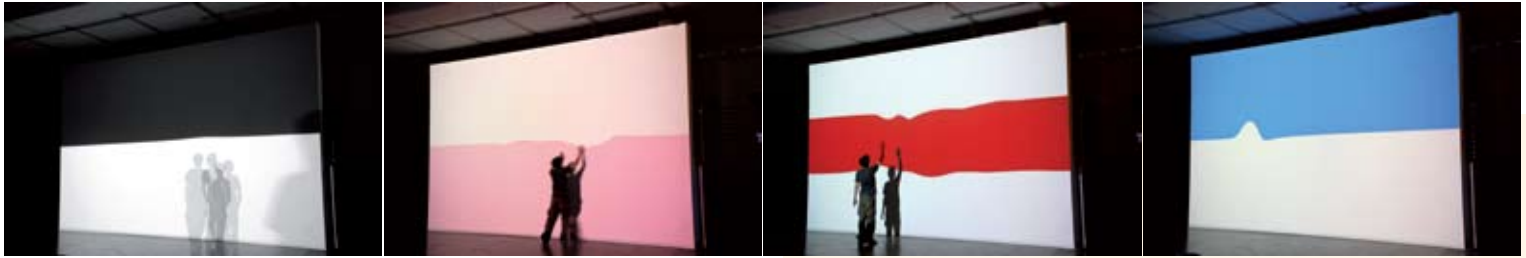


# JAY YAN

## wants to go out with you

or at least, with the cute girl documenting his ungainly proposal on the other side of the camera in his video art piece, *iwantogoutwithyou.com*. With a repertoire encompassing conceptual self-referential works and playful large-scale interactive projections, the Chinese-born, American-raised new media upstart is steadily gaining headway in the international scene as a force to be reckoned with. In the midst of a recent road-trip through Texas, Yan took time off from the steering wheel to talk shop with Adele Chong.





PROJECTION FOR A LARGE WALL SERIES, 2008, INTERACTIVE PROJECTION, VARIOUS SIZES

**Describe your art practice in one sentence.**

I try not to make art, but sometimes I fail and accidentally make art.

**How did you get into making art and what did you do before you openly declared to the world on your website that you 'are an artist right now?'**

I started making art because my parents wanted me to go to MIT and I was angry at them so I decided to go to design school. My work in design school was so bad people thought it was art.

**How much does your 'Sino-American' heritage account for the kind of the work that you tend to make? The reason why I'm asking is because I read your online bio which plainly states: 'I am born Chinese, raised American and now because Chinese art is so hot, Chinese once more.' Was this meant to be ironic?**

It's meant as irony as well as a commentary about how unpredictable life is. My mother and father both had very good jobs in China before we left in 1989. My mother was a surgeon and my father was a physics professor in a university and one of the only programmers in China at the time (he constructed the first database system used in China!). They left all that because they thought life would be better in the long run in the US. When we first came here, my mother was a janitor and my father was a dishwasher for 10 years to support us. Almost 20 years later, life is better but not by much. When they go back to China now, their colleagues all drive BMWs, own three-storey houses, eat out every night, and have a maid for everything. They tell me they don't regret it but I think they

secretly do. It's also about the art world, if I say I'm an American artist, no one really takes notice. If I say I'm a Chinese artist, I can charge three times as much for my work!

**Newsweek recently published an article on the Chinese art market which talked about the 'new generation of upcoming Chinese artists.' Where do you see yourself fitting in in regards to this category?**

I think the new generation of Chinese artists will have a very hard time because the market is so hot; they don't have to try anymore and this will be bad for them in the long run. I think most Chinese art has no dialogue with the rest of the world's art and when the market cools, the novelty of

Chinese contemporary art will no longer be there to fill the wallets of young Chinese artists. I mean, when was the last time you heard someone in NYC say [that they were] inspired by this Chinese artist to make this work? Chinese contemporary art mostly serves to comment on culture but good art challenges and changes culture.

**Raised as an American, do you sometimes feel like you are obliged to incline one way or the other and 'pick sides' when you are showing work?**

I tell Europeans I'm a Chinese artist because they like that more. I tell the Chinese I'm an American artist because they like that more. Americans are not interested in me.

**What do you think viewers are initially conscious of first when they see a Jay Yan piece - your 'Chineseness' or the actual work itself?**

I think when people see my pieces they think [the art] was made by a German because I'm influenced by the simplicity and boldness of German style and Bauhaus design.

**I love the Stealing Art performance piece where you produced and sold bootlegged copied of artist videos modeled on porn DVDs found on the streets of Shanghai - in this case, reproductions were ironically used to address notions of authenticity. Can you tell us the story behind this work as well as the kind of reactions you got from showing it?**

*Stealing Art*, to put it simply, is my Chinese cultural take on John Baltessari's famous piece, *Singing Sol LeWitt*.

I was in Shanghai buying bootleg DVDs from a street vendor and noticed an unpopular movie had pictures of Angelina Jolie on the cover even though she was not in the movie. I asked the merchant why this was there if she was not in the movie, and he said [it was] because her face sells more DVDs. I thought this was hilarious! Not only are they selling bootlegs, but they modify the cover art to popularize the movie.

When I got back to the US, the then latest issue of *Art Forum* featured a big article on the art market and predictions of the future. One article complained about how artists, whose work can easily be duplicated, are still limiting their editions to three [reproductions] in order to drive up individual prices but this prevents everyone except the economically wealthy from buying such works. Now, I'm not trying to



LEFT & RIGHT I'LL PRETEND TO KNOW THE WAY, 2008, INTERACTIVE MOBILE PROJECTION, VARIOUS SIZES

destroy the value of these video art pieces, it's more along the lines of how [Takashi] Murakami works. He produces so many toys and T-shirts that he makes very little on (apparently one painting sale is a match to his merchandising profits according to the MOCA curator) but they are still important to popularize his work. So I think of *Stealing Art* in much the same way. Collectors who always want the original with proof of authenticity will always buy the real work, why would a badly recorded DVD be as interesting to them as a collectable?

I actually intentionally tried to make it as bad as I can. It is the *badness* of it that makes it something. I've seen projects by others who try to sell bootleg art, either downloaded from the internet or photographs of art, but they all try to pass off as the art work instead of a new art work. In each DVD, I made them in the exact style of a Chinese bootleg DVD you would find on the streets of Shanghai. You see the reflection off the TV of me behind the camera

(referencing to the often seen man standing up at the movie theater at the bottom of the screen). The cover art is brightly colored with bold 3D letters (I was modeling them off porn DVD covers). The back of the DVDs are filled with nonsense text (Chinese bootlegs are filled with nonsense text to try to make them look more legitimate). I even included the thin plastic wrapping pouch that bootleg DVDs are sold in.

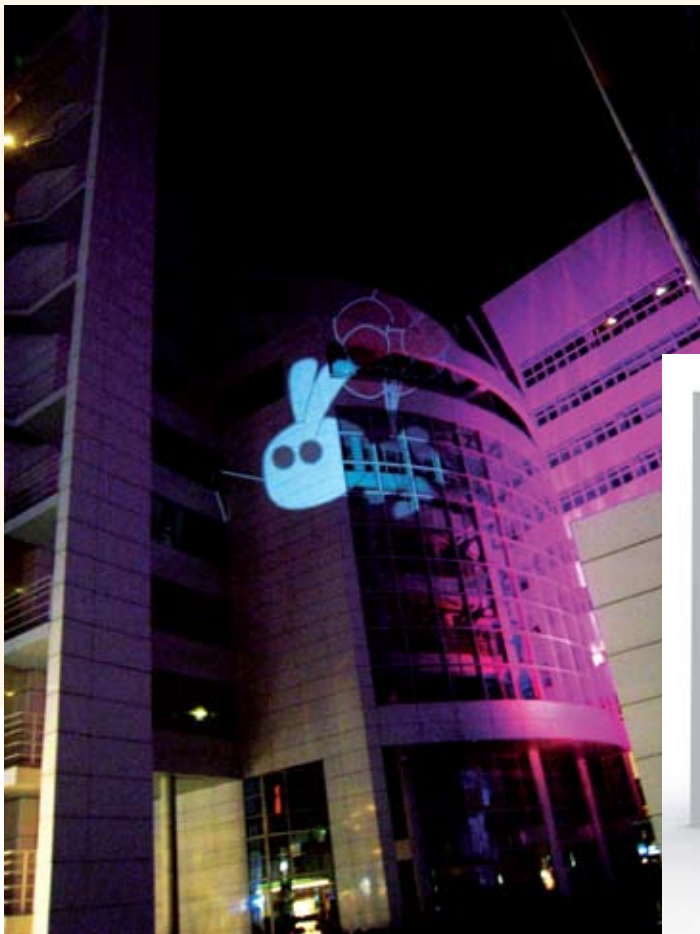
At the day of the opening, I knew two of the artists were going to be present because they were giving small talks so I set up a cardboard stand in front of the space with the bootlegs and people immediately started buying them. One was purchased for Guido van der Werve as a gift from his friend and I think he was kind of shocked because he immediately ran outside. I'm not entirely sure if he comprehended what was going on but he took one look and then went back in, not really talking to me. Marco Schuler was much more cool about it. He came up to

me and bought a DVD himself, but complained that since he made the original video, I should give him a discount. He gave me his card telling me to get in touch with him but I'm afraid he wants to sue me. All the DVDs sold out in 30 minutes.

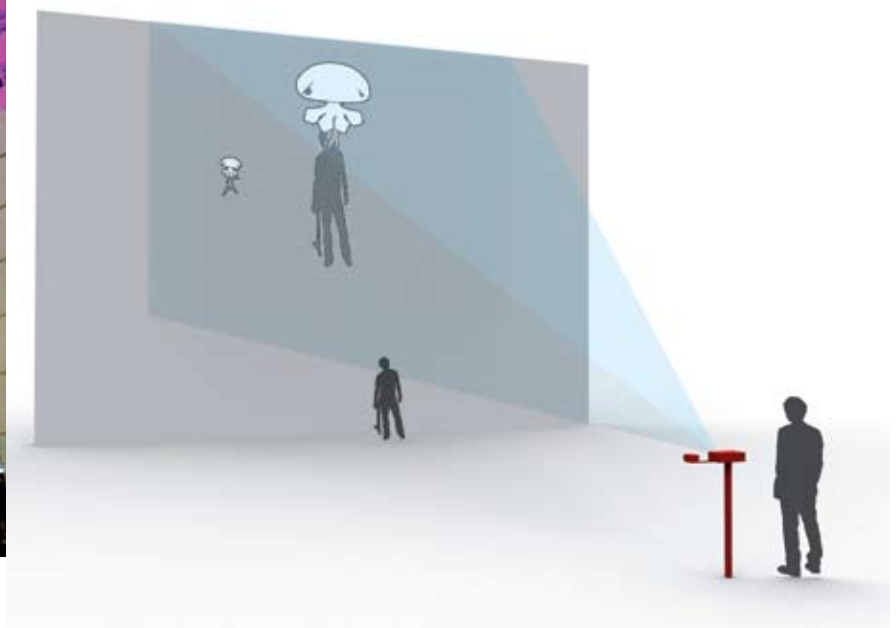
**This is more of a comment than a question: *Stealing Art* literally dealt with upsetting the notion of authenticity but I can't help but feel that this is a common theme which runs through the rest of your work as well, in one sense or another.**

More than you can possibly know right now - I have a secret project but I can't reveal any details. There is only three very close people that I know of who know what it is. The project will be disclosed in eleven months. Sorry for being such a tease.

**The search for the real narrative behind a projected scenario is always clearly emphasized whether we are looking at *My Apple Box is Bigger than Yours* where you digitally removed the apple box from under Humphrey Bogart in a scene from *Casablanca* or *Iwantto-gooutwithyou.com* where you deliberately put yourself in an awkward position by letting the girl you like film you while you ask her out. The last piece had me on the edge of my seat - as I watched your facial expressions and anticipated what would happen next. There is a sense of overstepping taboos to get to the heart of the matter - in the way you use technology that I also find extremely heartbreaking. Where does this need to penetrate pass the surface and dispel the illusion come from?**



TOP & BOTTOM WE ONLY COME OUT AT NIGHT, 2006, INTERACTIVE PROJECTION, VARIOUS SIZES



TURBULENCE (RED TO BLUE), 2009, INTERACTIVE PROJECTION, VARIOUS SIZES



This is where good art comes from, not from decorating cakes, but finding the things that challenges people. It's also because there's many things I find people do that symbolize certain problems in the world. Like the *Casablanca* piece, how it was important for men back then to be taller than women. Or like *He Did it First* where I found this single point where people extinguished their cigarettes because everyone who smoked there was too embarrassed to just litter, so they did it all in one spot in order to hide their shame. Isn't this just human nature? We pass the blame on the ones who came before. You can clearly see this narrative in the piece with the age of each cigarette. [The piece] *Marilyn in 10* is about how ingrained we are by certain art images that we don't really need to see the image anymore to recall it. *Throw Your Hands Up* is about how similar and ridiculous people act in front of interactive installations.

**Describe a moment when you were genuinely touched by how a viewer responded to your work.**

Most people just tell me how much they like my piece. A few

years ago, a woman went up to a piece, pulled up her shirt and pointed her breasts at the piece. That was the highlight of my viewer responses.

**Are there any other artists who you pay specific attention to?**

Larry Ghosh will be the most unappreciated artist in the world. Rafaël Rozendaal is going to be the greatest artist in the world. Pascual Sisto is just great. These are the guys I think I will be showing with in the future.

**Is there something that you do to fund your artist practice or are you able to live off your art?**

I work for the major art fabricator Carlson & Co. designing and fabricating some of the world's best and most complex art. It gives me a nice peek into what the best artists in the world are working on and how they work. I am not interested in being a medium-end artist so working there allows me to see how a major artist like Jeff Koons works to make decisions in dealing with multi-million dollar projects.

**Is it hard to break into the international art market as a media artist whose practice doesn't necessarily involve producing a conveniently packaged commodity?**

Yes, but who cares? Art is not about selling to collectors, it's about making great art. When you make great art, people will pay any amount to have it.

**If you weren't an artist, what would you be doing?**

This is a stupid question, If I weren't an artist, I would still be making art.

**Okay, let me rephrase the question: if you weren't making art, what would you be doing?**

Oh gosh. I had an early interest in robotics. Back in high school, I was working with a group of friends and developing complex stair walking robots which caught the attention of Dean Kamen, the famed inventor. He subsequently stole our idea to develop his own wheelchairs which also walk up stairs. That's OK, because he invited me to his private island off the coast of Long Island and I subsequently capsized one of his sailboats (for some reason, when I was 16, I thought I could sail). Needless to say, we don't speak anymore.

**Can you let us in on any projects that you are presently working on?**

I'm making a new series of projections with 20 solid color stripes that react and move to the viewer's movements. The idea is based on Josef Albers *Homage to the Square* series. I am also trying to hack this video game called *Dead Rising* about a man trapped in a shopping mall who must fight hordes of zombies to escape. I'm replacing all the zombies with Andy Warhol because there's something funny about beating hordes of Andy Warhols with everyday products from a shopping mall. [As for exhibitions,] I have a show coming up at Di Yu Gallery in Shanghai.

**Any plans to take your work to other parts of Asia aside from China?**

Sure - give me a space, send me a plane ticket, put me up in a hotel and I'm there!

 [www.jay-yan.com](http://www.jay-yan.com)



WHISPER, 2005, FRESH FLOWERS, MIXED ELECTRONICS, PAINTED WOOD, 48 X 48 X VARIOUS HEIGHTS