

An interview with

Tuo Wang

Tuo Wang's mythopoeic research investigates and deconstructs contemporary identity, merging together elements from cinema and video art. His refined language rich of references to the classical age as well as to the black and white photography of the 60s reveals a strong effort to destabilize visual clichés. We have selected for this year's VideoBiennale his work *Vanitas - A Study for Human Opera*, featuring William Corbett, Laura Marris, Mike Hickey, Laura Sichler and Samuel Altekruise. Tuo, could you introduce our readers to this video?

This project is based on two European fictions from the 19th century that I read many years ago, the realist novel *Effi Briest* by Theodore Fontane and the naturalist novel *Thérèse Raquin* by Émile Zola. I transformed the narratives by placing them in a contemporary context. These two novels left a very deep impression on me for many reasons, mainly because of the parallel structures that diverted into equally morbid but different endings. They share a similar plot: an unhappy marriage, an affair, and a subsequent murder. I believe that the stories part ways because they belong to two different movements in literature history – realism and naturalism. These distinct world views within the literary movements are reflected in the characters' motivations and different endings.

The project is mostly comprised of three short films, in which different groups of performers act out the same plot. Each video begins with a man and a woman presenting their monologues in a stream of consciousness about their unhappy union and adultery. Actually, what the man narrates is based on the story of *Effi Briest*, while the woman's tale is from *Thérèse Raquin*.

When the actor and actress narrated the plot of the respective novels, they were actually required to fill their accounts with details of their own emotional experiences, intimate relationships, as well as traumas. The narratives are interspersed with an interview

of William Corbett, an English professor, discussing realism and naturalism in 19th century fiction, using the two aforementioned novels as examples.

By opening up a channel where fiction and reality interweave, I want to set up a connection between the present human condition and the existing cultural archive, specifically classical literature, to make a new visual archive with contemporary occurrences – details of lived experience.

This project also attempts to reveal a relationship between literature and reality through their shared dramatic, often humorous and absurd moments. In this project, I created a fictional character – an artist named Joseph – and made several series of works on his behalf. The whole project culminated in a retrospective exhibition of Joseph's works, which included a sequence of videos of his performances, as well as paintings, photographs, texts, and objects. The three short films add another layer to the myth of Joseph, the artist.

Could you tell us the way you use performers in this project? How did you develop your film style?

Performance is a very important feature of my practice. Even my painting is an expansion of my performance, and the images that are produced should be considered within that context. But when we look at the history of performance art, the majority of those artists use their body, or others', as a medium, utilizing an paranoid methodology to explore the boundary of body. It all seems so safe.

My interest in the body is when it represents a unique and private set of experiences instead of a physical existence. I'm not as interested in pushing the body to its limits, nor presenting a set of unadulterated experience as whole. For me, performance should be more than a figurative portrait; a human body is a set of experiences, acting as material in the same way as colors on the palette are waiting to be resolve and reformed.

In *Vanitas*, I require performers to utilize their own experience as a resource in their acting, while also working within my framework. After acquiring enough materials, I manipulate each performer's experience and put them in dialogue. The performers are making use of their real (and imaginative) emotional experience, intimate memories and trauma to



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A still from *Vanitas*

fill the plot structure of the two novels. When William Corbett, the professor, is talking about realism and naturalism, he does not know that his words would produce a critical connection with other performers; he is candidly answering my questions about the literary movements, *Effi Briest* and *Therese Raquin*. As a result, all the participants are telling fictions filled with their realities, provocatively balancing between performance and documentary.

We would like to explore the performative nature of your video: in particular in *Vanitas*, we see the influence of

contemporary theatre, for example Romeo Castellucci's latest works.

Romeo's practice and theory do influence me quite a bit. He employs performers' unique experiences in a physical way. For instance, in Romeo's play, you can see types of performers that subvert expectations: very aged, disabled, and abnormal bodies. The unexpected actors anti-perform. They bring their physical uniqueness to the stage and let it be their only language. The visual truthfulness and cruelty force the audience to realize the absurdity of performance itself. When I am working with my actors, I want truthfulness and cruelty in their performance as well. Focusing on the

of narrative, and are surrounded by other media. For instance in *Vanitas*, based on Laurent from *Therese Raquin*, I created a fictional character - a conceptual artist named Joseph. As a friend of the husband and the lover of the wife, he functions as a thread between the two stories. However, Joseph never appears in the films. I believe the physical absence of Joseph deserves to be present in another way. I had a realization: I, too, as a conceptual artist behind this project, had been physically absent throughout the process. The fictional artist and his creator are in the same situation.

I've said before, it is important for the performers to use their experience, a truthfulness of being, within an established framework, to create a circumstance where reality and fiction simultaneously exist and interact. This methodology is fundamental to the project. Therefore, I have to place my own experience as a conceptual artist into the fictional identity of Joseph. I imagine and invent a philosophy of his artistic practice, and then examine Joseph's perspective to make a response in art. The result is a series of multidisciplinary work including painting, photography, sculpture and text, on behalf of Joseph. So to get back to the topic of my own multidisciplinary practice, I use different media as a means to complete the performance.

Your standpoint as a Chinese transplant has a specific role in your artistic research focusing on alienation of cultures: how has your history influenced the way you produce art?

Many people think that as an immigrant artist, the best resource is one's native experience. In the United States, these novel experiences are part of a significant strategy. I have to admit that identity politics is something inevitable in the process of making art or viewing it. And identity politics are everywhere. A Chinese identity doesn't offer me anything special, possibly because I do not place any importance on its novel qualities. It is still impossible to escape readings about your work that focus on identity. A friend of mine asked me why a person born and raised in China would pick up these two novels that couldn't be more western, as material to make art. That's when I realized that trying to avoid identity politics is also another way of engaging in it.

physical appearance of the performers, of course, is visually fascinating. Similarly, focusing on psychological states, using real memories to construct a play, also engages questions of performance.

The first time we have watched your works, we have been really impressed by the number of artistic techniques you use. Could you introduce our readers to the multidisciplinary aspect of your art process?

I prefer to build layers to create different levels of reading. Visually, my work is restrained. My videos often function as a trace



A still from *Vanitas*

We have previously quoted Castellucci's theatre: besides him, could you tell us your biggest influences in art and how they have affected your work?

Brecht's philosophy influences my methodology. In his play 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle', he combined the drama of Chinese Yuan Dynasty 'The Chalk Circle' and the story of Solomon in the Old Testament. These two stories share a similar plot, and the Western and Eastern world are familiar with their respective stories. By combining these two into one narrative, Brecht alienated both of the original stories. In another play of his, 'The Good Person of Szechwan', he places a European story in China. The way he manipulates narrative is really innovative. He didn't create a new story, but he created new meaning by shifting the circumstance.

Thanks for sharing your time and thoughts, Tuo. What's next for you? Are there any film projects on the horizon?

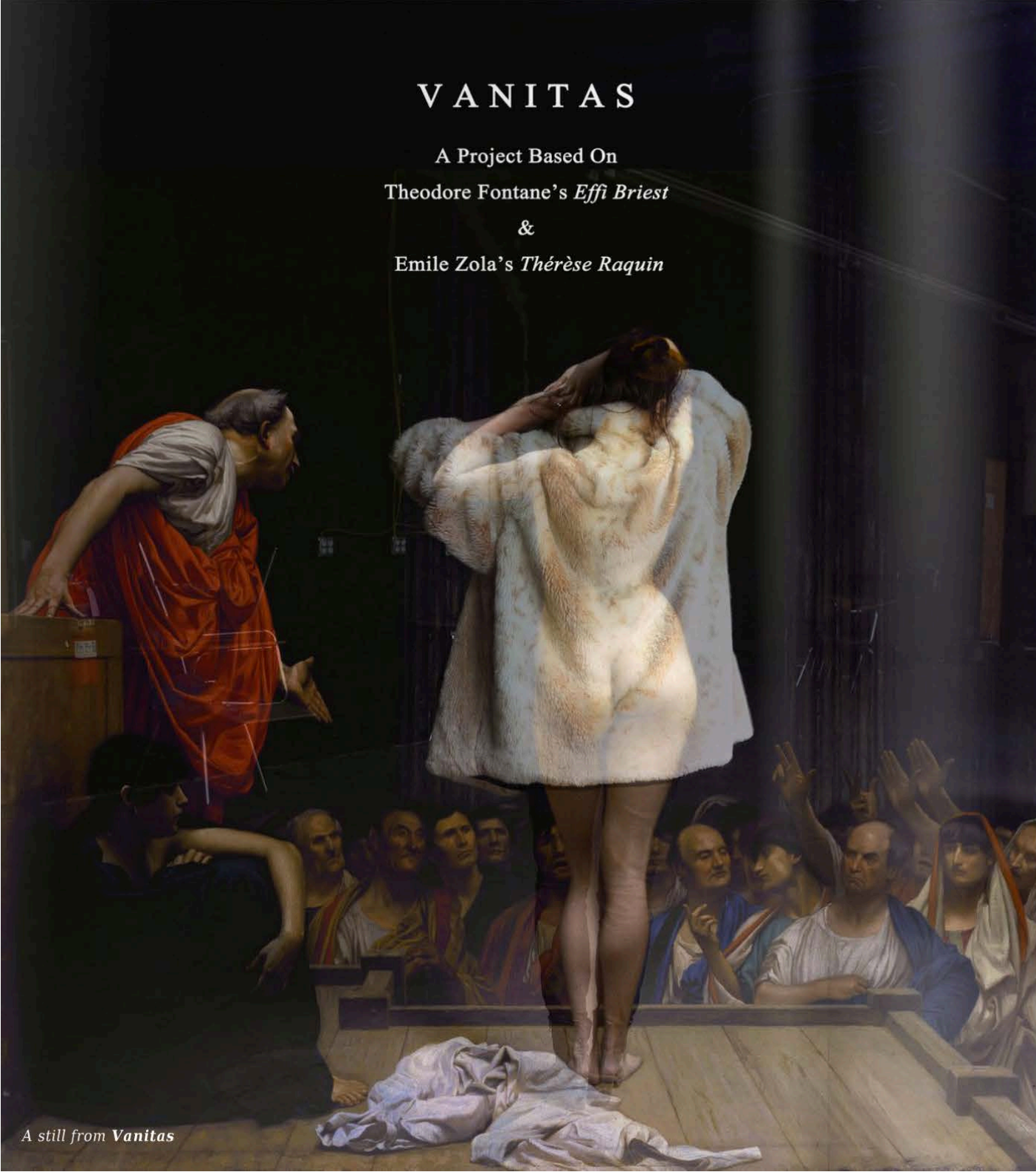
My next project will be a series of web-based videos. It will look very different from my previous work. It won't be as complicated as *Vanitas* and the content will not be as heavy. I will host 12 episodes of a talk show called 'Immortal' where I speak candidly with established artists based in America. I will throw them embarrassing and antagonistic questions about their art, something irrelevant and inappropriate. I consider this surreal (hyperreal) talk show as an attempt to deconstruct the so-called identity of 'contemporary artist.'



*A still from **Vanitas***

VANITAS

A Project Based On
Theodore Fontane's *Effi Briest*
&
Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*



A still from *Vanitas*

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An artist's statement

In Brecht on Theatre, Bertolt Brecht believes that when taking an incident or a character from the situation of which makes it obvious, familiar or readily understandable, then the wonderment and curiosity of audiences are created. He calls this the "Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect)."

My recent project Vanitas (2013--2014) is founded on his "alienation effect," combining with my knowledge and understanding of literature, unifying an interdisciplinary work with multiple layers of narration. I transformed two European fictions in the 19th century—Effi Briest (a realist novel by Theodore Fontane, 1894--95) and Thérèse Raquin (a naturalist novel by Émile Zola, 1867)—and placed them into a contemporary social context. By changing the time and space in which the original stories occur, I attempted to alienate the audiences from their existing knowledge and entrust the stories with new significance. Brecht's dramatic theory preserves and establishes a distancing that estranges and separates the audience from the play, which provides audiences strong consciousness of that they are watching a play. While in Vanitas, viewers are forced to stay in a difficult position where they continually remain skeptical about the truth of the story.

The film starts with a man and a woman presenting their monologues seemingly in a stream of consciousness. Their narratives are unique, but share many similar plots: unhappy marriage, adultery and murder. Actually, what the man narrates is based on the story of Effi Briest, while the woman's tale is set on Thérèse Raquin. These two original novels have many tragic cliché in common. However, the progressive connection from realism to naturalism renders two vulgar stories end up differently. When the actor and actress narrated the plot of the novels, they were asked to fill out some details with their personal experiences. The narratives are interspersed with a literature professor discussing and criticizing realism versus naturalism in 19th century literature as well as the two aforementioned novels. This arrangement urges viewers to keep questioning whether the two actors are recalling their own experiences or retelling the fictions. A key character 'Joseph' connects two stories. In both of their narratives, it appears an artist friend of the husband for many years, who later becomes the lover of the wife. This figure is created from 'Laurent' in Thérèse Raquin—an artist and the lover of Thérèse. In the latter part of the film, viewers are led into a vision of the hero's imagination and time travel. The two versions of

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Vanitas, 2013-2014, single channel HD video, 19'20", featuring William Corbett, Mike Hickey, Laura Marris and Tuo Wang