

BORN 1990 IN CHENGDU, CHINA  
BASED IN AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Shen Xin's *Provocation of the Nightingale* (2017–18) has evolved significantly throughout its globetrotting itinerary. It first appeared as a single-channel video in the artist's solo exhibition "Strongholds" at Lychee One in London in January 2017, and has since traveled to Beijing, Gateshead, back to London, and now New York. This continuous mutation reflects Shen's uncompromising commitment to complexity, at once a central condition of coexistence and an aesthetic strategy she has developed to navigate this very condition. Her moving-image work holds the capacity for reflection and affective openness, a field of provocation and questioning that urges us to imagine a politics within everyday life that moves through, and is mobilized by, the processes globalizing the present.

Shen uncovers both pain and bliss in tracing the circulation of power through various facets of the quotidian. Working like a detective, she has made a longstanding investigation into the assimilation of religious practices, particularly Buddhism, into different cultural contexts, culminating in *Form Escape: Prologue and Strongholds* (both 2016), as well as *Provocation of the Nightingale*. Her findings are polarized: while the Buddhist community in Korea has developed into the second most gender-balanced in the world, supporting women of foreign nationalities as they immigrate to a historically misogynous country to practice, the assimilation of Tibetan Buddhism into various places across Europe has led to recurring cases of sexual assault and child abuse. Just as pressing is the workings of power in interpersonal relationships. In *Counting Blessings* (2014), Shen follows her father, Shen Daohong, to Tibet to document his fervent pursuit of authentic images of the Tibetan people for the use in his own painterly practice. Shen exposes the fetishistic nature of her father's objectifying gaze, and goes on to reflect on her own complicity in capitalism and the knowledge economy—at the time of filmmaking, Shen was maintaining a parallel practice in order to afford her art education in London.

To Shen, the complexity within interpersonal relationships and power structures must be taken seriously; it urges her to reject a fundamental, abstract essentialism in social relations or forms of political resistance, and instead to focus on what is enabled by a hyperawareness of the affective events making up our everyday lives. If any individual or collective desire can transform into paranoiac wills to power, so might the artist. But perhaps power is not always evil. From this ambivalence rises an ethical question relevant to any form of social engagement: With every conscientious act of dismantling dominant power structures, how does one avoid simultaneously establishing another set?

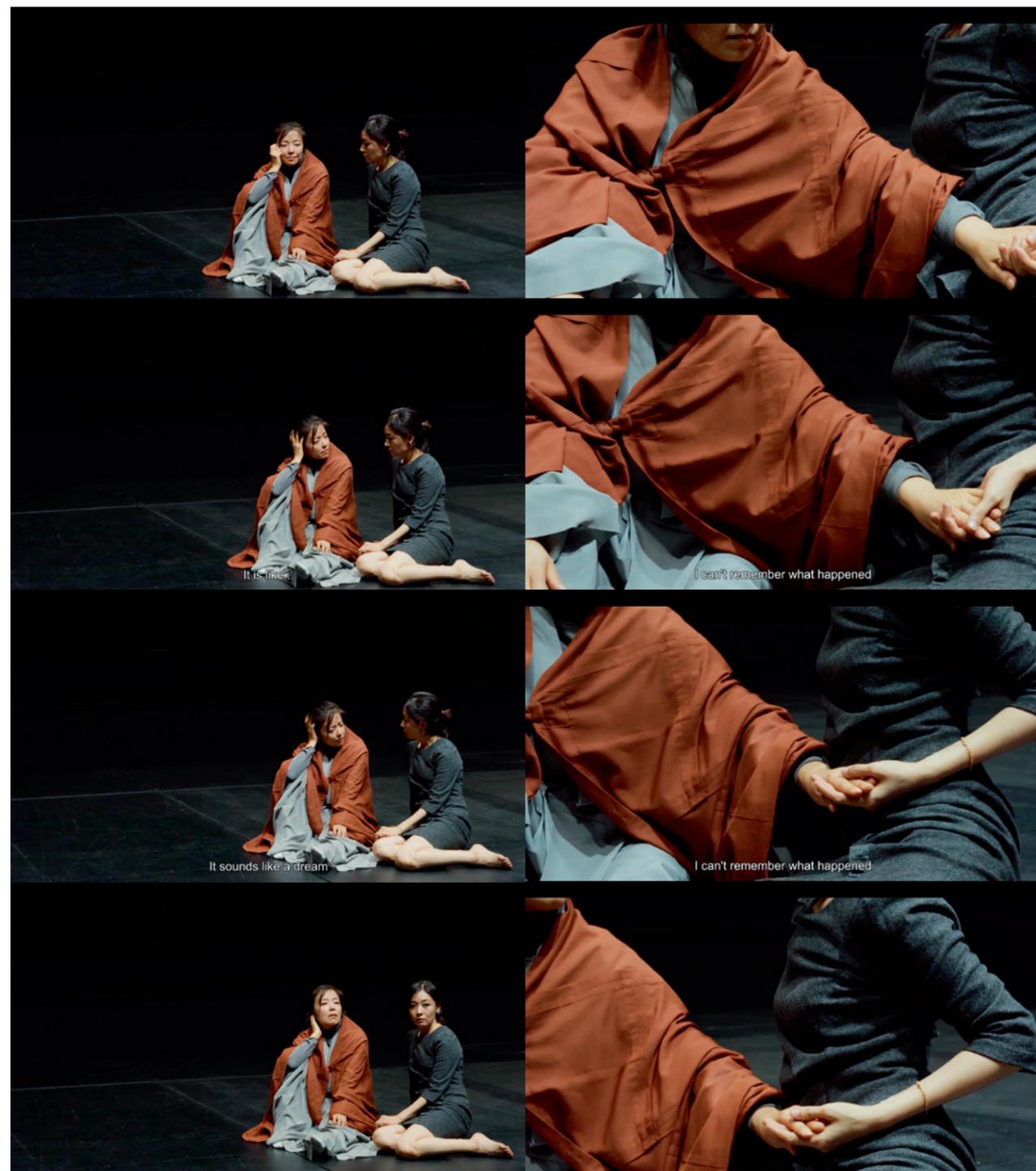
The two-channel configuration of *Provocation of the Nightingale* presented in "Songs for Sabotage" might be seen as the artist's response to this challenge.

Comprising three segments, all filmed in the theater of the Asia Culture Center in Gwangju, South Korea, the work presents a series of conflicting narratives and realities. On one channel, two videos play consecutively. First, looping yellow rings, achieved by motion-capturing YouTube users commenting on the experience of having a DNA test, dance across the theater space as the audio of their recollections plays. The YouTubers share personal feelings about their ancestry and genetics, ranging from joy—"I've always wanted to be Indian Native American, but I could never really say I was, and I guess technically now I can... So this is what a one hundred percent Native American looks like!"—to anguish: a Pakistani, after discovering he has no ancestral connection with the Arab world, wonders how his whole country can possibly be built on Arab beliefs. The video is followed by a compilation of found footage documenting the contrasting realities of religious practices as they are assimilated around the globe. Both the motion-captured video and the found footage invoke clashing responses: the former reveals a host of social and political issues ranging from racial fetishism and the limitations of DNA testing technology for ethnic minorities to the trauma of colonialism, while the latter challenges our ethical footing and empathy by giving accounts of colonizer as comfort woman and the misbehavior of Tibetan monks in Europe. The debate on the efficacy of spirituality and science continues on the other screen, where a scripted and staged encounter between two lovers unfolds; they speak of their values and desire, and eventually find solace in one another by sharing past trauma. The affective intensities that develop from their exchange open space for them to work through a whirlpool of conflicting judgments and beliefs. These intense juxtapositions may drive the viewer to the point where the customary organization of political and moral values no longer holds. Instead of offering a solution to the social problems it plumbs, the work provokes with its complex layers, pushing us to a threshold where we have no choice but to reflect on the ways we are enmeshed.

What *Provocation of the Nightingale* affirms is a way of engaging that is premised on an ethics of provocation, one which requires us to confront the complexity of our world in motion and acknowledge our power to affect and to be affected. Shen's emotionally inflected works lead us toward an uncompromising model of connecting with others in everyday life; taking this provocative stance on the formation of subjectivity and collective desire will equip us with ever-sharper tools to evaluate the varied practices of living invented in the globalizing present.

ALVIN JIAHUAN LI





OPPOSITE  
*Provocation of the Nightingale*, 2017 (still).  
 Four-channel video installation; 54 min







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