

Clement Huang, "Reappearances of Dada: On Xie Nanxing's 'A Roll of the Dice,'" *Heichi Magazine*,
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Heichi

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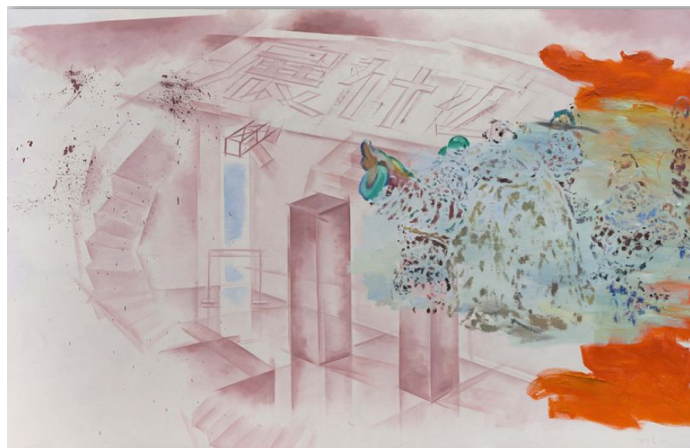
Text: Clement Huang



"Nor does one see in flesh and blood this Thing that is not a thing, this thing that is invisible between its apparitions, when it reappears." 1
— Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

The dice roll. We are brought to a state of waiting. Confronted by Xie Nanxing's paintings, the beholder must solve a puzzle: the colorful speckles on the canvas seem to assume a shapeless form, a specter haunting both the beholder and the space .

The dice land on an ordinary number. After attentive observation, the beholder finally recognizes the subject depicted by means of many colorful dots. Lying on the right-hand side of *What to Exhibit No. 1* is a kettle in the shape of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Trivial and cheesy, it easily makes the beholder laugh.



Xie Nanxing, *What to Exhibit No. 1*, 2017, oil on canvas, 190 × 300 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

At first glance, the painting seems to be a puzzle that obscures and mystifies, yet the answer is in plain sight. The process of solving this puzzle is so absurd that one can't help but

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associate Xie's works with Dadaism. In *What to Exhibit No. 1*, the floating ghost-like figures are a group of elderly women chatting outdoors, with fans in their hands. In *No. 3*, a collection of dolls from Yiwu markets are lined up in front of the elevator of the exhibition hall. The *Seven Portraits* series depicts seven close friends of the artist, with colors and details implying their respective personalities. Xie uses a technique called "leaking" to disseminate colorful speckles to form his paintings. Leaking is used by the artist to produce incomprehensible images, realized by covering one canvas with another, painting on the outer canvas, and allowing the paint to seep through onto the inner canvas. Leaking is a bit reminiscent of the "rayograph" technique invented by American Dadaist photographer Man Ray. Without a camera, Man Ray would obtain a photo by placing objects such as thumbtacks and coil of wire directly on a sheet of photosensitive paper and exposing it to light. By using these nonhuman elements, the outcome is an image where it is difficult to recognize any concrete objects. Even if the beholder is well aware of the artist's approach, such a process and its resultant product remain largely nonsensical, nonetheless.

A second connection point between Dada and Xie Nanxing can be found in the title of the exhibition, *A Roll of the Dice*, which represents the artist's reflection on the concept of chance and randomness. An French word for "chance," *aléa*, derives from the Latin *alea*, which originally meant "dice" or "accident." It is said that when Julius Caesar led his army across the Rubicon river during his long civil war against Pompey, he declared, "*Alea iacta est*" (the dice has been cast). Centuries later, Dadaists began to consider chance a productive artistic method: Hans Arp



Xie Nanxing, *Seven Portraits No. 1*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

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created his collages according to the law of chance, André Breton invented the methodologies of *écriture automatique* (automatic writing) and *hasard objectif* (objective chance), while Marcel Duchamp strove to "preserve" (*mettre en conserve*) chance in his art. Unsurprisingly, with its emphasis on randomness and uncontrollability, Dadaism also sees a revolutionary or subversive potential in chance.

Xie's *A Theater of Waiting* series provides a metaphor of how uncontrollable elements can pave the way for art. These three paintings depict scenes of waiting crowds in an airport or an aircraft. No specific signs or symbols indicate the whereabouts of those who are waiting, thereby obscuring the context for the viewer. In these moments of waiting, people's activities deviate from their original purpose: they were going to take a flight, but the airport is erased. What we see instead is a variety of trivial behaviors. However, as far as the artist is concerned, it is exactly these accidental behaviors that create drama and transform the space into a "theater." There is a third resonance between Xie and Dada, which lies in his anti-institutional attitude.



Xie Nanxing, *A Theater of Waiting*, 2019, oil on canvas, 90 × 120 cm, detail, courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

Dadaism is fairly indifferent to institutional critique, as it is not interested in analyzing the system nor contributing to its improvement, but takes unconditional negation as a revolutionary gesture. For instance, Francis Picabia wrote: "All you who are serious-minded will smell worse than cow's shit. Dada alone does not smell: it is nothing, nothing, nothing ... Like your heroes:

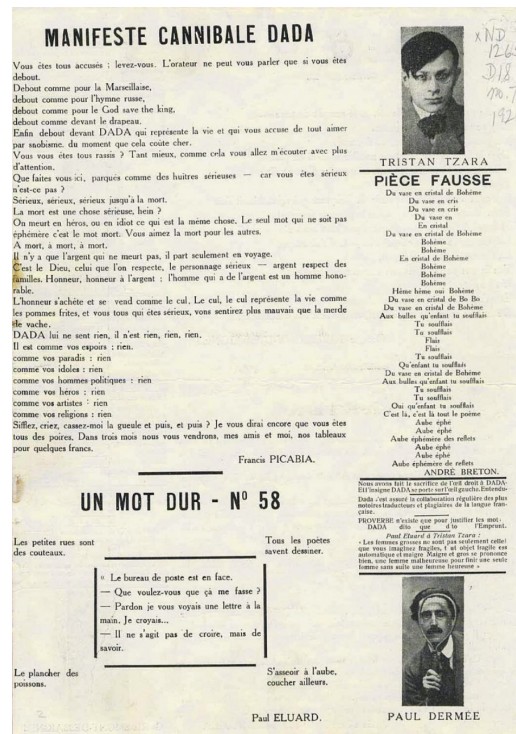
nothing; Like your artists: nothing ..."2 In *What to Exhibit No. 1*, the Snow White kettle represents the everyday objects that have been rejected by the system, here illustrated by the empty exhibition space in the background.

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The kettle, usually unwelcome in the gallery space, is transformed into a revolutionary storm, an omnipresent phantom that destroys the system. In his 2009 *We* series, Xie copied three of the nudes that Picabia painted after some Parisian pornographic magazine covers in the 1940s. Of course, while Picabia was one of the founders of Dada in Zurich and Paris, he was never Dadaism's foremost representative. Later, in 1921, he criticized the Dadaist school and claimed it could no longer create new things. Could it be that Xie regards Picabia as a symbolic figure of active detachment from all art historical interpretation and classification?

I think that there is a subtle but significant boundary between Dada's unconditional mockery of pre-existing aesthetic criteria and the fuzzy criticism of the market system often levied by condescending art critics. In 1994, after reading three consecutive issues of *Esprit* on the topic "What are the criteria of aesthetic appreciation today?", Georges Didi-Huberman wrote an article entitled "On Resentment Lacking in Aesthetics," in which he fiercely attacked the resentful attitude of French art criticism at the time. Didi-Huberman mentioned that Dadaism was often easily confused with "deconstructionism," which only revealed how many contemporary critics hated rigorous thinking. In fact, though Duchamp was unabashedly against the institutions of art, he did not consider doing anything insignificant to be a kind of rebellion. Instead, he experimented considerably with optics, materials, and words. Regarding those articles cynically criticizing the art system, Didi-Huberman wrote:

More deeply, where does its *effectiveness* come from? Because it could easily rush into the most glaring theoretical breaches where the social existence of art has been struggling for some time now ... For example, it



Francis Picabia, "Manifeste Cannibale Dada", in *Dada* No.7, 1920, Page scans from the International Dada Archive housed in the University of Iowa Libraries: [link](#).

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shows us that a real criticism of the art market, of its influence on production itself, has undoubtedly not been carried out extensively... Of course, the *nullity* of this resentment lacking in aesthetics lies in its incompetence and its fundamental irrationalism. It ignores, for example, that it has been a long time since artists themselves – artists of "contemporary art" – have challenged these very theoretical breaches through their works or their positions.³

Can critics really see and understand these expressions that challenge our art system, even though they often seem like random fragments? Henri Bergson has a definition of chance: "Chance is ... mechanism behaving as though possessing an intention."⁴ For example, it is not by chance that a huge tile falls and crashes on the ground, but it becomes accidental when the tile kills a passerby. It is accidental because some human interest is at stake. At this moment, a human's bodily mechanism fails, and the mechanism of the tile falling acts as if it had some kind of intention. Isn't seeing, analyzing, and creating accidents like this equal to breaking away from pre-existing artistic mechanisms in order to trigger new thinking? Didi-Huberman further wrote: "To criticize is to analyze forms – forms of knowledge, for example – in order to substitute others for them: it is, therefore, to create a form at the very least."⁵ When I look at Xie Nanxing's *What to Exhibit* series, the paintings seem to depict not only an accidental storm literally sweeping over the art system but also a Dadaist anti-institutional gesture that allows for a reflexive critique of art criticism.

Let's return to looking at the ghostly figures in these paintings. What are the dolls from the Yiwu markets doing? They're laughing. What are the elderly women in front of the exhibition space doing? They're chitchatting. As for the Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, their exaggerated facial expressions and bodily movements are blatantly risqué. A touch of sexiness and humor, delicately hidden behind the animosity of the apparitions, is the key to understanding the ingenuity and ingenuousness of Xie's work.

A roll of dice guides us into a spontaneous and reflexive moment.

<http://www.heichimagazine.org/en/articles/355/reappearances-of-dada-on-xie-nanxing-s-a-roll-of-the-dice>