

Appeal and Applause, Becoming and Being, Commanding and Communion: 2 Performances on December 7th

By Lane Speidel

Each year the newer members of the artist run collective in Philadelphia, Vox Populi are invited to present a show together. In the closing month of the *Knew Member Show*, I was able to see Luxin Zhang perform within her video installation *One Billion Applause/One Voice, Yi Sheng/Yi Sheng* as well as a performance by Marion Horowitz, activating her installation *Welcome, A Golem for Us*.

Luxin sits in stillness in a red dress on a white bench with black hair. The room is dark but there is a light on her. She sits in impossible stillness and peace without stiffness or any sense of waiting. Bending and swaying, hair gently moving and stretching to a recording of her voice singing in beautiful and clear Chinese. Laying down restfully, her movements are soft and graceful. A bent elbow falling off the bench, the underside of a delicate foot reflects a projection of underwater. She begins rising and falling, her arms like seaweed floating to the surface of the ocean. She floats and sinks with the pattern of breath, the video changing to a televised event in which a massive audience is applauding exuberantly. Their faces bust with huge smiles as Luxin softly collapses and rises again as if drowning and sinking under the approval of hundreds of people. The video shifts to a recording of possibly the same crowd of people sitting in stoic, frozen, watchful patience. She continues grasping lightly, reaching towards validation suddenly withheld, or possibly pushing against the unbreaking, watching eyes. Then when they break into happy applause she collapses for the final time.



As we watch the audience watching we are reminded of our own face and eyes, our own blank gazes impenetrably observant. I will reference some quotes from *ACOUSMA: Master of Fine Arts Thesis by Luxin Zhang* written to complete her MFA degree during her time at Syracuse University in 2018. “In my work, the performer and audience are relative concepts, and their positions are interchangeable, and sometimes they may have multiple roles.” The clips of the audience are constructed from the biggest televised event in China, the Spring Festival. These clips are taken from the broadcast from the year 1989, the year Luxin was born. This was also the year that television became very popular and pervasive in Chinese culture. When we watch the video clips of the audience from the Spring Festival we are watching an audience that is being watched, or has been recorded and watched. Luxin found that for the duration of the “4-hour and 18 minute broadcast, the audience is only shown for a total of 6 minutes”. She plucked those minutes out and sewed them together, creating a portrait of a portrayal of consumption.

We are watching an audience watch something we cannot see. They at points seeming to be possessed by delirious joy, applauding and smiling wide. And then suddenly they are silent. What are they watching? Are they watching us watching themselves watch Luxin? I can't help but think as I always do when I see a blank watchful face; Are you angry? Do you love me?

The video fades and she sits up, facing slightly away from the viewer her hair creating a curtain so we can't see her face. It makes it that much more startling when her hear her voice which can presumably only come from her hidden face. A song emerges like a sparkling stream coming from the top of a mountain flowing into the sea. Clear and high, unadorned and beautiful she sings in Chinese. What it feels like to experience is more like a sound is coming out of her shape, something crafted in air and rain and cloud impossibly flipped into our earth experience, transposed into our senses as a replacement for something else.

The lyrics translated into English are:

The moon is bright
The wind is quiet
Leaves shade the window
Crickets begin to sing
As beautiful as the violin strings
The moon is bright
The wind is quiet
Cradle swings gently
My little one is having a sweet dream
With a trace of a smile on her face

“As a child, I used to follow my mother everywhere... When she performed in theaters, I would hide behind the stage curtains and listen to her performance and singing on the stage.” As the lullaby flows from her shape, Luxin hides behind the fabric of the curtain as a child and at the same time is hiding behind the threads of a curtain of her hair during this performance. Her voice becomes totally disembodied, we are unable to consume her fully, we can't see where the sound is resonating from. It becomes like a hallucination, a moment of unreality.

When the sound ends she gets up and guides our eyes over to the opposing black wall. It has a video projects on it of her performing the same movement she did previously. It we see her shadow from the video creating eerie flowing shapes.

Then the performance is over, until a viewer enters the space and sits on the white bench under the spotlight, then they have become the performer and the performance has begun again.



all photos of One Billion Applause/One Voice, Yi Sheng/Yi Sheng are by Luxin Zhang

The setting for Marion Horowitz's *Welcome, A Golem for Us* is a silly and bright, a droopy anthropomorphic pile of household objects of a ridiculous queer clown. It stretches upwards, climbing into and onto a dark netting suspended from a rope. Large sad rosey eyes dangle down with neon fringe as bottom lashes. Below the eyes is a fish and pearl smile. Quite literally it is a smile made of a string of pearls with stuffed fishes at either end. Wigs work together at the top attempting to make a covering of hair as pants grasp on to delineate the bottom.

The Golem itself is an ongoing performance, a handwritten call for commands is clamped to a basket, it reads:

Welcome. I am building a golem for us. Golems protect people in peril and defend endangered ways of being. Please leave commands for the golem here. They will be delivered when we bring the golem to life on December 7th.

The audience settles in, in front of the creature that seems to have created itself and the performance begins rapidly. Marion rushes up like a carnival barker hyping her act, introducing the nights activities. We are promised that we will be changed forever and that we have been fated to attend this event.

“You crave deliverance- you crave salvation- you are hungry for perfection! And today, we stop waiting to see Heaven! Today, we bring Heaven to Earth!” Marion proclaims wildly, slamming one palm down into another. Tonight we will bring the Golem to life. We all begin to shout LIVE LIVE LIVE!



Puppeteers (Mal Cherifi and Rachel Brown) who are mostly hidden control long straight arms reaching out to signify that life has been breathed into this being. Marion's eyes light with achievement and power. She says that she will be liaison between us and the Golem, that we would only overwhelm it. She begins to state broad commands that are seemingly drawn from the basket, "Assemble a team to build free housing!" she states, pointing at three people in the audience as the team. "IT IS DONE!" she declares. "Kill Capitalism!" she shouts, and a canvas bag with a money sign on it is hit by the golem until nothing but green feathers are left. "IT IS DONE!"

The Golem is us, we become more powerful as a puppet. The puppet is free from its own will and can easily transcend the rules of our reality. Its fulfillment of large sweeping desires is quickly and easily done, proving in some sense, how simple it is for the work to begin. The team appointed may be working on free housing as we speak, we killed capitalism, it is dead and it was a cinch.

I say "we" and "our" because we created it. The Golem is controlled by the creator and although Marion assembled all its pieces, we as a collective force brought it to life with our desire.

Our desire to abolish police, have a black dyke president, give healthcare to everyone, protect trans people, to stop making art that only caters to privilege, to make me more whole so I don't feel separated from everyone around me. These are all commands collected by the Golem's basket. These are a multiplicity of desires from all different people. Is it more, or less powerful from the variety of voices? Is it more or less overwhelmed? Is it the intention enough to control it or does it have a will of its own?

She continues her proclamations, some involve kissing the Golem, some involve mouse housing, celebrating witches, loving ourselves. Each command is carried out quickly and without delay followed by a burst of cheer from the audience.

She is in the middle of declaring; "End family detention, enforce real environmental protections, and burn all prisons except Trump goes to jail and it becomes a reality TV show!". When a rabbi (Miriam Coppersmith) interrupts theatrically, dressed in a black coat and hat with a feathery gray beard. The rabbi has come to shame us for our easy release, particularly angered by our craftsmanship, "There are no legs in these pants!" He claims the Golem is a puppet, to which the puppeteers respond with a humorous gasp. He grasps and shakes the assembled limbs and tchotchkes taking them in with ridicule and disgust. But then with shifting passion, he begins succumbing to its beauty and charm, "Why, this poor monster with its cheeks, comely with plaited wreaths, its neck a string of jewels. Ah, my golem- my fair darling! Ah, you are fair with your dovelike eyes! Your neck is like the tower of David-built to hold weapons!" It starts to become strangely intimate between the golem and the rabbi, religious magic building in the air between them. And he decides to bring it to life himself.



It's very Jewish to place a direct critique of the work inside the work itself. This is internal dissent made public, this is private dissatisfaction made to fall in love with that which it picks apart. It is an outlandish and beautiful tool. When getting dressed, crafting dreams, making artwork or building a Golem there are many self-critical voices, one of them may as well be an angry and passionate Rabbi. "How dare you task this creature with human tasks!" How dare we externalize to the ethereal plane what we ourselves cannot do.

The rabbi brings the Golem to life, angrily cutting the threads of puppetry as the puppeteers fight to remain included. The lights become red and a swarm of smaller golems (Austin America, Micah Li, Jensen Huff, and Eliza Leighton) scramble slowly in, scaring Marion and the rabbi who scream in protest. Marion commands the golem to breath their final breath and all of the small golems drop to the ground. The ghost of the golem (Jen Rickert) rises in a garment like a cape of white clouds. The ghost recites a poem translated from Yiddish.

I'm calling now. I would call anyhow,
Even if all the locks were locked so tight.
Meanwhile my life is pouring, pouring through me,
Pouring me through that solitary moment,
Grateful now for that salvaged moment here,
For now that moment melts...

The moment has melted the commandments have passed through our hands and Marion's mouth. The desire for sweeping action and protection will call anyhow, whether or not attempt to make it form. Can a puppet created from desire die? If the puppet is real than the commandments are absurd, and if the puppet is absurd than the commandments are real.



all photos of Welcome, A Golem for Us are by Mackenzie Clark

