

海边斜坡 / A SLOPE BY THE SEA

Opening: 01.09.2026

From 2020 to 2024, Kan Xuan traced the mouths of numerous Chinese rivers, beginning from the Beilun River on the Sino-Vietnamese border all the way to the Yalu River on the Sino-North Korean border, ultimately culminating in her new work, *A Slope by the Sea*. This marks Kan Xuan's third multi-year, expansive expedition spanning multiple Chinese provinces, following *Millet Mounds* in 2012 and *Kū Lùè Er* in 2016. When discussing her earlier two series, critics have frequently noted the tension between their grand thematic scale and her idiosyncratic approach to recording, emphasizing how the artist's unique perception confronts and dissolves historical and geographical monumentality stretching across millennia and tens of thousands of kilometers. This dichotomy between the microscopic and the macroscopic is not without merit; rather, it converges on the most salient contradiction across this body of Kan Xuan's work: whether filming dynastic imperial tombs or ancient city ruins along the 400-millimeter precipitation line, precisely where meanings and emotional affects are most eagerly anticipated, the artist withholds either. Composed of edited mobile phone photographs, these silent stop-motion videos are displayed in an orderly, serialized way that echoes the inorganic, desiccated quality of 1960s conceptual art. Contrary to the romantic associations these subjects initially provoke, what unfolds on screen are segments of an eternally looping present, alongside an extreme materiality that defies recuperation by grand cultural or ecological narratives.

Shot on professional cameras rather than mobile phones, *A Slope by the Sea* is constructed through fixed-position time-lapse photography at two-second intervals, while the final presentation scales up from small screens to a massive 5 x 3.12-meter projection. If the trajectory of the photographer's bodily movement implied by the mobile lens once

provided an organizing thread for the editing, this stationary setup reduces bodily motion to a near standstill. Yet, countless subtle changes continue to unfold within the frame—rivers flowing, skiffs drifting, wind rustling foliage, vehicles traversing roads, and pedestrians coming and going across bridges. We chase these contingent shifts, building various expectations only to face continuous disappointment. In the end, nothing seems to happen, time simply elapsing amidst these subtle emotional ebbs and flows. Is Kan Xuan attempting to replicate and immerse the viewer in a Bergsonian "duration"? Not entirely. The video's temporal flow is mildly compressed by time-lapse, imbuing motion with a slight, unsettling estrangement. Shifts between close-ups and panoramic views—alongside occasional, minor pans or tilts within identical scenes—coalesce, in the artist's own words, into a search for "rhythm." This rhythm endows the vast project with internal cohesion. In the accompanying texts, one finds the artist's meticulous research into each river alongside her personal emotional shifts when confronting disparate estuarine landscapes. For instance, embedded within the field notes for Liaoning's Fuzhou River is a warm, poetic line: "The small boat, like a tiny bowl, cradles people and their days." Such unadorned sentiments are juxtaposed with sentences of official bureaucratic prose, charting the subjective imprint of each locale upon Kan Xuan's mind. Yet onscreen, all of this remains submerged beneath an overarching, regulatory rhythm of repetition. This repetition is no monotonous loop, but rather a "repetition-with-difference" (to borrow Gilles Deleuze's formulation), ultimately guiding the viewer toward something akin to Gaston Bachelard's notion of the "lavish heterogeneity of duration". Within this temporal framework, whether it is a sprawling port infrastructure site, dense clusters of horizon-line factories, meandering currents,

or local people toiling by the riverbank, all elements refuse to transcend their own particularity and materiality.

Kan Xuan's lens compels us to dwell in the present, however fraught with uncertainty that present may be. The ambient soundscape running through *A Slope by the Sea* is drawn from BBC News, a 2002 sound piece by Kan Xuan. On the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, she continuously recorded 29 straight hours of BBC radio broadcasting, slicing each hour's audio into one-second increments before randomly remixing them, thereby reducing media discourse surrounding that world-shaking catastrophe into meaningless sonic particles. Today, these fragmented, clamorous particles drift down like historical dust upon estuarine landscapes captured over two decades later, casting an unsettling undertone over the entire scene. Crucially, this cross-temporal juxtaposition implies that there may be no fundamental difference between a historical event of global magnitude and an utterly banal day in an uneventful local landscape. While this insight may stem from Kan Xuan's earlier engagements with the macro-fluctuations of civilization during her filming of imperial mausoleums and ancient ruins, it also directly addresses a familiar contemporary condition: a ceaseless barrage of hyper-stimulative topics flares up and dissolves on social media; apocalyptic social, political, ecological, and climatic crises loom on the horizon-yet everyday life drones on. Trapped in this reality, we often succumb to a paralyzing anxiety, while our longing to escape the present merely feeds the machinery of algorithmic and ideological manipulation. To this seemingly hopeless, closed loop, Kan Xuan offers no resolution. Instead, through cycles of departure and return, she plunges into the seemingly infinite micro-moments of daily life to unearth and forge difference, thereby preempting all transcendent exits of meaning. From the historical relics, mountains, and rivers under her lens, we witness neither a panegyric to Chinese civilization nor a heroic counter-stance against technocratic structures of power, but rather how an artist carves out some space to move within a seemingly inescapable historical condition.

As *A Slope by the Sea* neared completion, Kan Xuan set out once again for Northeast China to film cities and stations along the Chinese Eastern Railway, creating the two-channel video *Announcing Stations*. On one screen, she returns to her most intuitive tools—the mobile phone and filters—overlying square black-and-white photographs onto raw color images during editing. While the monochrome filter lends figures and objects a nostalgic tint, our gaze is frequently drawn to the color margins framing the edges. If the platforms,

fields, and architecture in black and white appear as though they have remained unchanged for a century, the colored margins do more than simply pull us back to reality; through this mutual push-and-pull, they point to an eternal present that refuses any projection, whether toward the past or the future. Accompanying the visual track is a low ambient drone, intermittently punctuated by the long, distant whistles of arriving and departing trains, completely devoid of human voice. This expansive quietude engages us in a slow mode of viewing—a bid to reclaim the potential to scrutinize, take measure, and act against the ever-accelerating flow of time.

Agency remains paramount for Kan Xuan, serving as the driving force of her sustained practice. Within her nimble animated shorts, the repetitive, diminutive objects and movements of quotidian life occupy center stage—whether it is the drifting, flickering clusters of “island fungi” in her new work *Alongside the Sea*, the cardboard boxes that tumble, flip, and continuously self-organize to sharp syncopated beats in *Evanescent*, or the cascade of trinkets and coin imagery streaming out to street-vendor cries of “two-yuan” in the earlier *Island*. Compared to the lofty themes these works hint at—geopolitics, technological acceleration, global capitalism—Kan Xuan remains fundamentally anchored to the cyclical temporality and bare materiality embedded within them. Beneath this anti-transcendent posture lies an expansive, decelerated conception of time. In an era where progress and prosperity prove increasingly untenable, and precarity and turbulence become baseline norms, this temporal framework acts as a defense mechanism, warding off the onslaught of techno-mediated information floods and the siren song of crisis-born exclusionary populism. Kan Xuan's art invites us to linger in the present, dissecting its structure, rhetoric, and operational mechanics. At times, this scrutiny yields biting caricature, as seen in *Walking, Walking*, where a group of cucumbers pushing their own heads squirm forward under the regimented chant of “No oil, no garlic, no vinegar, no salt,” or in *The New Middle Class*, where metal washers rattle and slip endlessly up and down an industrial lead screw. Kan Xuan once remarked in an interview that her definition of humor is “a form of distance, or an understanding of joy and sorrow—simultaneously sad and joyful.” This formulation elegantly encapsulates her broader artistic praxis: against a bleak and uncertain future horizon, she practices with tireless joy reclaiming agency for each passing day.

About the artist:

Kan Xuan was born in 1972 in Xuan Cheng, Anhui

Province, China. lives and works in Beijing and Amsterdam.

Kan Xuan's video and installation works often incorporate static objects and enduring landscapes. She is interested in exploring the relationship between individuals' subjectivity and the external world, how these relationships form and dissolve, and if art making can provide ways to make new ones. Simple yet incisive, intelligent yet sensorial, her artistic language seeks the tension and balance between narratives and poetics. Kan applies a sincere and inquisitive self to her practice, whether by examining the prosaic details of quotidian life or engaging complex historical topics, she spends long periods of time with her subjects, an approach that lends her work a unique and focused tempo against the ever-accelerating, overwhelming rush of contemporary life.

About the writer:

Du Keke is a writer, translator, and the Editor of artforum.com.cn.

About the gallery:

Founded in 1990 in San Gimignano, Italy, GALLERIA CONTINUA has expanded its locations to Beijing, Les Moulins, Havana, São Paulo, Rome, Paris and Dubai. GALLERIA CONTINUA represents a desire for continuity between times and a desire to write a current history. Thanks to its investment in forgotten and unconventional sites, the gallery has always chosen atypical locations, developing a strong identity and an original positioning in over thirty years of activity. In 2004, Galleria Continua has been one of the first foreign art galleries to reach China, opening the second gallery space in Beijing's 798 Art District. Since then, Galleria Continua has endorsed an important role of cultural mediator on that side of the world, offering Chinese art-lovers a chance to enjoy exhibitions created specifically for this space by internationally acclaimed artists.

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