees captured from different angles at a particular time of the day. She then collages the various fragments of the trees captured with computer software to render a displaced figuration. Intentionally disrupting the original structure and optical relationships of the tree while maintaining its completeness by making minute manipulations, these tromp l' oeil images allow the non-existent to infer what was once present. Respecting the nature of digital images, the input and output of information render a reality beyond the multiple dimensions of nature. In other words, this is no longer a real phenomenon, but a pile of adjustable digital combinations, in which the photograph is only one component contributing to this level of reality. Considering the 1980s born generation experiencing an explosion of images in their everyday lives, Fan Xi' s photography does not seek to represent a rigid icon, in the contrary, attempts to build an organic system that generates self-replicating symbols and meanings. Moreover, as collaging images has become her continuous daily repetition, Fan Xi has translated her understanding of the image and the digital technology to an art practice. Fan Xi'

s experiments are transformative, not only altering her subject matter, but also in the approaches she has adopted. For her "Reduction of Image" series, she corrodes the silver film of the photograph with water and alcohol, and then prints the images on board or non-acid silver plate and etc., allowing the images expand in optical distortion. This is a process of "prolapsing" or even "disfiguration" that affects liminal visual space and "distortion". If the original image was an objective takes of the subject, then the way the subject is photographed, the selection of the "original image" and the process of corrosion are her subjective manipulation. In fact, this "manipulation" attempts to destroy the notion of photography and its boundary with painting. From the capturing image to processing it, not only the aesthetic of such genres is subverted, one can also consider it as an constructive attempt at un-familiarize these images in order to tamper with the viewer's expectations, allowing them to be surprised by the newly processed image, and bestowing them a freedom from existing rules. Then, "The Tree" and "Reduction of Image" series visualize the relationship of "processing and the processed", where both types of images were coded, layered and entwined, that regroup information on the original images, by which to engender new possibilities and visual tension in the medium of photography. This possible and tenacious mentality inspires to challenging and rejecting her understanding and the narrative tendency common in photographing objects, a subversion and deconstruction of the original creative awareness and iteration based on the relationship of "mutually affecting image", or an attempt at "counter-narrative" or "new narrative". Since 2013, the ongoing series "Time Length" is Fan Xi's alternative approach to snapshot. Whenever she discovers an effective method to ameliorate her work, she would begin to manipulate her subject, of which she tries to eliminate any narrative or unnecessary component in order to enhance the straightforwardness and purity of the photograph. Once the quantity of her photographs reaches a certain point, she selects those she believes are accurate. "Time Length" requires the complimentary light source from the flashlight to

over-expose, due to which the subject is blinded by the light resulting only in a simple silhouette of the subject. The steady lens would only document an instant, whereas Fan Xi's photographs transcend the "reality" of the image, gaze at the viewer. The fragmented images seem dispersed and in disorder, casted under the light of ambiguity and enigma, every figure, every setting of the scene seems ready to disappear - missing out on those whom they may have encountered, ready to miss out on oneself. It captures the whimsical lives, and exposing those oblivious absurdities... placing photography back into reality, lending to other realities that are so do speak, parallel. If "Time Length" is a projection of the relationship between the individual and his environment, then the new work "All Beings" is the current status and sentimental expression of a particular circumstance. The acclaimed Canadian photographer Jeff Walls once stated, "Photography is the meticulous processing of those specific moments, rather than careless snapshots of instants." However, I believe Fan Xi has taken the liberty to capture the "ephemeral" in this series of work by employing long exposures and multiple flashes. She has demonstrated unusual fascination on the disorder of "nature", particularly in entwining vegetation, the desolate landscape and the various unexpected shapes and forms. These strange images are on the cusp of representing surreal scene and physical objects; they are visual analogies of the human relationship to nature in search for new notions and deliberations in the art of photography. While the reality of these phenomena conceals a deeper truth, which lends to visual illusions as time, speed and space are intentionally disrupted when viewing these images. Moreover, this series of images provide a counter example to people's inclination of extrapolating information from photographs, or paying little attention to the content of the photographs. Fan Xi's photographs urge the viewer to imagine the path and forms that the objects once had. As spectacular and detailed supplements, they propel the viewer to learn about the unknown details, renew one's visual experience and open up to a new space of imagination in the production of images.

In the art world, there are a number of odd "fairies" . They are self-aware, sensible and willing to exist on social peripheries. These people are unwilling to conform to existing order, to give in to the mundane, whether in their art practice or in life. They' ve kept a distance from mainstream values, as they continue to make attempt in expressing their personal experiences. Departing from the periphery, and walking towards it; the periphery is the other, the non-conformist; the periphery differentiates, and displays diversity. Art practices occurring on the periphery is a self-projection, by which their unique vernacular is established. My guess is, Fan Xi' s purposefully created the unsettled, contorted and ruptured world through the medium of photography – the nightmarish blending of surreal scenes that usher the viewer into a spiraling enigma, a winding path and a place of suspense. Secluded, without a path, like waking up from a nightmare at midnight, there is no trace to be found. She is not interested in representing her awareness of the suffering and helplessness factored by the environment, but rather focusing on confronting a reality with one' s own choices within the society she lives in. She stares at your viewing in a tragic and destined gaze, the strange loftiness and the sparkles of romance adorned into darkness, it startles and touches the viewer with unexpected revelations. For a viewer, the imagined reality is always at a distance, and more often, everyday practice translates into images and becomes art. People often only perceive its fragments, what are frozen in time, and what can be traced in one' s mind, its particular and insignificant existences, meanwhile reality is far from it. China in the time of tumultuous transitions, its process of modernization is ushering us into an unknown direction as everything changes in whimsical ways. The relationship between people, gender ambiguity and the undefined emotions, make us adrift in unconstrained ways. Thus, Fan Xi' s self-disciplined or self-indulgent art practice and visual translations touch on a sentimental and psychological reality, like a lonesome emotion with a self-respecting attitude. Perhaps she' s drawing attention to seek out one' s own uncertainty, rather than practicing art that endorses the "determined notions" .

