

# 燃点 Ran Dian

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## Migratory Practice



“杂毛连须公”，展览现场，胶囊上海，鸣谢胶囊上海

“Scraggly Bearded Grandpa”, exhibition view, Capsule Shanghai, courtesy Capsule Shanghai.

**“Scraggly Beard Grandpa,” Capsule Shanghai** (1st Floor, Building 16, Anfu Lu 275 Nong, Xuhui District, Shanghai, China) , **November 4 — December 22, 2017**

Writing from Paris in 1991 under the pseudonym “No Beard Fei,” Fei Dawei penned a letter to fellow art critic and curator “Scraggly Beard Grandpa,” the pen name of Li Xianting in Beijing. Fei’s letter was a response to Li’s concern that “if art leaves its cultural motherland, it necessarily withers.” Li had previously asked Fei, “Do you believe you have made an impact on the Western art world?” In the wake of China’s first avant-garde art movement, known as the ‘85 New Wave, many artists from China who moved to the West for political reasons were grappling with how to actively engage their new social worlds; Fei claimed that Chinese artists living abroad could still address “contemporary cultural questions in their new environments.” Several decades later, the letter from Fei and Li becomes a point of departure for the exhibition “Scraggly Beard Grandpa” at Capsule Shanghai. Curated by Cici Wu and Wang Xu, co-founders of PRACTICE, an artist-run space previously in an old apartment in New York’s Chinatown where they hosted a year-round residency program open to artists from around the world, the group show staged a casual encounter between the Shanghai art scene and twelve PRACTICE alumni. PRACTICE was established nearly three years ago in the Chinatown location as a place for artists—mostly friends of the founders—to live and make work while passing through the city.

The space became a studio, exhibition space, and mahjong house to cultivate a community, however transient, for conversations between artists, and, well, practice.

The founders of PRACTICE, who were born in China, make reference in the text that accompanies the exhibition to the early wave of Chinese artists who moved to New York in the 1990s, which included Zhang Huan, Cai Guo-qiang, and others. While times have certainly changed for China-born artists and the general contours of the art world since the 1990s, the core function of PRACTICE as a quasi-familial support network reveals a social practice that stands in for a sense of community that the early generation likely lacked. Chinese artists who moved to New York in the 1980s and 1990s were largely viewed as political exiles in the West. Although many of the artists from China, both then and now, were trained at prestigious art academies in their home country, and later in U.S.-based art programs as well, the dual challenges of being far from home and trying to stay afloat in New York's unforgiving urban context placed many in precarious positions. Well aware of this history, the founders of PRACTICE have established a strong foothold in Chinatown, which has been the location for an increasingly mobilized anti-gentrification movement that overlaps, at times in uncomfortable ways, with New York's contemporary art world. The scene has been set for intervention.



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For PRACTICE, language becomes a metaphor for connection and disconnection. The shared languages of the art world — English, installation, site-specific — create bonds and opportunities for artistic exchange. Today's fluid global movement of artists (not only from China) no longer reflects an art world linked primarily to national ties and fixed geographical locations. Multilingual art communities have sparked mobility that becomes a powerful form of agency, and

allows artists to shift their practices from survival mode—many artists from the first wave of China’s avant-garde painted portraits on the streets of New York to get by—to social practice, affective labor, and the processes of community-making. The collective of artists— several born in China, though most from elsewhere — reunited in Capsule Shanghai for “Scraggly Beard Grandpa,” where the gallery floor was painted gray to resemble their space in New York. There was a sense that a set of shared experiences were actively transplanted into the unfamiliar territory of Shanghai, a city with a rapidly expanding art scene marked, in large part, by pragmatic, market-oriented tastes.



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Without an overarching thematic conceit, the works in the exhibition seem to bounce words off of one another, and produce a collage of distinctly accented modes of art-making. In the garden, Rania Ho’s installation *Genus: Verduos Suburbanus Bucolia & Love Hate Relationship* (all works cited, 2017) ironizes the meticulous pruning of plants for topiaries in suburban contexts. Wearing inflatable, nylon ripstop costumes meant to function as camouflage, a single-channel video, alongside the bulbous costumes, depicts a whimsical “love hate relationship” that was performed on site. Yunyu “Ayo” Shih’s “Before It Happens” constructs a fragile barrier near the entrance of the gallery with modular sculptural elements made of concrete and metal. They form a wall defined by negative space, and gesture to partition walls built between bordering nations. The skeletal structure creates frames through which viewers can speak to one another across the space as they tread lightly around the precarious object.

Almost as if to hide away in silence, Irini Miga's *Landscape for a Thought* works on a poetic micro-scale to produce an anti-monumental work that is terse yet profoundly meditative—a tiny, cut-out cone from the wall filled with the sawdust of its own making. João Vasco Paiva's *The Last Kauai Bird I and II* features an unmatched pair of Nike sneakers carved out of hardened volcanic lava by local artisans in Bali, along with an audio recording of supposedly the last Kauai Oo bird calling out for a mate; in this case, the ultimate absence of communication is extinction. Zheng Yuan's *Game* works within the visual idioms of the video essay as it contemplates how we experience real and virtual worlds through cameras and simulation technologies. From live-broadcast sports to 8-bit video games and Chinese scroll paintings, Zheng's analytical dissection of ways of seeing adds a dense coda to the exhibition for viewers to reflect back on the visual languages of the other artists' works in the exhibition. The concept that "each person is their own territory," a statement from Fluxus artist Robert Filliou quoted in the exhibition text, reinforces the singularity of the artists' distinctive styles, and helps to patch over the idiosyncratic gaps between the artists' works.

Reflecting on the role that language plays in bringing together PRACTICE's artists on their intersecting itineraries in and out of Chinatown, the exhibition feels like an unfinished conversation that trails off after a long night of talking over hotpot. As stated in the exhibition text, "language, evolving from being a tool to a habit, became a game." In the exhibition's game of artistic languages, there is a sense that the human connections and shared experiences between the artists add layers of meaning that transcend the works themselves, though this remains partially untapped and requires further context about the artists' on-the-ground social practice in Chinatown; this dimension of shared experience cannot so easily be sensed in Shanghai, where the feeling of immediacy and urgency feels distant. Yet unlike other group shows that try and fail to develop a coherent conceptual thread, the show's deliberate avoidance of an imposed thematic unity presents a curatorial provocation.—Produced at the time of Shanghai Art Week, with its typical mayhem of art fairs and champagne parties, "Scraggly Beard Grandpa" feels refreshingly out of place in Shanghai's burgeoning contemporary art world—one that increasingly resembles anywhere else in the metropolitan constellation of art world capitals.