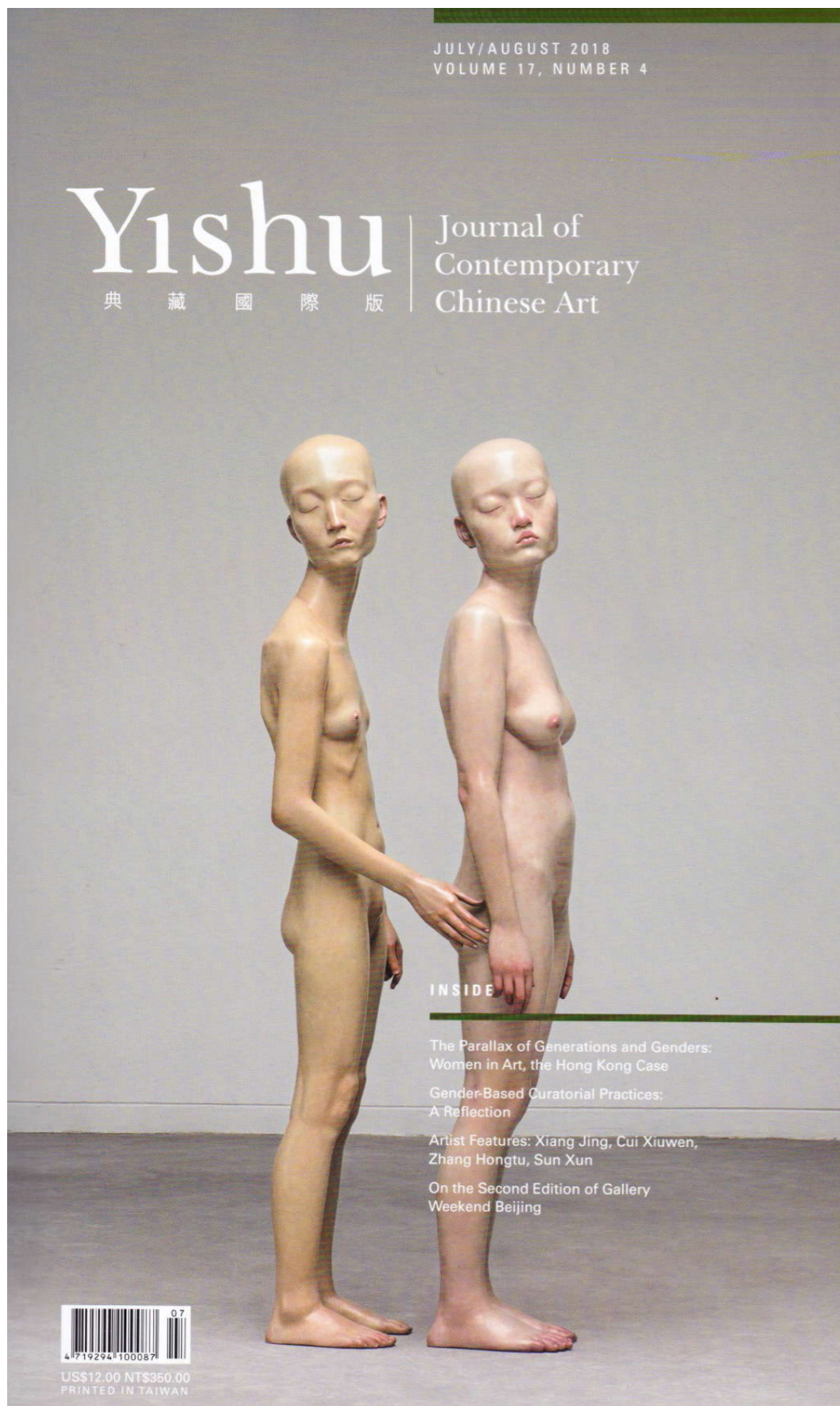


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"Regarding Language and Its Limitations: A Conversation with Sun Xun."



Alexandra Grimmer

Regarding Language and Its Limitations: A Conversation with Sun Xun

Sun Xun, *21 Grams*, 2010,
single-channel animation, 21
mins. Courtesy of the artist
and ShanghART.



Alexandra Grimmer: Sun Xun, you have recently been preoccupied with a big project. After more than twenty short films you are working on your first feature film 万国奇幻录 (*Wanguo qihuan lu*, translated as *The Magical Odyssey of Ten Thousand Kingdoms*), which will be a sixty-minute animated movie.

Sun Xun: Yes, exactly.

Alexandra Grimmer: An important figure in all your works until now has been the magician—a man dressed in a black suit with a top hat. Can we expect to see him in the upcoming film?

Sun Xun: The magician will be a character in my film. The story begins with him, but in a certain way, thereafter, he is transformed so that he is no longer a magician. The magician is a liar, and as such he is important. Think about the act of purchasing movie tickets. We already know that magic is a lie, but we still want to see it. Apparently, we need lies.

Alexandra Grimmer: What kinds of lies do you mean?

Sun Xun: This is a very interesting problem. I have a work titled *The Lie of the Magician* (2005). Given that the magician is a liar, how should we perceive what he says? Is it true or false? I think that many things around us arise out of a truth, even one that cannot be proven. In fact, the truth often occurs as a false truth.



Sun Xun, *The Lie of the Magician*, 2005, single-channel animation, 4 mins., 14 secs. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

Take the Bible, for instance; no one can prove that the events described therein all really happened. Is it the truth, or is it false? To a large extent, Western civilization stems from the Bible. If it is a lie, would it mean that all Westerners are ignorant of the truth? Of course not! A similar state of affairs is reflected in the story of the Buddha, as there is some truth that cannot be expressed in words.



Philosophy has also searched for the answer to this controversy. According to Carl Jung (1875–1961), it is not sufficient to say “this is a cup.” It is inaccurate, since another, different cup is a cup as well. One can only describe “this cup” in relation to other items or circumstances—it is on the table or next to a book—because it is not just a cup. If you say it is just a cup, it is not true. In this regard, language presents its own problem, as it is impossible to use words to precisely describe things. This is one characteristic of art; it does not use spoken language to describe something. Art is a form of processing that leaves a message at the end. This turns art into a form of magic. It can describe things

Sun Xun, colour sketch of a guy from MingYi, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

that cannot be verbalized; that is to say, it can express things without using words. If you are smart, you may figure it out; if you are not, you will not understand. Art is the same as the Buddha’s lessons: it invites you to find, learn, and understand unspeakable messages.



Alexandra Grimmer: In your past work you have made use of different techniques—drawing, woodcut, and montage, which means the juxtaposition of different elements such as filmed material with animated sections. For

Sun Xun, *Magician Party and Dead Crow*, 2013, installation view at ShanghART Beijing. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

Magician Party and Dead Crow (2013), you built an entire set, including all its requisite components, in the ten-by-twenty-metre exhibition hall of ShanghART Beijing. Also, *Time Spy*, the Audemars Piguet commission for Art Basel Miami Beach in 2016, was created from approximately

Sun Xun, *Magician Party and Dead Crow*, 2013, installation view at ShanghART Beijing. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.



70,000 woodcuts and transformed into a three-dimensional piece through computer technology. How did you arrive at your new project of a sixty-minute animated feature film?

Sun Xun, *Time Spy*, 2016, installation view at Art Basel Miami Beach. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Edouard Malingue Gallery, and Sean Kelly Gallery.



Sun Xun: I have been wanting to do a feature film for a long time. Every animation I have made so far was made differently from the others. In this project I want to bring together all the methods with which I have experimented with before into one

film. Technique, material, and storyboard, I have done it all before in short movies. Now, I am doing a long movie, combining those techniques with photography, sound, dubbing, and monologues.

Alexandra Grimmer: Who is the intended audience for this film?

Sun Xun: Since I am doing this film for public cinemas, anyone can see it.

Alexandra Grimmer: This means that people not embedded in the art world will see your film as well. Will they be able to understand it?

Sun Xun: People in the film industry believe in stories, while people in the art world believe in images. It is a different language system. Generally speaking, not everything needs to be understood at once. The world is like that. This is exactly what I want. When people saw an airplane flying for the first time, they did not understand it either. So, the obligation of an artist is to do things ahead of time—ahead of what the human mind can yet conceive of. It is not necessary that people understand immediately. It is fine with me if people come to understand it in twenty years. It is similar to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. During the time in which he worked on it, nobody could really follow it. Now, what it means is commonly understood.

Alexandra Grimmer: The last time I was in your studio, I noticed a colourful, life-sized drawing of a president. Based on his clothing style, one could place him in the eighteenth century. How do you deal with different epochs? Does your film take place in different eras?



Left: Sun Xun, colour sketch of a president, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShangHART.

Right: Sun Xun, colour sketch of a queen, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShangHART.

Sun Xun: Yes, this is correct. I want to make reference to many epochs in art history, as well as different styles and aesthetics. This is the part about the history of art. There is another aspect in this film related to international politics—Turkey, the US, Japan, and China are complemented by specific places and particular histories, such as Manchuria, Byzanz, and Dunhuang. From traditional times and from the present day, there will be various cultural points of reference that relate these places to one another.

My point of view also has to do with today's world; America has a very important function in relation to China. It was different before, but, today, the United States is a very weird country—very different from our previous understanding of it.

The ideological positions of different continents—those of America and Europe—is actually changing. This is happening in the background of our everyday lives. China is more important than it was in the past. It is no longer impoverished as it was during the times of the Cold War. However, what is happening today is subject to different opinions.

In doing residencies and exhibition projects, I regularly visit different countries. Travelling is very important for my work because through travelling, I understand better what things I know, what I have, and what kinds of things I never owned. An understanding of all these places, their history and culture, and their relationship to each other has become part



Sun Xun, colour sketch of a squire, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

of my work, and I am transferring my resulting feelings into the film. Of course, I am not saying “this is America, and this is Japan.” As I translate my impressions into my language, the identifying signs that characterize these countries will be gone.

Alexandra Grimmer: Contrary to our linear understanding of history in the West, your storyboard will move back and forth between different times, sometimes from the present to a former period in Turkish history, with the last station in ancient China, right?

Sun Xun: The last station will be Dunhuang, in the northwest province of Gansu; it represents the earliest period of the narrative in the film.

Alexandra Grimmer: By addressing so many current topics, is the intention of your movie to be a form of political commentary?

Sun Xun: No, it is the story of a boy looking for his father. He goes to many different places, passing through different times and situations in order to finally understand the world. Everyone will understand. It is not about one country or one region. It is about the whole scope of the world, so that people in various places can understand. It is an imaginary world with some reflections of our world.

Alexandra Grimmer: Apart from identifiable symbols having become famous elements of your work and your method of creation, there are different characters in your casting. Next to human figures, there are personified animals, such as the three donkeys who possibly assume the function of surveillance, mosquitos as soldiers, or a chicken as a civilian. You are bringing together many things here.



Left: Sun Xun, sketch of chicken civilian, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

Right: Sun Xun, sketch of a mosquito, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

Sun Xun: I want to do something new. I call it a movie only because I have no other word for it. You can understand it as something else as well, but it is very similar to a movie. You could call it an experimental feature film. Or an art film?

However, when I say "film," you should not think of your experience with other films in order to understand what I mean. In fact, forget all the categories and types of film that exist in your mind. You can keep the word "film," but delete your understanding of it. This is the only way you can begin to comprehend what I wish to achieve.

So, you see once again that when we use language to understand the world, we are limited. Don't believe language; it is too limited.

Alexandra Grimmer: When is the movie expected to be released to box offices?

Sun Xun: It will be some time in 2021.

Alexandra Grimmer: In the meantime you are working on other projects. You have a solo show coming up at the Museum of Contemporary

Sun Xun, colour sketches of
three donkeys, 2018. Courtesy
of the artist and ShanghART.





Left: Sun Xun, sketch of a soldier, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

Right: Sun Xun, sketch of a soldier, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.

Art, Sydney, Australia. The opening is on July 9, 2018. Can you tell me something about this project?

Sun Xun: I will create a very special work—a super-sized, forty-metre-long and three-metre-high drawing. It will be shown together with other new works and with an animated movie.

Alexandra Grimmer: I noticed that you shared on social media some images from the Australian Museum (the Natural History Museum, Sydney) and from the Sydney Zoo last year. What is your impression of Australia?

Sun Xun: Australia is very different from all other places. It is a very large and, at the same time, a very small country. Why? Because it is large in terms of land mass but comparatively small in terms of population. Only some parts along the coast are inhabited, while most of the interior is of an unimaginable dimension and dominated by a world of animals. This fascinates me so much!

When I went there for the first time, I found the birds walking in the street to be very strange. They are not afraid of people, and that's very funny.

Alexandra Grimmer: I like your way of connecting with places. You always bring a very special perspective, and people who know the place well come to see a completely different side to it. That said, you are working on many projects each year. Going to so many different places, I expect you don't really have much time to spend in each one.

Sun Xun: I'm very good at looking at things. I believe my eyes are much faster and more efficient at capturing interesting details than many other people's eyes are. This is because my eyes are those of an artist. Others might not think much of ostriches, but I think they are very interesting. They are strange birds that do not fly, and they are lazy at the same time.

Alexandra Grimmer: So you have taken these birds and transformed them into a type of Chinese bird? After you have painted them, might they acquire some Chinese character?

Sun Xun, sketch of civilian/the crowd, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART.



Sun Xun: Not necessarily, though in this exhibition I will process my observations of Australia as the animal world that I consider it to be. The result may be something else. For them (the Australian audience), my work is very Chinese. In transferring my interpretation of the animal world into the exhibition, I will use my Eastern approach to process the images, which will eventually be combined with traditional Chinese elements. As a result, the influences will be mixed.

Alexandra Grimmer: You recently finished a large ink drawing, right? Are you going to show it in Sydney?

Sun Xun: Yes.

Alexandra Grimmer: With the pheasant, the tiger, and the over scaled crab, it conveys a very traditional Chinese feeling.

Sun Xun: This is your opinion. I brought together many Chinese, Japanese, and European elements simultaneously in this work. Of course, there are no crabs like that in our Chinese tradition, and if there were, they would not be painted like that. They are called Dungeness crabs, originally coming from the West Coast of North America. They don't live in Chinese waters. There are lots of them in Australia, though.

When Chinese friends see this work, they say, "Oh wow, it is very Japanese!," even though there are no crabs like that in the Japanese tradition, either. Europeans will read it as something very Chinese. This is because we don't have the same cultural background.

I just want to make a very strange joke with people: This comes from where? What is this? This is an animal world.

Alexandra Grimmer: There were some subtle jokes in your past works as well, for example, when you added the flag of your studio (Animation Studio) into a scene of Tian'anmen in *What Happened in Past Dragon Year* (2013). Many little details like that can be discovered in your works.

Sun Xun: There are many jokes, or laughable circumstances, in history and politics. For example, when Thomas Cook landed in Australia in 1770, he



Sun Xun, *Invisible Magic* (work in progress), 2018, ink on silk, wood, paper, dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, and Edouard Malingue Gallery.

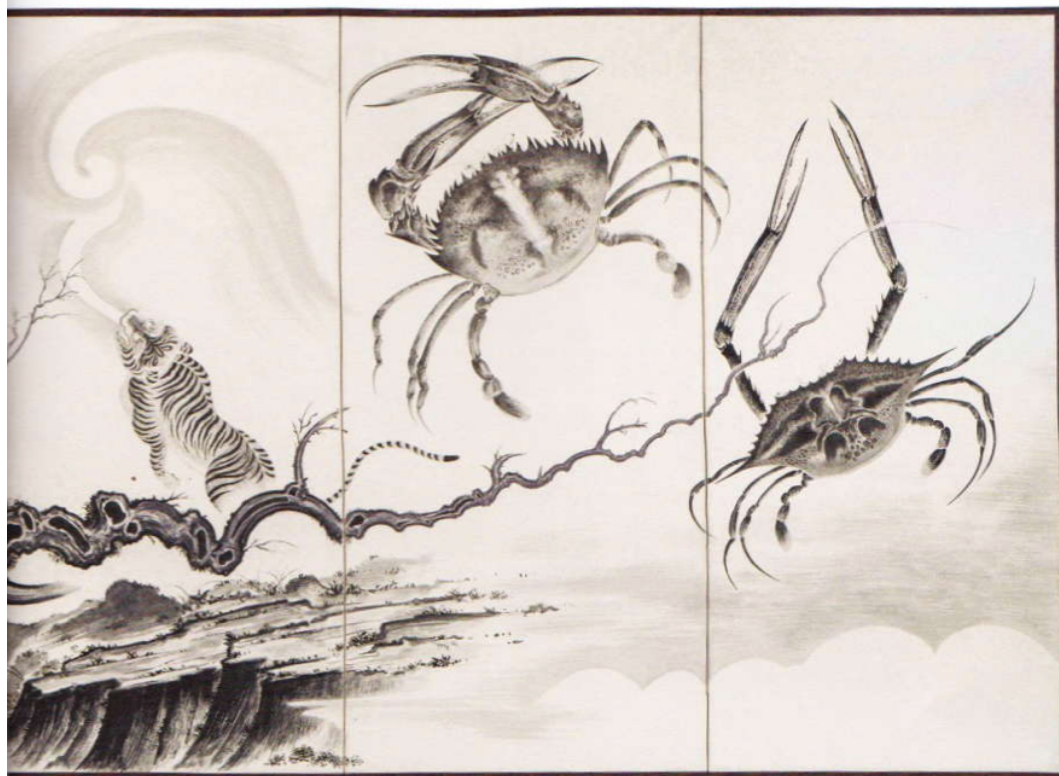
expected a place covered with dust; instead they discovered grass and water. They saw it was a very beautiful place. Christopher Columbus embarked on a journey by ship to India, only to arrive in the Caribbean. Yet, they thought they had arrived in the East Indies, where they would find spices and gold. This was not so. Humanity's history has included many jokes, and I wish merely to continue with this humour in my work.

In this way, I reflect an aspect of humanity's history. The joke becomes the real—the remarkable, the recognizable—version of history. Ironically, people are very proud of their history, yet simultaneously, they are weaving a beautiful lie with it. You know, we make a lot of mistakes. A lot of stupid things have happened.

Look at the First World War or the Second World War; what was the purpose of these events in world history? Why did they occur? Then, consider the present, the political world today. Donald Trump—it is a joke! So, everything is a joke in some way. My work is not the real world, but rather a joke about it. That is the spirit of history that my work honours.

Alexandra Grimmer: I think of jokes as uncharacteristically Chinese. Jokes can often leave a very bitter aftertaste. If no one laughs, the teller of the joke and the audience can become rather uncomfortable or even disaffected.

Sun Xun: I agree with you. The joke is not always appropriate. The end of most events in life are also not pleasant; they are actually sad or tragic. Just



look back at the history of opera: most of its content is very dramatic and tragic. Even in classical Greek tragedy, as the word already indicates, happiness is not necessarily the subject. But then there is the operetta, the funny opera, which is exactly about the humour inherent within serious matters.

Alexandra Grimmer: Coming back to your solo exhibition in Sydney later this year: the title will be *Aurora (Jiguang)*. How does this title relate to the animal world you speak of?

Sun Xun: It is a poetic meaning, referring to the cosmic phenomenon of the aurora australis. It is a wonder, a marvellous spectacle! These are the southern lights in the very south of Australia and in New Zealand. With the extreme natural spectacle of the aurora, you have a feeling of something that is impossible to capture or to comprehend in its entirety, much like the animal world in Australia. There are mysterious places in the interior of Australia that few have ever explored. It is the animals' kingdom, and we can only guess what it is like. The same is true for both the southern lights and the northern lights; you can travel close and eventually get an idea of them, but you can never go there and become a part of them.

This conversation was conducted in Beijing on March 19, 2018. The author would like to thank Juliet Wenjing Peng and Chané J. Rama Dahya for their assistance with aspects of the translation. Sun Xun's exhibition Aurora will be presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, from July 9 to October 14, 2018. See www.mca.com.au.