

# Huaqian Zhang *ARNA (moth)*

Espai 13 presents *ARNA (moth)*, Huaqian Zhang's first institutional exhibition.

Guided by a moth's fluttering, the installation interweaves everyday narratives with an industrial scale, thus deepening into belonging, estrangement and the haunting nature of certain objects. A large scale thermal sculpture built through standardized materials, gestures and processes performs as a heating system in the gallery space, and the exhibition's main feature. By fluctuating across multiple intensities and durations of heat and light, it sparks varying degrees of proximity and visibility, allowing thus to observe the threshold between reproduction and creation, revealing what is already there. As an object usually linked to cold weather and the appearance of structures that extend from domestic environments to urban leisure settings, the radiator evokes a movement that is both inwards and outwards.

The temperature imposed by the institution's closed circuit takes on a broader register in the Espai13. It anticipates the physical and structural vacuum through which sound and heat travel across.

Huaqian Zhang lives and works in Barcelona. They primarily work with sculpture, sound, textile and video, producing installations that alter the relationships between agency, dependence and desire. By interchanging these vectors as an syntactic exercise, their work generates somatic and affective conditions, revealing already existing sensory flows, structures and spaces.

**Alejandro Alonso Díaz,**  
curator of the exhibition programme

## CONVERSATION:

### Alejandro Alonso Díaz:

I recall that our conversation began from your text «Overheating». Although the installation currently on display at Espai 13 is part of a different body of work, this initial point of departure has proved to be particularly fruitful: *... love causes friction / friction causes heat / heat causes pain / pain causes tenderness / tenderness causes love ....* The phrase that sets the rhythm of the text also gives it a circular structure. It's a kind of feedback loop. Temperature appears as a way of articulating the structural and the sensory, and that somatic impulse is also present in the Espai 13 installation.

### Huaqian Zhang:

There's something temperamental about working with heat, like how our emotions can be affected by a change in the consuming too much. Heat accelerates transformation and cold preserves the status quo. You envisaged a room full of heaters, but we had to abandon that idea for fear of consuming too much energy. Although the image of incandescence remained etched in my mind: its maximalist effect, its capacity to channel so much energy into a material that it changes its state – to the point where it begins to glow and emit heat. Since it was impossible to put lots of heaters in the room, I decided to make only one, but a very large one. Scaling up the size of an object is like looking at it very closely, or making yourself small before it.

### AAD:

This change of scale acts similarly to the cyclical structure of «Overheating». Both resist categorisation, while simultaneously containing an emphasis on feeling – now I recall the references to pop in several of our conversations, or the emotional response to certain songs. There's a great deal of careful attention given to the emotional encounter with the work as well as the circumstances in which this encounter occurs. Adrenaline, desire or melancholy are states that your work and practice in general explore, and perhaps this can be read as something that leans towards the romantic, with its life and death drives. Could you elaborate on this?

### HZ:

What interests me about pop is its ability to be contagious. It spreads like a folk tale passed from mouth to mouth, a meme that goes viral, or a catchy song. A pop element originates in the mundane, is distributed en masse, circulates rhizomatically and is easily identifiable and appropriable. Lately, I've been thinking about what hyperpop art would be like. Not so much to define a specific aesthetic, but out of curiosity about how that emotional overload would translate into matter. I could sing what I want to say here with any love song, but I'm too embarrassed.

### AAD:

The loops generated in these transactions between emotion and matter, interior and exterior, have led me to imagine the circle as a hole and this giant stove as a piercing device. In *Animal Joy: A Book of Laughter and Resuscitation*, Nuar Alsadir writes: «If we resist aligning our interiors with the social order, we create openings into which we can spontaneously grow.» You know the type of holes that open up when you hold a lighter to plastic? It's something like that.

### HZ:

Yes, I know what kind of holes you're talking about... You mean the moment when something becomes detached from reality, as if losing its substance, blurring its contours and entering into a yet to be defined state. Fire is so alluring that when you stare at it, everything else ceases to exist. There's a haunting beauty in destruction. But if you focus all your love in one place, you'll end up getting burned.

### AAD:

This rise in temperature sometimes alters perception. Besides heat, this perception appears through intensified light, like a kind of overexposure. I'm interested in this state of instability, which also occurs in the absence of narrative in sound. Nothing here is stable, only fragments of experiences, blurred memories, latent violence, pulsating temperature, manifesting as flows of energy with varying intensities.

The relationship between these intensities and energy, electricity and light has been an important aspect that has guided the process of thinking and producing this installation. Particularly how they define and/or alter the moth's method of orientation. Light is a navigation system for moths, a reference and object of desire. What's the relationship of this work to moths?

### HZ:

Did you know that the brain activates a defence mechanism when we're about to die? It revisits the most intense memories in the form of flashes, searching for similar experiences in order to adapt. Testimonies often mention a light and that the transition involves moving towards it. The navigation system of moths is somewhat similar. They're naturally designed to position their dorsal side at a 45-degree angle to moonlight and fly in a straight line, but this stability was corrupted with the arrival of electricity. Their instinct became a fatal attraction.

### AAD:

I recall we had another conversation about moths during one of my last visits to your studio, when I told you that I'd share an excerpt from one of Virginia Woolf's diaries in which she writes about them. Several weeks went by and I never did, so here it is: *'Now the moths will I think fill out the skeleton which I dashed in here: the play-poem idea: the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night&c, all flowing together: intersected by the arrival of the bright moths.'*

### HZ:

Thank you! That's exactly what the exhibition's about: all the things we want to say that don't always find a channel to be expressed. The message becomes an act of faith when there's no clear means of communication. It's as if I were praying and knew for sure that my prayers would be heard. There are things that cannot be explained with words; they express themselves in the form of a continuous current. There's neither sender nor receiver, only a conduit body.

### AAD:

It's a channel without a beginning or an end, and yet *from 6.12 pm to 5.48 pm* defines a space between sunsets, a kind of arc in the night through which I like to visualise a moth travelling. It's a nocturnal insect, and the image of a night-time bird's-eye view as a way of revealing its infrastructural materiality is evoked whenever the cycle is discussed. You've responded with an installation of light, metal, heat and sound. What attracted you to these elements, perhaps more acoustic and somatic, not so much visual?

### HZ:

On the contrary! I'd almost say this is a video piece. It's a kind of expanded cinema where the image doesn't materialise on the screen, but rather resides within the architecture itself and is registered in the mind of the person perceiving it; each person assembles his or her own film. I'm interested in this oscillation between the spectacular and the spectral, between making the absent present and rendering the present absent. All of this imagery crystallised with pop irony in the image of a moth looking at itself in a mirror alongside the phrase: 'Man, stop searching for the perfect lamp, find the light inside you.' The work ultimately responds to a practical issue: I simply want to add a little warmth to the gallery so that we can cuddle up together this winter.

*ARNA (moth)* has been produced in collaboration with Arnau Sala Saez and Skyland Dallal Rice (sound), Emma Prats and Indiana Pumar (pattern and garment making), and Mikel Adán and Joan Bennassar (assembly).