



YANG JIAN: UNCLAIMED OBJECTS

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View of "Unclaimed Objects," 2012 Where Where Art Space, Beijing

"Unclaimed Objects" features just that: a random assortment of bric-a-brac the young Fujianese artist Yang Jian found on the street, and then brought into the gallery to form this solo exhibition at Where Where Art Space. The modest collection of items in the show was collected between 2005 and the present. They range from the broken to the sculptural to the archival—an assortment of plaster cast, and broken sculptural fragments, discarded photographs, and bits of paper. Next to each, Yang leaves a short, handwritten note in pencil, a brief caption describing the circumstances of the object's discovery and preservation.

Many of these objects seem to exude materiality, possessing rich textures and a strong sense of presence. A giant marble fist, cut off at the wrist, pounds down on the cement ground, for example, while an old Sony television set plays lo-fi black-and-white footage. Other objects are less imposing: One-inch ID photos of an unknown man taken against a light blue background line the steps of a set of short aluminum stairs.

One would be hard-pressed to find a logic to the grouping of all these things—there is little in them to explain the relationship they have with one another, and many of the objects even resist association. So why group them together? In reality, the exhibition is held together by little more than the artist's whimsy. Selection is based solely on whether or not this scrap or that chunk of material captures Yang's attention—the essence of subjectivity. What rhyme or reason can be found in that? And although the exhibition has already opened, Yang's collecting period is not over. The artist continues to bring found objects back to the space, installing them in the white gallery like a proud crow bringing bright baubles and trinkets back to decorate its nest.

Yang Jian is animated by an urge to preserve and elevate, rescuing trash from its redundancy and placing his treasures on pedestals for admiration. But the Delphic and open-ended process through which the artist curates his own exhibition is not so different from the opacity that governs the production and consumption of contemporary art. Yang's decision to place an object is, at first glance, an attempt to interrupt the stages of decay and disuse that govern materiality. It is also a comment on excess: In an earlier iteration of the same show, the artist had planned to collect trash via hired migrant worker proxy from outside the studios of well-known artists and put that on display, reassigning value and use to what had already been passed off as unwanted. This exhibition might have been given the equally literal title "One Man's Trash Is Another Man's Treasure."

But Yang's decision to place discarded objects within the gallery is not only an attempt to reassign value to these orphaned entities, but also to interrogate the very processes by which value is created. Why is something art just because an artist says it is art? What does it mean to be part of a collection? Why is something worth more if it has been shown in a gallery? Why is one object any more valuable than another, and who can rationally explain why one thing is more coveted than another? What does it mean to exist?

Yang Jian's gesture is small and his questions are simple but refreshing in their directness and naiveté. Portions of the artist's own unfinished writings on the nature of existence and materiality are included in the show; his project remains incomplete, his simple questions yet without full answers.

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