

# feedback

yan jun

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Interview with Tom Soloveitzik  
March 2021

**feedback** was released in 2019 on the Canadian label, ORAL\_records

**feedback – yan jun** on bandcamp: <https://oralrecords.bandcamp.com/album/feedback>

**Tom Soloveitzik:** I'd like to start with the comments by you, written on the inside cover of the cd.

Here's the quotation:

This is one of the first works i created in my new studio in beijing.

Actually my first studio in beijing.

I enjoy to stay in the room without doing anything. Except some cups of tea.

I let the feedback went on. Without any of my manual manipulation.

When i started this set up back to 2007, i'd rather play it, move it, discover its possibility.  
Nowadays i have 'feedback solo' performance that i move my body instead of the instrument.

In this recording neither the body of mine nor the instrument.

When i first read it i thought as if i'm reading a poem or at least i could refer to those remarks like a poem in a certain way. I know that you're a poet as well (though unfortunately i haven't read any of your poems to this day). What is your take about these lines? Do they enhance something for the listener about the music?

**Yan Jun:** it's not intended to be like a poem. maybe just my writing style.

i wrote them to let people know the necessary background of this recording. music is not a pure listening phenomenon for listeners. and music is not a pure sound generating process for musicians/composers. in this case i'd tell people how this music comes, or, what's behind the sound. it's a bit like "no overdub" in improvised music recordings or "no keyboard" in rock music recordings. but in further there is method and attitude. the result of different processes could be the same but i care about how and why.

**TS:** Yes, I agree with you on this topic. I'm reminded of Eddie Prevost's book '*No Sound Is Innocent*' which its title reflects on your remark. Talking about AMM, I wonder what is your take on improvised music today? Has improvisation informed your practice somehow?

**YJ:** i think most of my musician friends are considered as improvisers. so i'd say i'm one of the scene. but there were some embarrassing moments during the early days of my practice. when i played with some professional improvisers i always felt difficult. they have certain languages and codes based on written music, which i could never follow. the classical european free improvisation, especially their root of jazz, sometimes makes me uncomfortable. it's a club. and it's always too polite, sometimes hypocritical. each player has to produce an equal amount of sounds. you have to listen to and respond to each other. you have to avoid melody and harsh noise... when amm and mev (and han, and many others) started they tried to make a strange situation and push everybody into a wild field. why should we stay in a zen room now? i hope to see eddie forget to bring his bows next time. therefore improvisation for some people is a point to break out from. in the frame of improvisation they could challenge common sense. in the standard of classical improvisation i'm not qualified to play. fortunately there are different rooms and we can make more.

**TS:** You're telling a story about a certain room in Beijing, which also happens to be your first studio in the city. The room embraces your presence. What can you tell me about this room? It seems that you have a certain fondness to inhabit it. Can you describe your favorite way of doing nothing / doing anything in the room?

**YJ:** a room could be an extension of one's body and mind. recently i read kafka's *The Burrow* again. it tells exactly this topic. in another way i think a room for me could be a jacques lecoq's neutral mask (the theatre training tool). it gives me a distance to observe myself. i could be an ugly man, a mad man, a woman, a half-human or whatever in this quiet room. and which is the true me? none and both. my recent routine is coming here after lunch. the first thing is tea and one album of black metal. then more tea and perhaps another album or some odd things like doing emails and cleaning. then work. then simple dinner and more work. i have a lot of "nothing" time here. just let time pass. listening to a kid practice piano next door. picking up a tiny piece of dust from the floor. keeping my mind blank till the daylight changes... it's fun to be meaningless.

**TS:** Kafka's *The Burrow* is a wonderful example. There are some passages in it that relate in my mind to listening as a neurosis process. Can you reflect on that?

**YJ:** recently i was invited to perform in the context of an art exhibition. one group of artists built this mirror room as a version of kafka's burrow. that's why i read it again. i enjoy kafka because it's a world for weirdos and the weaks to enjoy themselves. weaks know neurosis. it's not a terrible sickness but another way of being. with my age and situation some people would see me as a mature and kind man. but i know it's mostly because i'm used to the social circumstance and self-make up. i don't make perfect music to pretend to be a better self. and of course kafka made his works' form a burrow, a labyrinth through language. the neurosis language could be so real and so strong, and so useful for being useless.

**TS:** As a tea lover i kept asking myself which tea do you like to drink inside your studio?

**YJ:** normally 10-15 years raw pu'er (i can't afford older ones). sometimes the same age of ripped pu'er or white tea (white tea of white tea instead of white tea of green tea according to the green, black, red, white, yellow and half-green system). sometimes highly baked northern oolong such as tieluohan. sounds a little picky but i'm definitely not an expert.

**TS:** When listening to the album I was thinking of different approaches to the concept of landscape in the west vs. the chinese one as brought up in François Jullien's book *Living off Landscape*. In short, one can say that the western concept of landscape considers a 'vantage point' that the subject can look at and contemplate on from the outside, whereas in the chinese concept one anchors himself in it and dwells there for a long duration of time. It is not something outside of ourselves. Does this thought resonate in a certain way with what you're doing with the feedback in this album?

**YJ:** i think so.

my friend che qianzi (车前子) is a great poet and ink painter. he is my connection to the traditional scholar lifestyle. there is no border between art and trash, work and fun, object and subject when you drink with friends around a table where paper, brushes and ink are ready on it. maybe there is a moment everybody agrees that "this is good" then the painter would stamp on a piece of painting to transform it into a final work. but then you still can add other stamps, write poems on it and hold in hand for enjoying.

this album is made by this room which includes me. or me contains the room. feedback is always about a room or an environment (of space or of circuit). our hands are not dominant.

little bit more to say about françois jullien. in his book "eloge de la fadeur" (1991, editions philippe picquier) - [*In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics, Zone books, 2007 - t.s*] he has discussed the blandness in ancient chinese music and sound (actually the scholar taste after later later song dynasty). but i would say the blandness is an attitude instead of an aesthetics. those ancient chinese weren't obsessed with aesthetics as we people after the 18th century do. i'd be looking and listening through the noise to taste the blandness. today people forget that cage has also produced so much noise. but only quietness was selected by the bourgeois aesthetics of his consumers.



**TS:** This is all very interesting. I'm reminded of a recent album by you: [Yan Jun; Musically Homeless \(Homage to PF & DW\)](#). Is this part of 'no borders between things' attitude? I know that it is a bit of a detour but I'm interested to know about the name you chose for this album - Musically Homeless.

**YJ:** yes we can say it here. that was a commission work for a festival no one could attend physically. i didn't want to produce another electroacoustic piece because there may be some other listeners. tsonami festival did a great job to link local people to the arts. and i think we don't have to rise everything higher to the "art level". we can lower art back to "life level" in this context. my friend li chaolin told me that fischli and weiss said this phrase somewhere. i haven't dug up the origin. we both like their work. especially some films we watched with terribly translated subtitles. the subtitles made them even more mysterious. i had no musical education except the very poor school lessons. actually i feel culturally homeless. my education and family background couldn't lead me to the great tradition. fortunately this is the situation i share with many people of the modern world.

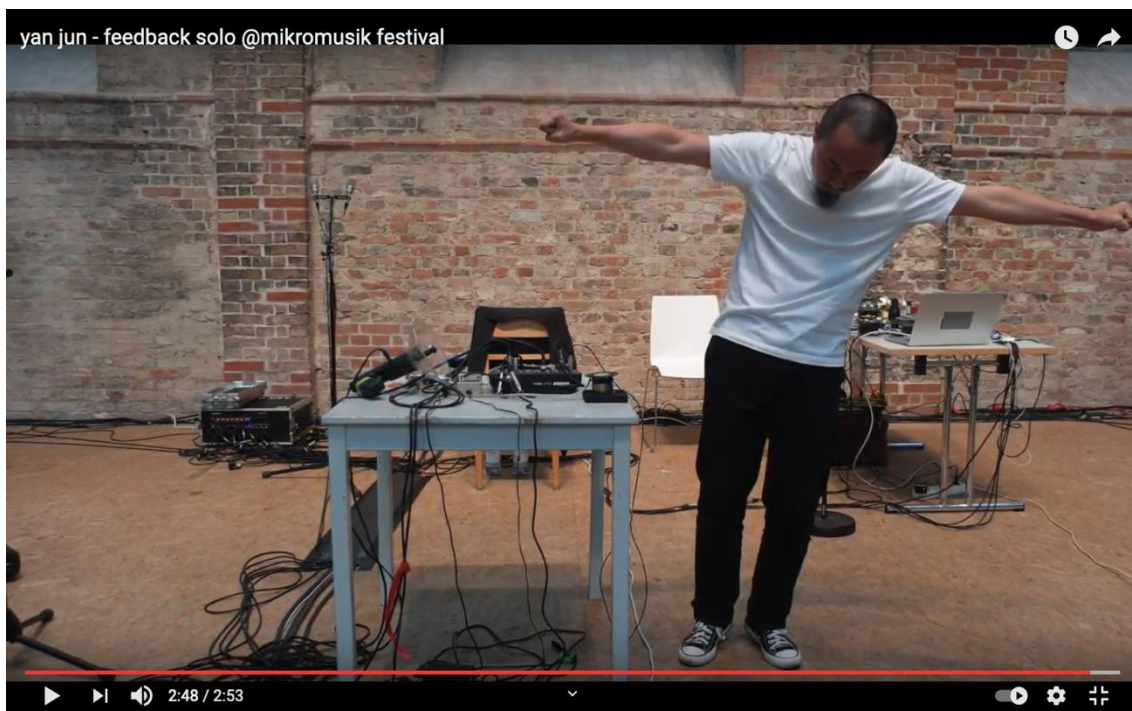
**TS:** What about Fluxus? Do you feel any lineage in your work to it?

**YJ:** yes indeed. they did something everybody knows but not strong enough to believe. of course there are maciunas fluxus, paik fluxus, corner fluxus, paterson fluxus, beuys fluxus, brecht fluxus, knížák fluxus and akiyama fluxus, and so on. but that difference made fluxus alive. i wish i could eat and digest more of them.

**TS:** To continue with your remarks on François Jullien's *In Praise of Blandness*. Attitude is something that stands out when listening to your music. Do you value aesthetics when you perform or work on your albums? Or is it always a byproduct of the process itself? In regard to your saying that Cage = Silence these days, do you see the Wandelweiser group as missing the point in their interpretation of his work?

**YJ:** if i look into myself through the performance or recording/composition i can see clearly the aesthetics is a byproduct. especially during performance the ego and habit are always flowing upon some quiet abyss. they are byproduct as one's self. i would say it's lovely and it's not solid. sometimes it's true fun to play with it, spoil it. sometimes and ultimately i believe aesthetics is the base of the hierarchical system which limits our freedom. and we have to think that aesthetics has only risen since the middle of 18th century from germany. why should we wear it as a pair of default set up glasses ?

i'm not very familiar with most of the wandelweiser composers and works. but i have translated michael pisaro's long article and edited some other related translations. for introducing wandelweiser to chinese listeners, and for understanding and digesting by myself. manfred werder has shocked me several times. his mind is my great resource in certain form of time and perception. stefan that give me an impression as quick as lightning on the street. maybe because his street compositions break the surface of ordinary life. i have also played a piece of antoine beuger. it's almost nothing but at the same time there is a strong personality. ah, there is chico mello and silvia ocougne's brasilian music based composition. a surprise if you only think the silence cliché... there is of course a stereotype of quiet and silent wandelweiser but i don't care about that part. sometimes the mind could be so sharp and extreme through a work. and yes unfortunately you can smell a kind of bourgeois scent from things under this label. i know some people playing back wandelweiser recordings as healthy music or spirit music, as they do to some ecm jazz.



**TS:** I'm also reminded of Toshiya Tsunoda's work here as an example for someone that observes and not interferes with reality, in a sense that it brings the listener into a specific place (inside the landscape) and explores its qualities. Is this method of operandi something that characterizes work? Or is this approach one of many in your disposal?

**YJ:** toshiya tsunoda always stays somewhere like a stone while doing field recordings. he enjoys it very much. you don't hear himself from the recording. in my field recording there are always my activities such as steps, breath and hands moving. for me myself is also a part of the field. the stupid anxious self. the one drives my improvised music performance. in this album i also interfered with reality by un-intended activities. i really think being selfless would be a great achievement. but if i'm not yet there i would observe the self i still have.

**TS:** Can you say something about your feedback instrument? You mentioned your involvement in playing and thinking about it. You mentioned feedback performances where you explore the feedback in the room through your own bodily movement. Is the materiality of the body something that occupies you as a performer? I'm also reminded of the air, of the aether and its sonification while listening to your feedback.

**YJ:** i use a toy parabolic mic, the so-called bird-viewer. it feedbacks with pa system and also a speaker cone on the table. then there is contact mic feedback and no-input feedback. both are very simple but when they are routed together in the mixer they modulate each other. the room is very important. the points where the pa speakers are put are very important. then you can touch the air by fingers and face. every little movement would change the balance of feedback. literally the air! a breeze would change the sound. of course i can't control or choose the sound but i know it will change or stay still, in most cases. it's really a way to literally feel the air, the room, the sound, and the body. but in this album i set up the feedback system not so sensitive. so i can enjoy the time passing.

**TS:** Is there something on the personal level between you and your feedback, certain ways you handle it, certain frequencies that occur while you use it or any other aspect?

**YJ:** there are several specific high frequencies i get often. they are not my choice but by the equipment's. there are low frequencies i'd develop during soundcheck and setting up. the low frequencies move with a large amount of air in the room so you can feel the materialization. i have another project called noise hypnotizing. it's earphone feedback with built-in mics of a portable recorder. it generates rich high frequencies which are very physical and bio-chemical. like drugs.

**TS:** I'm curious what your thoughts are regarding the way you chose to present this CD. How did you decide on its length? Were there other trials that you weren't happy with while working on this CD?

**YJ:** the length is exactly the length of recording. no cut or edit. but why this length of recording? i guess it's not very natural. it must be because i'm used to play a set between 25-45 minutes. and an easy experience of listening to an album for me is 40-45 minutes. when i buy metal cd i always don't like the reissue edition which add extra songs. that's a custom to be challenged. i have printed some stickers for add on the plastic sleeve. it contains information such as artist name and label name, and also describes the content: boring, cold, painful, sudden impulsion... i'd let the audience know it before buying. maybe i forgot to paste it on the one i sent you?

the craft level of the package is not perfect. inside of the spine need to be made stronger. the size is also a little bit wrong. these would distract people.

**TS:** I was thinking about the political aspect of letting something just be. Were there any intentions from your side or thoughts about this aspect?

**YJ:** yes it's very political. but don't trust a chinese man when he says doing nothing. if you read laotse carefully you will see he wanted to be the king's sideman so eagerly.