

BRUNO ZHU

Shhhhhhh

1 February –
29 March 2020

Throughout the last years, i.e., since taking over as Director of UKS in 2017, UKS has fronted an aim to be a malleable operation, carefully custom-fitted to each new artist—shifting opening hours, tone of voice, exhibition architecture, outreach, or bandwidth according to the artistic intention of the current solo exhibition. In fact, as part of our annual Open Call for artists' solo shows, we've advertised that we're an institution that "molds itself to the artistic practice, not vice versa."

Now, Bruno Zhu's (b. 1991) intervention at UKS—a response to our recent Open Call—could be said to take this at face value. Zhu basically employs the institution as his material; he makes the organization move around, act differently, change. This I mean literally. In his production for UKS, Zhu takes the normally fairly tidy, white spaces, and engulfs these in thick curtains and velvety walls, somberly lit by phallic, soft, lampshades. This scenography holds, in its inner core, two seemingly unimportant curiosa selected from the UKS archive—an Easter egg and a photograph. The latter Zhu inserts into a soft, fabric wrapping, meticulously fitted as if a classic photo sleeve, seemingly cuddling the semi-private remembrance and odd innards of the institution. Further, he re-redresses the exhibition staff, making the institutional representatives don suits he has tailored. Upcycling, as he has done before, existing clothing into his artistic work, he sculpts the pieces around the human body, somewhere between fashion, fetish, and figuration. And, last but not least, Zhu instructs the institutional representatives to pass on tales, notably, when asked by the audience (so please, ask!).

In brief, Zhu turns the institution into an intimate and literally custom-fit scenography. In that sense, Zhu's artistic gesture could be said to be one grand,

velvet smooth embrace of the institution—one of these big warm hugs, sometimes a bit longish, potentially passive-aggressive, or maybe just insisting and heartfelt, pointing at UKS' function as a (padded) jewel box wrapping itself around the artists of tomorrow.

Knowing that Zhu is currently working on a novel, the exhibition at UKS could also be read as a decoy for an excursion into the secrecies of storytelling; a decoy for the artist's coming out as an author; a decoy for a literary portrait of the artist as a young man. As already stated, Zhu asks UKS staff to pass on and circulate shifting oral tales, gossip, misunderstandings, memories, whenever asked. Through these blabber-mouthed staffers, you, as a visitor, are thus offered different entryways and sentimental ties to the displayed, archival objects: the Polish Easter egg (that no one really knows the "real" story of) prompts changing private tales of adolescence, desire, and corporeal concerns, while the old snapshot from an in-house event at UKS will be re-told through idiomatic anecdotes of achievements and climaxes. Zhu thus makes UKS converse in whispery tones, fusing the institution's old ephemera with his own backstories—all hidden behind the imperative *shhhhhhh.*

Considering gestures of autofiction, the exhibition holds a fictional alter ego of Zhu in its midst, a hangman in the form of a male figure wearing a jockstrap, placed in the first part of the velvet scenography. This figure is—next to the tailored suits and wrappings—perhaps closest to Zhu's previous work as an artist, sculptor, and occasional curator (Zhu runs an exhibition program inside his Chinese parents' 3000sqm home goods store A Maior in Viseu, Portugal). Treading the backwaters of global consumer society, his previous artworks include

sewn fabric packaging for mundane commodities (soap, perfume flacons, shaving brushes) or custom-fit suits made for anonymous businessmen; both are examples of how he links desire and retail therapy with the reshuffling of intimate, everyday objects or clothing. At UKS, the male figure is hollow, it has no skeleton, it is outlined only by its clothing. The cladding—which consists of trousers-as-arms, high-heels made in clunky cotton, and the cast of a sex costume alluding to buttocks—become the only factual body or identity of this figure. There is only the outer shelling, no inner core. The empty sculptural figure is hung with its back to the audience, fragilely pinned to the ceiling from its hollow eye sockets, shying away from the show.

Coming into UKS, the initial space is all-grey, a coat rack carries the tailored suits, and a staff member wears one. As an end note, starting at the beginning of the show, as I see Zhu's exhibition, it is (while carrying complex narratives on its inside) as simple as possible: a recipe in fact, it is an instruction of the institution. It is a recipe for changing the institutional architecture and behavior, creating a re-reading of its archive in the eyes of Zhu. This recipe for a re-reading in turn comes full circle: since Zhu has decided to gift the full installation to UKS, the archival intervention travels into our, i.e. UKS' own archive—parasitically, insistently massaging his personal gesture, his warm embrace, into the institutional annals.

Rhea Dall, Director, UKS

Bruno Zhu's (b. 1991, PT) recent exhibitions include *Guts* at Kimberly-Klark, Queens, NY (2019); *Life Hacks* at BQ and *Constructing Desire* at Knopf Paul, both in Berlin (2019); *Continente* at Kunsthalle Lissabon (2018); and *Bugs* at La Plage, Paris (2017). Zhu is a member of A Maior, a curatorial program set in a home furnishings and clothing store in Viseu, Portugal. Zhu lives and works in Amsterdam. He is a graduate from the Sandberg Instituut.

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