The Shadow of Your Smile: Xu Yong's Portraits and the History of Portraiture East and West

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Abstract:

This article discusses Xu Yong's experimentation with the camera both as a recorder of events and as a medium for personal expression. Early works document modern life in China like the destruction of old Beijing or the events in Tiananmen Square. But trained as an engineer, Xu Yong explored the function of the camera and re-engineered the lens reducing its performance to only capturing light. Then he made portraits of his friends and others. These abstracted images reveal something essential about the subjects, especially when contrasted with traditional portraiture in China and the West, as he is heir to both traditions.

Key words: Chinese contemporary art, photography; portraiture, nondigital photography; portraits east and west,

Xu Yong has spent his life experimenting with the camera to understand its simultaneous functions--as a recorder of human experience and as a form of artistic expression. The projects presented here represent his audacious experimentation in both realms. As a testimony to daily life in China, Xu photos exposed the government's policies: of destroying its buildings and neighborhoods to make way for high rise buildings, hotels, and shopping malls; of its rampage against the students of the Tiananmen event; and its persecution of prostitution as it emerged in Chinese cities. For him, film photography is unassailably objective, for the negative, unlike the digital image, cannot be essentially altered. There are two periods of Xu's work: in one his photos are a meticulous record of the image, providing as much information as possible; the other alters the mechanism that captures light, reengineering the camera lens so it is not possible to render a recognizable image, rather an intense colored light defines the composition. This technique, unlikely as it sounds, he uses to make portraits of his friends and cultural icons and by doing so reframes the nature of portraiture.

Xu Yong has pursued this fact-telling function of the camera in several projects, the most recent *Negatives*, comprises photos he took during the Tiananmen uprising in 1989. It is well known that in China and elsewhere, news images have been altered for propaganda purposes, creating convincing re-interpretations of events, or as we call it now, fake news. (Wu, 2006) People and objects are cropped out of the photograph or added. But as Xu asserts, negatives cannot be manipulated, they are an unalterable document of events and that is why he used them to publish his record of the events of 1989. He had them printed in book form, despite the strong government proscription against publishing any images or any discussion of the event. They are not available in China but widely exhibited and sold in Europe and the US. Asked why he is showing them now, he answered he has been guarding them for over 25 years and now, well-passed the age 60, he feels compelled to release them. He explained,

"On the attempt to cover-up and induce amnesia on an historic event, negatives have more direct impact as evidence than normal photographs or digital media. However, perhaps using this form to immunize against amnesia is not that important. What should be carefully considered are the social conditions that have resulted in the prolonged process of completing these works."
(www.lensculture.com/articles/xu-yong-negatives accessed 5/18/2021)

Publishing the negatives, not the prints, was less problematic for government restrictions since the images are harder to read. In this way he found a means of protecting the participants in the event, who could be subject to government harassment for their actions.

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But in a clever ruse abetted by the iPhone, the negative images, with a simple adjustment, can be reversed to produce a positive view. (Figure 1) The book has been widely acclaimed and awarded number of honors (Figures 2-3).

Figure 1 Xu Yong, *Negatives,* 1989, published 2015 (Image courtesy of the artist)

Figure 2 Xu Yong *Negatives,* 1989, published 2015, negative print (90 x 120 cm) (Image courtesy of the artist)

Figure 3 Xu Yong, *Negatives* 1989, published 2015, negative print (90 x 120 cm) (Image courtesy of the artist)

Negatives, like Xu's earlier works, engages the memorial function of the camera. In 1989 he documented the destruction of the Hutongs, small single-story brick domestic enclaves, which were being heedlessly demolished by the government. (Figure 4)

Figure 4 Xu Yong, *1001 Hutong,* 1989, photograph (60 x 90 cm) (Image courtesy of the artist)

In *Backdrop and Backdrops* of 2007, he captured images of local tourists taking pictures of each other in front of the two foremost national monuments, Tiananmen Square in Beijing and the Shanghai Needle Tower. (Karetzky 2008:92) (Figure 5)

Figure 5 Xu Yong, *Backdrops and Backdrops*, 2007, (Shanghai) photograph, (90 x 90 cm) (Image courtesy of the artist)

Xu showed how what had been extremely uncommon in his youth—travel and owning a camera--was now a routine experience for so many people. His photographs of them taking photographs of themselves are markers of a time and a place in the life of the individual as well as their generation. Everyone, he maintains, has had their photo taken in such circumstances several times in their lives; it is a national event. He used his documentary mode in two projects on prostitution in China. In one, *Solution Scheme,* 2007 he gave complete control of the picture-taking to a sex worker: it was her decision to select the models, costumes, poses, backdrop and by remote control to shoot the picture. (Figure 6) He gave command to the powerless Yu Na, making her an artist, as well as a beneficiary income of the sale of the book.

Figure 6 Xu Yong and Yu Na, *Solution Scheme B3*, 2007, digital print, (110 x 150 cm.) (Image courtesy of the artist)

In *This Face* 2008, he photographed, hour by hour, the face of a sex worker on the job, recording her expressions after each encounter. Such efforts reveal Xu's sensitivity to the rise of prostitution, once outlawed by the Communist party, and the horrors to which women are exposed--disease, physical abuse, arrest, pregnancy-- and despite these hardships, the hope of ample financial compensation that has attracted many college-educated women. Here too the camera documents social reality.

Xu Yong's New Explorations and Portraiture

Most recently, as engineer turned artist, Xu Yong has been contemplating the mechanical function of the camera and its artistic possibilities. At the same time, he encountered the theories of the aesthetic value of replications posed by Richard Prince who said, 'As a mode of production, re-photography can reproduce or "manage" an already existing photograph or picture effortlessly.' (http://www.richardprince.com accessed 5/20/21) and Walter Benjamin who said ….'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'(Benjamin 1968:214-218) Thinking that the basic function of the camera is to capture light, Xu began a new course of investigation—he physically altered the camera so that it could not focus: he extended the length of the lenses with an empty lens casing that he specially created and had manufactured. The resultant picture was an explosion of light. He presented the first result of his experiments in his book of 2010, *18% Grey*, whose title refers to the factory default white balance setting for cameras. Thus, Xu limited the regulation of the white balance to the factory settings resulting in an inability to focus the image. The series turned out to be a moving document of his life--pictures of places and people important to him all rendered as a burst of light: the diffuse reds of the Tiananmen gate, the grey haze of the *hutong* he knew so well, (Figure 7) the miasma of pale yellow of his grandmother's hospital bed. The titles are the only clue to the subject and reading them elicits a secondary response, after the initial visual one.
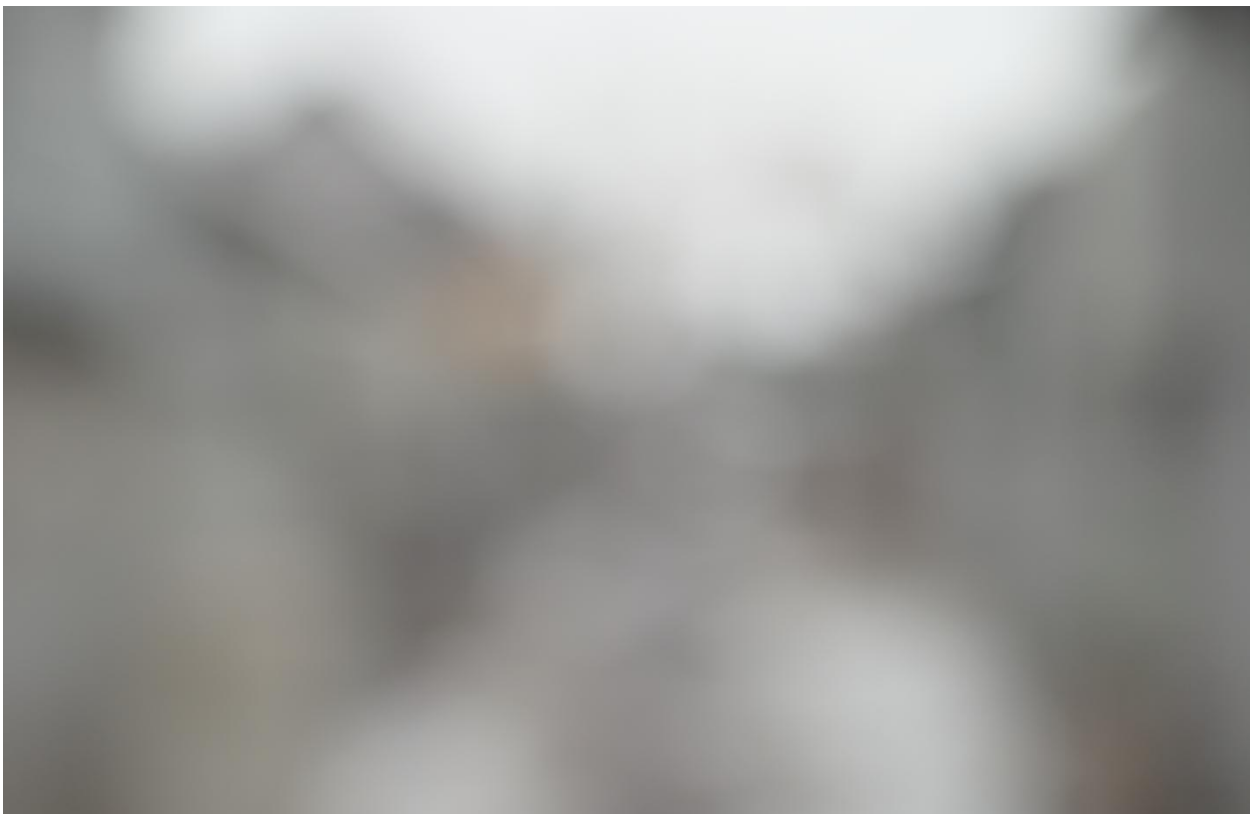

Figure 7 Xu Yong, *Deep into the Flowers Hutong* 2012 digital print (60 x 45 cm). (Image courtesy of the artist)

Xu then began a series of portraits of his friends. Here too he challenged the function of the camera as a recorder of reliable outward appearances. By having transformed the mechanical operation of the camera, he turned it into a paintbrush; without manipulating the image through Photoshop, the camera created colorful abstract designs. This experiment was part of a larger meditation on the nature of portraiture, and how the character of the model is often judged by the external details of posture, clothes, setting and other elements. Xu thought it was important to strip away these identity markers to reveal something about the inner spirit of his subjects. In engaging in this project, Xu took his place among the portrait makers of history.

The History of Western Portraiture

For over a fifteen hundred years, artists have faced the challenge of making portraits. By the time of the fifth century BCE, the Greeks created idealized realizations of male beauty (Richter 1942); and by the first century Roman imperial patrons (first century BCE- fifth century CE) desired more realistic renderings of their subjects. (Richter 1955) Since then portraits have fallen into two categories: the flawless depiction of human beauty and the stark representation of flawed and imperfect persons. Hellenistic (323-31 B.C.) and later Roman imperial artists excelled at the new challenge of picturing the non-ideal – the old and poor with withered, sagging flesh, bodies humbled by age, oddly shaped heads, rheumy eyes, slack jaws, hollow checks, and skin imperfections. They also attempted to convey different states of being and consciousness- sleeping, dying, and loving. (Kitzinger 1963) Roman portraits were held in such high regard that when bad emperors died, their portraits were destroyed. With a renewed focus on humanistic concerns in the fifteenth century Renaissance, the art of portraiture remerged (Woods-Marsden 1987); and in the seventeenth century Baroque era, the dichotomy of ideal and naturalistic representations came to the forefront. When great artists like Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) and Diego Velasquez (1559-1660), to mention three of the better-known portrait painters, fulfilled royal commissions, they had to flatter the sitter to please their patrons. At the same time, they depicted common people, perhaps as an antidote, sincerely, revealing their personal feelings for the subject. Rembrandt painted the mighty municipal burghers in *Night Watch* in 1642 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and simultaneously dressed up common people of his acquaintance in fineries they could never afford. Such paintings related the disparity between the humble subject and a false outer appearance that implied a higher social class. The apogee of his career is decidedly his brutally frank self-portraits. (Crozier and Greenhalgh,1988) So too Diego Velasquez flattered the profoundly unattractive *Philip IV* and painted the humble but noble *Water Seller of Seville*, (Apsley House, London), a profile view of the subject dressed in worn clothes, a candid realization of a middle-aged peasant. Using such artistic conventions as posture, pose, facial expression, dress, ornaments, surroundings, modeling in light and shade, palette and texture of the paint, artists were able to fulfill both their responsibility for wealthy commissions and their desire to convey intimate emotions. With the twentieth century, the challenge to express a new system of aesthetics that favored expression over naturalism motivated fin de siècle painters like Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) to name but two. Matisse relied on the brilliance of color, the vibrancy of patterns, the simplification of drawing, and the exotic decorative vocabulary of North Africa to make emotionally stirring and sensuous depictions of women and other subjects. And using fractured cubistic forms, overlapping, unconventional spatial relationships and a muted palette, Picasso reconstructed the human anatomy to render it simultaneously from multiple perspectives, thereby conveying the three-dimensional reality of the human form. In this way he partially transcended the limitations of the two-dimensional medium of painting. Many of his subjects were his lovers and he used the new technique to render his intimate knowledge and response to their multi-faceted personalities and physical attributes.

The History of Portraiture in China

Following a different trajectory, Chinese painters since the Han dynasty (second century) were commissioned by the emperor to make pictures of eminent, virtuous, and evil subjects to exemplify the merits of moral conduct. These were simple silhouettes with interior lines. Dress, posture and identifying titles conveyed the didactic intent. The renowned artist Gu Kaizhi (344-406) was the first to be credited with the ability to make excellent portraits of an individual, and this skill climaxed in the Tang dynasty with painters like Zhou Fang (c. 730-800) who was lauded for rendering not only the outward appearance of the subject, but his manner of laughing and talking, his spirit vitality. (Soper 1958 p. 211) By the time of the eleventh century of the Song dynasty (960-1126), imperial commissions focused on landscapes and "feather and fur" compositions, though figure painting also thrived. It was not until the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) sixteenth century, with its new rampant urban economy that wealthy members of society wanted portraits of themselves and the gardens they spent much time on perfecting. (Fong 1995 and Park 2011, p. 33) With the introduction of Western style painting in the late Ming, the Chinese adopted some foreign techniques like modeling in light and shadow to render their subjects more convincingly. The only extant exception to such romanticized pictures was a single painting by a commercial artist of Nanjing, Zhou Chen's (1460–1535) *Beggars and Street Characters* done in 1516, (Cleveland Museum inv. no. 1964.94) who used ink and brush to describe the maimed and diseased beggars outside his window.

Portraiture in Contemporary China

With the invention and increasingly widespread use of the camera, people, awed by its ability to replicate the appearance of life, saw photography as a true picture of the world. In this way photographs of the last hundred years were seen as accurate historical representations. But the camera, Xu Yong explains, is limited: it only captures light and shadows and a single moment in time and space.

It is a mechanical device that can only record the image before it. Within the last fifty years, Xu Yong asserts, considerations about the reliability of photography led to a re-evaluation of its value as a genuine document. (Private communication, June 2015) Although it may not be immediately apparent, the photographer affects the neutrality of the picture by his choices of lighting, setting, framing, pose, perspective, angle of the shot, cropping and more. It is now well known how photographs became propaganda, manipulated to serve a political agenda through editing and omissions. Several Chinese contemporary photographers demonstrated this process of image distortion. Liu Zheng (b.1969) (www:photographyofchina.com/blog/liu-zheng accessed 7/20/21 and Wu 2012) reconstructed and reshot photos of the Second Sino-Japanese war printed in newspapers to illuminate how they were altered by adding and subtracting figures, changing the background as well as adjusting the lighting. Zhang Dali (b.1963) in 2013 produced his *Second History*, exhibited at Luxun Academy of Fine Arts Museum, Shenyang, China, (Wu 2006) in which he published original pictures from an early communist era photographic archive along with the doctored ones; Zhang made the seemingly subtle changes apparent. These are but two of several artists engaged in this theme.

In the west the subjectivity of photography was also under scrutiny. Instead of political propaganda, it was the advertising industry that constructed and designed illustrations to create desire for consumer products. Artists such as Richard Hamilton (1922-2011) exposed this fiction: his collages decontextualized the ads, robbing them of their immediacy, exposing the artificiality of an ideal life dominated by merchandize in his 1956 *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/richard-hamilton-1244 accessed 7/20/21) A woman is shown in her living room surrounded by all her new appliances and a beefy, nearly naked male model. As the unreliability of photography was exposed, it faced rejection as verifiable legal testimony, but its creative possibilities as an artistic medium grew. Artists sought ways to utilize the medium to design their own false narratives. To mention but a few, Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) disguised her cultivated designer-clad self to create selfies of a wide variety of characters, like the over-painted, over-weight, uncultured wives, blue-collar women in America, and more. (www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1154 accessed 7/20/21) And Yasumasa Morimura (b. 1951) interjected photos of himself onto the bodies of the such famous subjects of famous masterpieces as Goya's *Infanta* or photos of media stars like Madonna and Michael Jackson. (www.saatchigallery.com/artists/yasumasa_morimura.htm accessed 7/20/21). Jeff Wall used time-lapse photography, multiple negatives, and staged scenarios to recreate a single moment in a particular place with oblique references to an historical event or work of art. (Fried 2007) Similarly, Gregory Crewdson (b.1962) enlisted a cast of dozens of actors to populate his reconstructed American suburban scenarios, creating pictures that despite their objective appearance, have an eerie unreality to them, they seem frozen in time and space and exploit the limitation of the medium to record a moment in a certain place.(www.aperture.org/crewdson/ accessed 7/20/21). Xu finds Richard Prince's radical reinvention of photo art, which co-opts the works of others and submits them to a series of editing, fascinating. Prince explained: 'My feeling about reproducing photographs or "public images", is that these images could have been observed or unconsciously collected by persons other than myself and in effect it's this prior availability that defines the images desires and threats." (www.richardprince.com/writings/accessed 7/8/21). Prince's efforts defy the hegemony of originality of art in favor of the originality of the conception, and like an omnipotent curator, he selects and edits public representations without an apparent aesthetic goal.

So too Xu contemplates the end of the art of photography in a digital age in his photographic series. Decision-making in Xu's new technique is limited to a few possibilities, and he does not spend much time on editing and arranging the variable prints: he says he intuitively selects a favored print from a shoot, with no apparent reason, importance, or order. The series is limited to portraits of his good friends, some of long duration, some more recent, some intimately a part of his life, others only intermittently seen. The viewer has no way to determine the intensity of the relationship. Captions, like those at *Xiaofangjya* series, accompany the portraits, providing name, gender, date of birth and occupation, making the viewer an active participant who must strive to make sense of the caption and its corresponding image, to try and reconstruct it, at least in vague terms. He shoots head shots of his subjects; most of them stand out of doors in natural light, avoiding brilliant sunlight. The effort is usually accomplished in one sitting. Because of the mechanical changes made to the camera, there is a loss of detail and a theft of forms from their colors.

This is the antithesis of traditional portraits where the goal is to identify the sitter by being as realistic as possible, by providing details of the anatomy, physiognomy, dress and setting. However, in later European painting, artists like Francis Bacon (1909-1992) and Lucian Freud (1922-2011), sacrificed such details to achieve a truer, more emotionally resonant depiction, for a more spiritual or psychological realization of the character. It might be said that Xu's technique also attempts to reveal an inner truth at the expense of the representation of outward appearance. In rejecting the normal signifiers of character, Xu Yong reaches out to a new realm. He goes beyond the limitations of the traditional portrait to create an image of the essence of the individual. The photos are sumptuous abstract compositions. The eerie vague shapes, colors and emissions of light overwhelm the eye. Light and hues are transmitted in a pure, effervescent state. These visual perceptions have a corresponding resonance in the body; they convey a palpable presence that transcends the mere gathering of information from the visual perception of detailed representations. Xu shows the progress of his technique by aligning multiple photos of the same subject in varying degrees of abstraction.
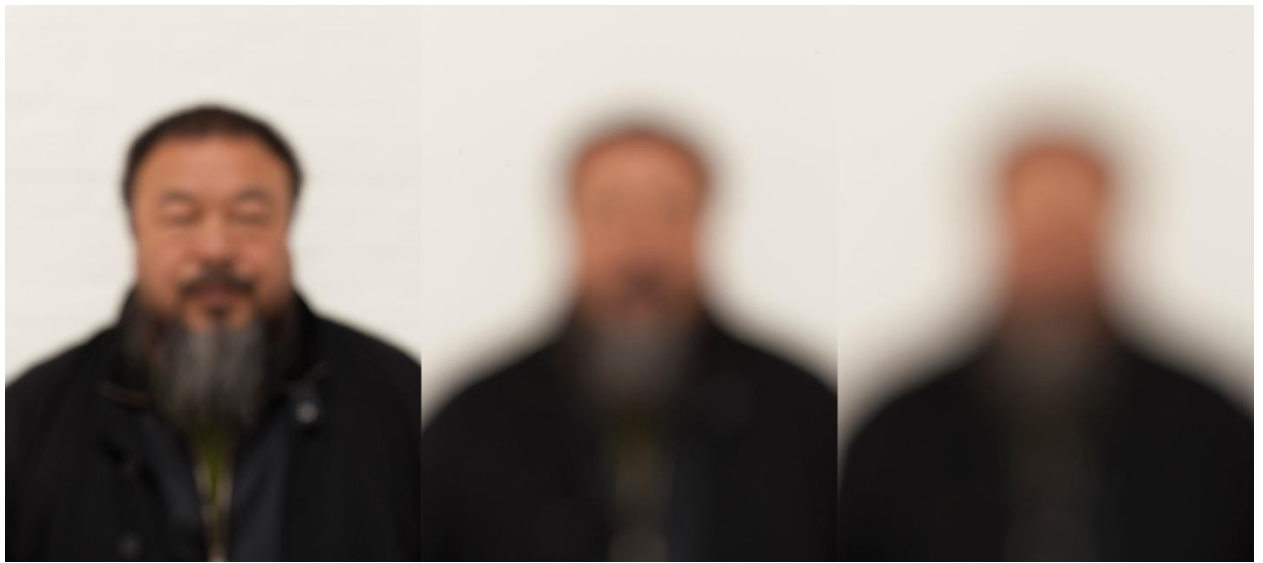

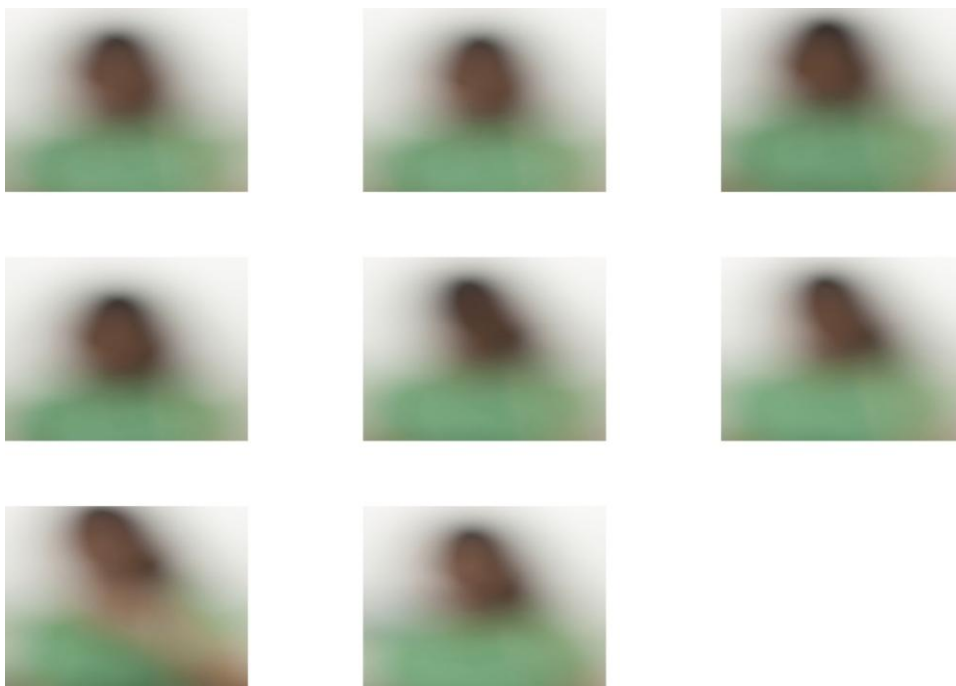Figure 8 Xu Yong, *Ai Weiwei, Artist, b. 1957,* photo (120 cm x 90cm) (Image courtesy of the artist)

Figure 9 Xu Yong, *Ye Zi, Chinese Opera Star,* b. 1981, Photo (Image courtesy of the artist)

In the last phase of his experimentations with light, Xu prints monochromatic colors on rectangular pieces of glass. These works are part of a scientific understanding of the nature of light. He shoots an object up close with his modified camera. He has the photo printed on clear glass and arranges a selection of differently sized rectangular pieces of glass in an abstract composition.

Xu Yong's most recent project assumes that photography in untrustworthy. It is but a one-dimensional shadow, subject to the artist's manipulation.
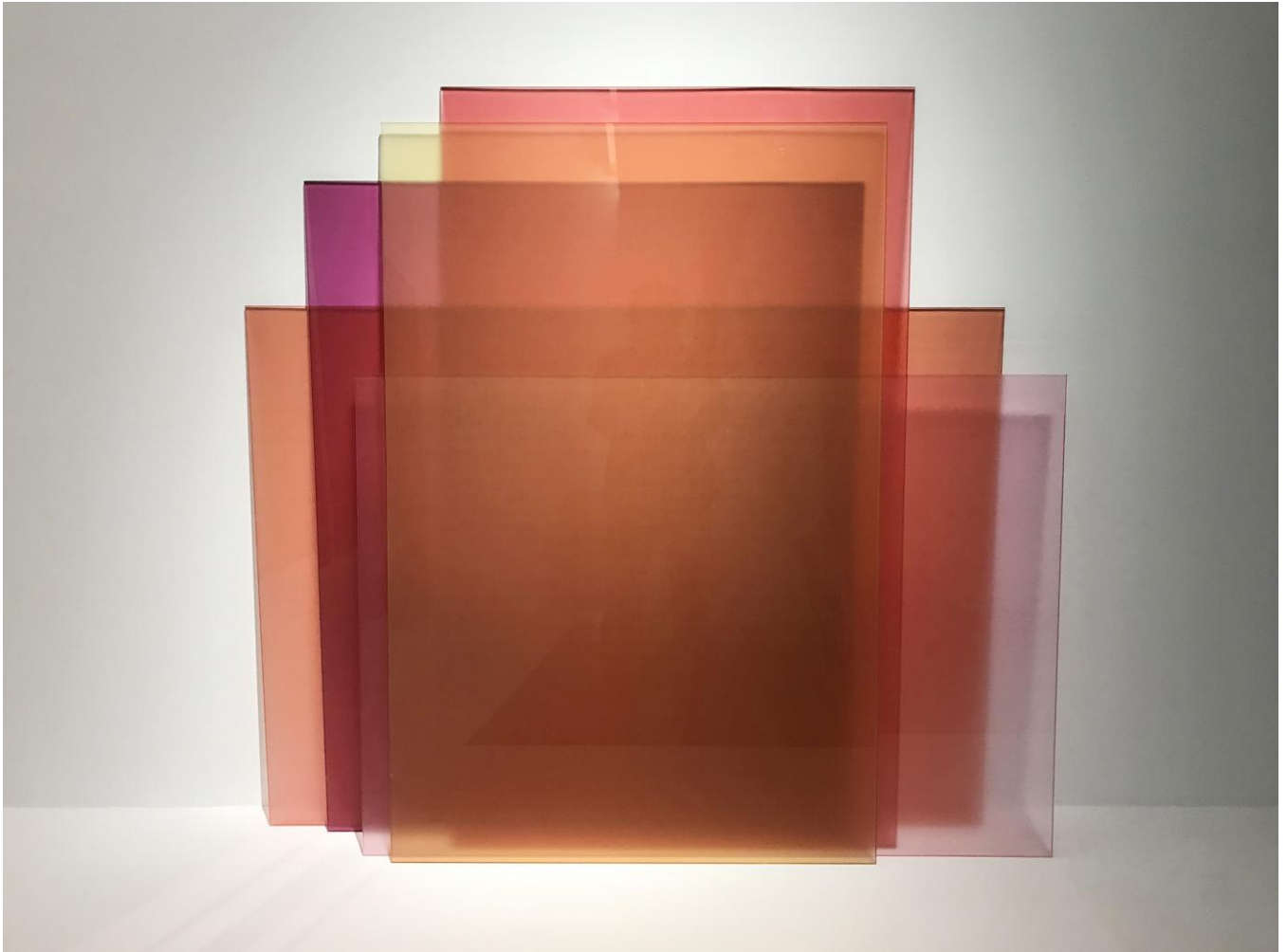

Figure 10 Xu Yong, *Transmission and Focus 002*-Tempered glass-UV Printing-Approximate Size 120cm x 100cm x 5-2016 Photo (Image courtesy of the artist)

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