

# ArtReview



...is art the end?

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## Yang Fudong

The Chinese artist, known for haunting formal experiments in black-and-white filmmaking, captures the light of the Norwegian summer and imagines the darkness of its long winter in a project unveiled late last summer on a beach north of the Arctic Circle

*by Aimee Lin*





preceding pages, above and facing page *The Light That I Feel* (stills), 2014,  
eight-channel black-and-white-film installation.  
© the artist. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai







Located in Norway, north of the Arctic Circle, Sandhornøya is a small island with a human population of about 300 families, where for thousands of years conditions have created an environment rich in fish and animal life, attracting, in turn, the humans who survive on the fauna. This past September, on the occasion of the opening of a new arts and music festival, SALT, Chinese artist Yang Fudong unveiled *The Light That I Feel*, his outdoor film installation for the beach of Sandhornøya.

Yang made the work *in situ*, filming for a month on the island (using, as the artist always does, black-and-white stock), employing local dancers to perform in it and editing it at the Nordland College of Art and Film, Kabelvåg (a small village on the archipelago of Lofoten). Yet the site-specificity goes further. The screens are arranged in correlation to the stars – easily discernible in this remote idyll, far from the light pollution of the artist's home city, Shanghai – specifically the North Star and its relation to its seven counterparts in the Big Dipper asterism. The first screen features an almost still frame of a baby sea hawk. The ruffle of the bird's feathers in the wind provides the barest of movement. It is a typical opening scene for Yang – earlier works have similarly started with animals, people or plants shaking in the elements – and becomes the artist's signature imagery, registering his acute feeling for the physical manifestation of sensation coupled with a taste for alienation.

Born in Beijing, Yang first gained international attention for works that explored the spiritual world of intellectuals, or what he calls the 'minor literati'. *The First Intellectual*

(2000), a photographic triptych, went some way towards introducing this theme. Over the three images in that work, the same bloodied, harried businessman stands in the middle of a road, brandishing a brick in one hand as if caught in the moment before hurling it. Perhaps as a precursor to the stillness of Yang's later films, this unlikely insurrectionist's pose barely changes over each of the triptych's parts. Yang's 76-minute 35mm film *An Estranged Paradise* (1997–2002) develops the

theme of bourgeois alienation through a portrait of a young man made sick by his discontent with life. Yang refers to the film as his 'minor intellectual movie', the start of a habit of giving each of his moving-image works descriptive monikers. *The Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* (2003–7), a series of five films that premiered at Robert Storr's 52nd Venice Biennale and which takes a stark look at China's youth, is given the appellation 'abstraction film', for example. Or there is his 'peripheral-vision film', the nine-part *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* (2008), in which, like his work for the Sandhornøya beach, the artist has created a spatial instal-

lation that forces viewers to see all projections simultaneously, out of the corners of their eyes.

The formalist studies as to what constitutes a film mount up: his 2009 work *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith*, a 'marching (on-going) film', treated the process of filming itself as a film. The work consists of only

nine scenes but lasts 180 minutes. For Yang, as he explained in conversation with curator Li Zhenhua that year, 'on one hand, it is a multi-screen film; and on the other, it possesses the

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*Push the Door Softly and Walk In, Or Just Stay  
Standing Where You Are*, 2013,  
multichannel video installation, 16 screens, 10–20 min.  
Edition of 6. Courtesy the artist



features of video installation from the cinematography itself'. So it could be viewed as a film composed of only nine scenes, or equally as nine single-scene films, each constituting a minifilm. Even occasional departures from the moving image (while Yang works mainly with moving image and photography, he originally trained as a painter and occasionally still works in that medium), such as a commissioned project for the first issue of *ArtReview Asia* (Spring & Summer 2013), nonetheless remained an investigation into the medium. Titled *402, Snow, A Fox Outside the Window* (2013), the magazine project consisted of a series of images annotated with sketched-out narratives. The work came from a question asked by Yang when he came across a film magazine while studying at the China Academy of Fine Art, Hangzhou, that included an article, with accompanying stills, on Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963), a film that at that point the artist hadn't seen. The question was: could text and stills in a publication constitute a film for those who had never seen it? To answer that, Yang created in effect what the artist calls a 'film on paper' or a 'film for reading'.

Besides the baby hawk, *The Light That I Feel* contains myriad images – naked dancers, flowers in the wind, a stone lying in the sand – that provide a notion of equivalence between the human and the natural world. They also provide a perfect example of what Yang has called 'image as film' – or in relation to his recent commission from the Sharjah Art Foundation, *Push the Door Softly and Walk In, Or Just Stay Standing Where You Are* (2013), a 'single-frame film'. It is based on the idea that the process of shooting a film is to stick successive single-frame photographs together. If a film can be seen as a series of

still photographs, then each photograph is a single-frame film. The Sharjah work related to the Norway project in another way, too. The former, the first work Yang created outside China, was shot in the UAE and Granada, Spain, and was an attempt to capture in a series of still-photograph-like shots the 'breeze' of his new working environment. Related to his 'abstract film', it's a word that he uses to refer to a feeling of excitement that cannot be described in words. In *The Light That I Feel*, the 'breeze' is the quietness that he experienced in Norway. For a man who lives in a city with a population of 23.8 million, Sandhornøya is simply the quietest place in the world – 'as if a moose just passed by your house'. As polar summer came to its end and polar winter took over, it was also a place that brought into sharp focus the fact that light is the source material for all film. Standing in the open air, each of the screens became a lamp in the deepening darkness of a Nordic night in September, as well as a reflection of the stars that puncture it.

And so, with the screens finally installed in Sandhornøya, the beach was illuminated. However, 'the light that I feel' was not only the light that Yang saw and created, but also what he expected to see when he was imagining the darkness of the polar night – and the aurora. It might be a coincidence, or perhaps it was prewritten, but the very night on which the installation was completed, Sandhornøya witnessed the first aurora of the year. For those who still commune with nature, it was at this moment, as a pale, weak, newborn aurora reluctantly shimmered in the dark blue sky, that *The Light That I Feel* felt complete. ar



*The Light That I Feel*, 2014  
(installation view, SALT festival, Sandhornøya, Norway, 2014).  
Photo: Gunnar Holmsted. Courtesy SALT, Tromsø, Norway.