

Television in Contemporary Chinese Art

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Background

Established in 1958 at the onset of the Great Leap Forward, Beijing Television—the first TV network in China—realized its mandate by demonstrating the country's determination to transform itself into a modern society despite the embargo of the West.¹ Only fifty black-and-white monitors—the total number of TV sets in the capital—received the inaugural broadcast on International Labor Day, but the *People's Daily* proudly announced that China had made another technological breakthrough. More TV stations appeared during the following years in major cities like Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou, but the quantity of television sets remained small: even eight years later, when Mao Zedong started the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the whole country had fewer than 12,000 televisions, mainly belonging to government institutions, factories, schools, and neighborhood committees.² Such collective ownership of television sets remained basically unchanged during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, but great efforts were made to capitalize on the media's potential in political education and mass entertainment, creating a vast visual culture based on numerous communal TV viewing spaces throughout the country.³ This visual culture sharply declined after the Cultural Revolution, but has never entirely disappeared: even though today's TV audiences in China are

1. The Great Leap Forward (*Dayuejin*) was an economic and social campaign mobilized by Mao Zedong from 1958 to 1960. Its basic goal was to use China's vast manpower to transform as rapidly as possible a primarily agrarian economy dominated by peasant farmers into an industrialized society unified by Communist ideology.

2. Feng Bo, "Zhongguo dianshi sishinian" (The forty years of Chinese TV), *Xin zhoukan*, no. 8 (1998). For a systematic introduction to the development of television in China, see Junhao Hong, *The Internationalization of Television in China* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), pp. 46–75.

3. According to Yang Weiguang, the director of CCTV (China Central Television) from 1966 to 1978, a national TV network was created during the Cultural Revolution. By 1975, programs broadcast from Beijing could be received in most provinces. Cited in Yu Guanghua, *Zhongyang Dianshi Tai shi* (A history of CCTV) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 1.

offered wide-ranging programs from over 3,000 registered stations, they find such diversity easily trumped by a higher authority. Every day at 7 P.M., when television prime-time viewing starts, a single program—CCTV's (China Central Television's) evening news—occupies all the major channels. Suddenly the walls between individual families seem to have vanished. For the next hour, no one has any doubt about the Party's ultimate control over television.

Closely related to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and "open door" policy, dramatic changes in Chinese media took place from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. CCTV replaced the original Beijing Television in 1978 with an ambitious national and international agenda. From 1979 to 1993, its staff increased from 400 to 2,500, and its channels multiplied to cater to different interests. The same period also saw two other changes that had even more profound consequences in Chinese TV culture: the establishment of a host of regional TV stations and the privatization of television sets. Now owned mainly by individual families, the number of TV sets jumped from 3 million to 220 million during these fifteen years; over eighty percent of the population—close to a billion in 1993—became committed TV viewers.⁴ People were absorbed by new-style TV serials, including both domestic and foreign products. (CCTV aired its first American drama series, *The Man from Atlantis*, in 1979, followed by dozens of American shows over the next decade. The first domestic TV serial, *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp (Diyang Shiba Nian)*, was produced in 1980 and aired in 1981.) Some politically minded programs, such as 1986's *New Star (Xin Xing)* and 1988's *River Elegy (He Shang)*, triggered heated debates; the latter has been linked to the democracy movement of 1989. But generally speaking, the development of Chinese television from the late 1970s to the 1990s was characterized by a sweeping process of commercialization and popularization. Older people still remember the shock they felt when the first TV ad was broadcast on New Year's Day, 1979. Today, both central and provincial networks customarily hold bidding wars among foreign and domestic companies, which eagerly compete to entice the largest TV audience on earth with their cleverly designed commercials.

Although brief and incomplete, this summary of the history of Chinese television helps explain a paradoxical relationship between contemporary Chinese art and television: on the one hand, contemporary Chinese artists have never penetrated television's media network; on the other, their works contain rich references to television and TV programs. This seeming contradiction is easy to understand. Because of the absolute governmental control over the media from the 1950s to the '70s and because of the sweeping commercialization of the media since the late '70s, the technological process of TV in China has played little role in the development of contemporary art. Indeed, by the time "contemporary art"—a term often used interchangeably with "unofficial art" or

4. Xia Jun, *Shizi lukou de Zhongguo dianshi* (Chinese television at the crossroads) (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2006), p. 7.

“experimental art”—became a phenomenon during the 1980s and '90s, network television had already deeply saturated popular culture and become enmeshed in old and new visual traditions.⁵ Although some experimental artists did attempt to engage network television or to utilize closed-circuit TV in private exhibitions,⁶ many more artists were attracted by installation, performance, body art, and multimedia art—newly introduced contemporary forms that readily signified the artists’ alternative self-identity. It is in these works, however, that we find a genuine engagement with TV—a finding that should not come as a surprise considering the complex historical experience associated with television in China. In other words, if a “contemporary art of network TV” is absent in China, the television has played manifold roles in contemporary Chinese art as icon, metaphor, concept, and instrument. This essay aims to explore these roles.

TV in Propaganda Art

An exhibition in Shanghai’s DDM Warehouse gallery in May 2007 featured a new work by Wang Lang and Liu Xinhua. Entitled *Implemental Photography* (*Gongju Shying*), it is a massive archive of images selected from periodicals, advertisements, and design sourcebooks.⁷ By classifying the images into discrete groups according to theme, composition, and figurative style, the two artists hoped to uncover persistent patterns in image construction that transcend the boundaries of political, commercial, and popular art in contemporary China. One of their image groups includes multiple photographs with the common theme of “people watching CCTV’s newscast of the Party congress.” Photographed at different times and places by different photographers, the images nevertheless show startling similarities: in each case, a group of television viewers forms a tight cluster, occupying the left two-thirds of the composition and facing a TV set on the right side. Their clothing signifies divergent ethnicities and occupations, but their uniform responses to the television identify them as citizens of the state.

Two photographs in the group are especially interesting, because both show the images on the TV screens while maintaining the compositional formula. The result is a puzzling disharmony: the television viewers in one photograph watch the TV with intense concentration, but the television screen is turned away from them to show President Jiang Zemin addressing a conference

5. For a discussion of the development of contemporary art in China, as well as the concept of “experimental art” in the Chinese context, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Contemporary Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 12–16.

6. Since the 1990s, the Beijing-based artist Zhao Bandi has created a series of “public welfare” posters featuring himself and a toy panda discussing various public issues. In addition to installing these works in public spaces such as subway stations, he has also persuaded CCTV to broadcast some of the images.

7. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalog of over two hundred pages: Wang Lang and Liu Xinhua, *Gongju shying* (Implemental photography) (Shanghai: ddm warehouse, 2007).



Students in China's Central University of Minorities, left, and Communist Party members gathered in front of a village television, right, watch CCTV newscasts of Party congresses. From Wang Lang and Liu Xinhua. Implemental Photography. 2007.

of Party leaders in Beijing. In the other picture, the television viewers are smiling and clapping, echoing the gestures and expressions of the participants at a Party congress seen on a turned-around TV screen. Both photographs are illogical, because when a TV is positioned at such an oblique angle toward an imagined spectator of the photograph, the TV viewers inside the photograph can no longer watch it. Comparing them with photos of similar compositions but with the television set more naturally positioned, we are almost certain that both images have been doctored, each made of separate images of a group of viewers and a TV image.⁸ The question is, however, why such awkward pictures have become the norm.

To answer this question, we may compare the two photographs with an American postcard from the 1950s. Showing a middle-class family gathered around a television in a cozy living room, it is also a constructed picture, because the image on the TV screen cannot possibly have been photographed with such clarity and crispness in a lighted room—it must have come from a separate source and been grafted onto the photograph. But such manipulation only makes the representation more convincing visually, because it restores an imagined reality: the woman on the TV smiles and speaks directly to the spectator, presumably standing in the same living room as one of the TV viewers. Such pictorial illusionism is not the goal of the two Chinese photographs, whose awkward composition testifies to three ideological agendas that transcend perceptual believability. First, these and similar propaganda images must represent “the people”—a collective subjectivity constructed to serve as “the master of a socialist country.”⁹ The TV viewers in the photographs embody this subjectivity through their nearly frontal poses as in a group portrait (while the American

8. For numerous examples of such doctored propaganda photographs, see Wu Hung, *Zhang Dali: “Second History”* (Chicago: Walsh Gallery, 2006).

9. For a discussion of “the people” as a constructed visual reality, see Wu Hung, “Displaying the People,” in *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 85–104.



Left: Villagers watch the Sixteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. From Wang Lang and Liu Xinhua. *Implemental Photography*. 2007.
Right: Americans gathered around a TV in the 1950s.

postcard picture only offers a glimpse of the TV viewers' faces). Second, such propaganda images must also represent the Party's leadership, an agenda satisfied in the two photographs by showing a Party congress on the TV screen. Third, from the early days of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there has been a persistent quest for formulas to represent a symbolic "meeting" between the leader and the people; the two doctored images provide an ingenious solution by using TV as a picture-within-a-picture in single-framed photographs.

Among these three agendas, the third encapsulates the first two and is naturally the most challenging. Indeed, when Chinese painters depicted the National Day parade in Tiananmen Square—a frequent theme of propaganda art from the 1950s to the '70s—they often found it difficult, if not impossible, to portray Mao and the parading masses in a single frame. This difficulty is demonstrated by two paintings created after the establishment of the PRC on October 1, 1949. The first is Dong Xiwen's 1952–53 oil painting *The Founding of the Nation*. Arguably the most celebrated work of official Chinese art, it depicts the moment when Mao, standing on Tiananmen's balcony, proclaimed the establishment of the new country. Behind Mao are other top leaders. In order to show the "revolutionary masses" in the square, the artist systematically manipulated perspective, artificially raising the horizon so the entire square could come into view.¹⁰ The result of this and other maneuvers is an unobstructed view of the two spaces above and below Tiananmen—a composite scene that is unattainable in any photograph of the event, which could only focus on one space or the other, never both. Still, the parading masses in the painting derive strength only from a collective anonymity, while the leaders atop Tiananmen are portrayed convincingly as individuals. This "revolutionary masterpiece" thus continued a conservative tradition of historical painting by differentiating the leader and the people as figure and ground.

The second example, a poster printed after the 1949 ceremony, reverses the

10. For a detailed analysis of this painting and related works, see Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, pp. 173–77.

perspective of *The Founding of the Nation* by depicting the event from the square below. Like a distant mirage, Tiananmen now looms over an ocean of people, who cheer at the monument with an empty rostrum. The presence of Mao on the rostrum is symbolized by his portrait, drawn perfectly rectangular even though Tiananmen itself was painted from a diagonal angle.¹¹ The cheering crowd consists of men and women wearing clothes that indicate their different social classes and occupations. Portrayed from the back, they are faceless figures in an anonymous whole. Their role is reduced to defining a particular vantage point, from which Mao's existence is comprehended as an everlasting image. (Today's viewer of the picture may in fact imagine that Mao's portrait is projected on a giant screen like those found at large conventions, sports events, and rock concerts.)

Both paintings manipulate reality for symbolic purposes, but refrain from representing the leader and the people as interacting parties in a ritual communication; instead, they betray a vast gulf separating the two. A solution to this problem was found in multiframe photography, as exemplified by a spread on two facing pages in a 1950 issue of the *People's Pictorial*. The ten photographs in the spread are juxtaposed spatially to constitute a coherent representation of the National Day celebration that year. Among them, the largest picture focuses on a crowd of marchers, cheering and waving their hands toward someone outside the picture frame. The subject of their enthusiasm is shown in another photo at the upper left: Mao stands on Tiananmen's balcony and waves back at the marchers. The downward angle of the first photo implies a gaze from above. Equipped with a telephoto lens, the photographer is also able to capture the

11. This then became a convention in propaganda paintings. For other examples, see *ibid.*, figs. 51, 54.



Dong Xiwen. The Founding of the Nation. 1952–53.



Left: Images of the 1950 National Day Celebration from People's Pictorial. Right: Anonymous. National Day Celebration in Tiananmen Square. 1950.

ecstatic expressions on nearby marchers' faces. The second photo is much smaller. Placed at the upper left corner of the spread and overlapping the larger photo, however, this second image assumes a commanding position and defines a vantage point. Juxtaposed as a pair, the two photos create the illusion of two gazes responding to each other: whereas the marchers become ecstatic upon seeing Mao (or Mao's portrait), Mao also sees them from Tiananmen's balcony. The intentionality of this design is clearly revealed by the captions of the two photos: "Chairman Mao on Tiananmen waves at the 400,000 people in the rally" for the upper left picture, and "Chairman Mao sees the masses who wave to him with great enthusiasm" for the lower right image.¹²

The two photos representing "people watching CCTV's newscast of the Party congress" are not necessarily more sophisticated or convincing than this 1950 spread. What is new about them is their use of the television to collapse previously separate spaces and subjects into a single representation. The dilemmas of distance and perspective no longer exist: wherever it is installed, a TV instantly conjures up a picture within a picture, inserting remote images into local settings in real time. This function makes a TV a *chronotope*, a term used by M. M. Bakhtin to designate the spatiotemporal matrix that governs the base condition of narratives and, in Eugene Wang's formulation, "compresses different time frames and spatial realms within one continuum."¹³ It differs from a

12. The remaining eight photos in the series, further reduced in size and arranged along the left and bottom of the spread to surround the first two pictures, all serve a dual purpose to represent specific components of the parade and to construct Mao's omnipresent gaze.

13. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and

literary or architectonic chronotope, however, in its ability to enmesh disjoined local times and spaces into an interconnected spatiotemporal order sustained by a media network. Not coincidentally, most photographs compiled by Wang and Liu bear captions stating emphatically that people are watching a direct TV broadcast of an ongoing event. The implication is that the viewers of the broadcast, whether in Ningxia in the northwest or in Zhejiang in the southeast, are participating in a Party congress held in Beijing, albeit through TV's invisible network. Conversely, the television in these photographs transgresses geographical boundaries and temporal zones and stands for the omnipresence of the Party's leadership.

When Wang and Liu transferred these photographs from divergent sources into a homogeneous group, their goal was to demystify their independent meaning through the revelation of their shared visual grammar. In other words, although each picture claims to capture a particular local event, their uniform pictorial formula reveals a preexisting script. This script differs from the explanatory texts attached to the photographs: whereas the captions always *localize* the image by emphasizing the television viewers' distinct regional, ethnic, and professional identities, the standardized photographic composition erases such differences completely. The captions also describe the television viewers as independent agents—they come together voluntarily to watch the CCTV news-cast. But in the photographs, it is the television that controls and synchronizes the viewers' emotional responses. As we have learned from representations of the National Parade, the real subject of these photographs is neither a particular event nor a specific subject, but the relationship between the Party (symbolized by the television) and the masses (represented by the television viewers). This relationship also dictated actual TV viewing during the Cultural Revolution, as communal TV-viewing spaces were established in factories, schools, villages, and neighborhoods throughout the country. Nearly two decades later, the memory of such TV-viewing experience informed the first group of experimental video works in China.¹⁴

TV and the Communal Viewing Experience

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, a distinct vernacular architecture was invented in Shanghai and transformed the urban space.

Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Eugene Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 55.

14. In addition to Zhang Peili's *Hygiene Document No. 3*, many other video works created in the early 1990s were presented as TV broadcasting in real spaces. Wang Jianwei, another pioneer of Chinese video art, told me in a private conversation that only starting from the mid-1990s were his video works dissociated from the notion of TV.



Wenhui Bao. *Illustration for Struggles in a Sun-facing Courtyard*. 1976.

Known as *Shikumen*, it is distinguished by neighborhoods of row houses connected by narrow alleyways. Whereas each row house was equipped with a tiny courtyard called a *tianjing*, or “sky well,” the alleyways provided communal spaces where people in the neighborhood mingled and interacted. During the Cultural Revolution, especially around the mid-1970s, such residential compounds were transformed into neighborhood units known as “sun-facing courtyards” (*xiangyang yuan*), a name that implies a pledge of collective loyalty to the great leader Mao Zedong. In an illuminating study, Nicole Huang explores the

significance of the sun-facing courtyard as a new type of public space for political education and entertainment:

Amateur artistic troupes representing individual courtyards and under the supervision of neighborhood committees performed excerpts from revolutionary-model Beijing operas and other works of revolutionary theater to audiences both large and small. Revolutionary songs were rehearsed in choruses made up of both adults and children, with the goal that everyone was to become a revolutionary artist in his or her own right—presaging the karaoke craze in late-twentieth-century China.¹⁵

More relevant to this essay, various verbal and visual media contributed significantly to this new communal space. In particular, as Huang points out, the introduction of television distinguished this space from the mass propaganda entertainment of the 1950s and '60s: next to the reading room and activity room in a neighborhood, there was now a TV room, where “central news” broadcasts from Beijing and a few model operas and films were repeatedly shown. The arrival of a television set, then a mere black-and-white nine-inch box, was celebrated as

15. Nicole Huang, “Sun-Facing Courtyards: Urban Communal Culture in Mid-1970s’ Shanghai,” *East Asian History* 25/26 (June/December 2003), pp. 161–82; quotation from p. 162.

an important political event, as described in a contemporary short story written by a writers' group from the Yangpu District Cultural Center in Shanghai:

This last summer, numerous sun-facing courtyards swiftly lit up every alleyway in the city, like brilliant wildflowers in bloom.

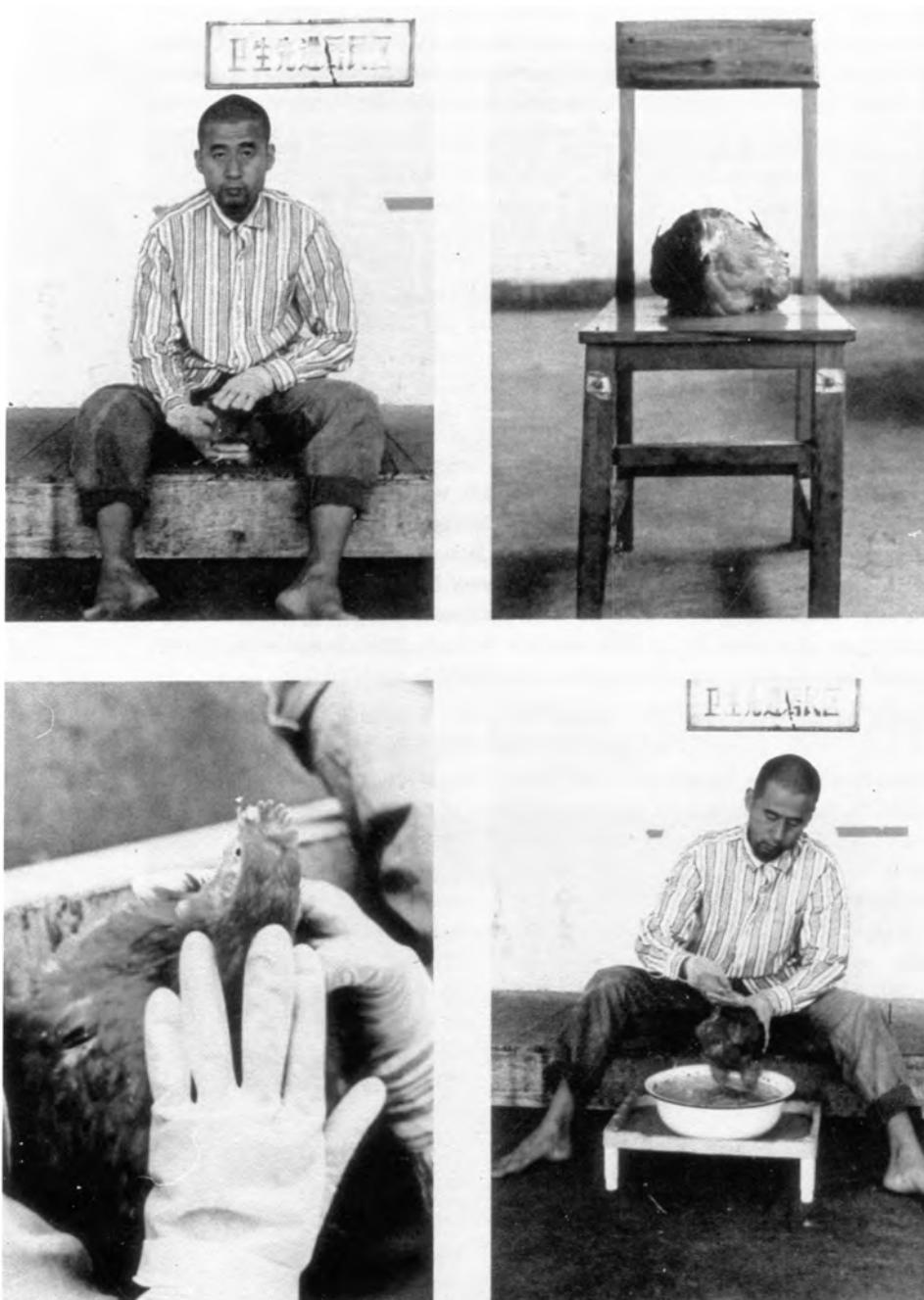
One morning, the deafening sound of gongs and drums sent the Red Star Neighborhood Sun-Facing Courtyard into a festive mode. A tricycle was hauled in, filled with books, followed by the retired worker and Communist Party member Uncle Ah Gen, who carefully carried in a television in his arms. He told everyone: "This is a gift from the Party Committee of our neighborhood to our courtyard. Tonight we are going to see a revolutionary model opera, so I welcome you all to come and watch it!" Uncle Ah Gen thought to himself as he walked in: "Our television is an important tool in disseminating Mao Zedong Thought. Everything will work out just fine now! We will use it to generate lots of revolutionary messages in the politically complex battlefield of our neighborhood."

Children gathered about, all yelling and jumping around the television, beside themselves with anticipation. Even an old lady in her seventies heard the news and rolled her wheelchair over to check out the excitement. She caressed the television with both hands, tears in her eyes. She said: "Things are finally going to be fine now, the revolutionary arts are going to be performed right in our alleyway, and Mao Zedong Thought will be invited right into our homes!" Uncle Ah Gen's little grandson Junjun was maintaining order on the side. He protected the television in case damage might be done by the over-enthusiastic crowd.¹⁶

The rest of the story centers on the defeat of "class enemies" by the neighborhood's revolutionary residents. In an illustration that accompanied the original publication, Uncle Ah Gen summoned two young pioneers to lay out their plan of action. As Huang has commented, a "TV set, placed firmly atop of a cabinet, perhaps the only decent piece of furniture in a sparsely furnished room, quietly observes the intense scene."

Only by reviewing this historical significance of the television during the Cultural Revolution can we understand Zhang Peili's 1991 video *Document on Hygiene No. 3 (Wei Zi 3 Hao)*. In this hour-long piece, the artist, wearing a striped shirt, sits directly facing the onlooker while absorbed in the act of washing a live chicken. Holding the chicken tightly in his sheathed hands, he rubs its feathers

16. "Xiangyangyuan li de douzheng" (Struggles in a sun-facing courtyard), *Wenhui bao*, May 30, 1976; translated by Huang in *ibid.*, pp. 178–79.



Zhang Peili. *Scenes from Document on Hygiene No. 3*. 1991.

with a bar of soap and soaks it in a plastic bowl. The performance has an unmistakable satiric overtone: the title *Document on Hygiene No. 3* alludes to a classified government document; a plaque on the plastered wall behind the artist displays the characters “Model Hygiene Neighborhood”; and someone is reading a newspaper article in the background, praising an ongoing “patriotic hygiene campaign.” These and other clues have inspired critics to interpret the work—the first video shown in an exhibition in China—as a veiled attack on the government. Some writers have also noted that the striped shirt evokes the image of a prisoner, that the struggling chicken is perhaps a metaphor of China, and that the act of washing the chicken may allude to political brainwashing.¹⁷ One crucial fact is missing from these allegorical readings, however: Zhang initially created this video as a mock TV program.

When this video was first shown from November 22 to 24, 1991, it was the centerpiece of an installation designed to extend the virtual space of a series of TV screens to form a continuity with the physical space outside the screens. An unofficial exhibition held after the crackdown of the 1989 democracy movement, the show took place in a subterranean garage on Yueyang Road in Shanghai, so the participating artists named it *The Garage (Cheku)*.¹⁸ In the middle of the empty garage, Zhang placed four different TV monitors on a platform, all playing the video *Document on Hygiene No. 3*. In front of the monitors were nine rows of “stools” made of blocks of bricks. Each row had eleven blocks, so the whole formation contained ninety-nine stools. There is no need to guess the meaning of this installation because the artist has revealed it himself: “I installed these stools before the monitors to simulate the feeling of a ritual occasion. Years ago when we saw a film in the open air or attended outdoor public gatherings, we always sat on bricks.”¹⁹ He did not mention television here; but considering his age (born in 1957, Zhang was in his late teens in the mid-1970s) and the place where he lived during the Cultural Revolution (he grew up in Hangzhou, a city about one hundred miles south of Shanghai), he must have been familiar with the communal TV viewing in a sun-facing courtyard.

An awareness of this exhibition context makes us see the video anew. First, the “Model Hygiene Neighborhood” plaque in the video establishes a continuum between the TV screen and the space beyond it. In fact, if there is one element that links these two discrete spaces into a coherent visual presentation, it is the social context of a residential neighborhood, which is the environment of the

17. For example, Karen Smith sees political criticism in this work because the contour of China’s map is often compared with a rooster. Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Zurich: Scalo, 2006), p. 373.

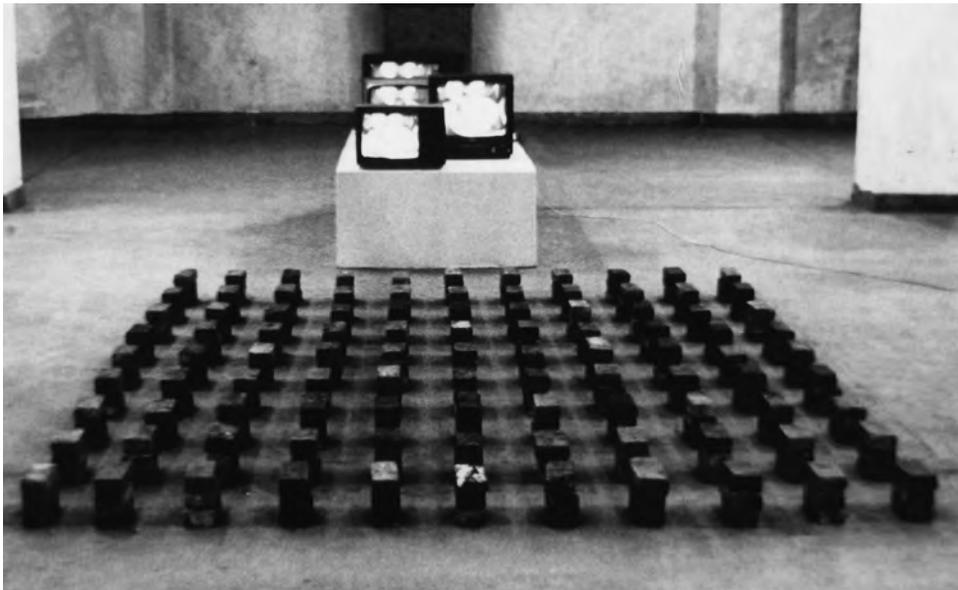
18. For a brief but informative introduction to this exhibition, see Lu Peng, *Zhongguo dangdai yishu shi 1990–1999 (90s Art China)*, exh. cat. (Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2000), pp. 51–55.

19. “Lianheguo? Ta renshi wo, wo hai bu renshi ta ne!” (The United Nations? It knows me but I still don’t know it!), a conversation between Zhang Peili and Lu Leiping, *Dongfang yishu—dajia* (Eastern art—important artists), <http://www.artokok.com/infohtml/2007/10/30/index33043.html>.

videotaped performance as well as of the viewing of the video. Second, instead of reconstructing a particular TV viewing space in a Shanghai or Hangzhou neighborhood, the installation typifies numerous such spaces in 1970s China. This significance is revealed by the number of the brick stools: any Chinese viewer would understand that ninety-nine symbolizes “infinity” in traditional Chinese numerology. In addition, the multiplication of TV sets transforms a specific narrative into a general statement, as Zhang explained in an interview:

Single-channel video inevitably focuses on the content. Multi-channel video neutralizes the content with defused images. . . . A multi-channel video work should not be considered a physical gathering. Rather it emphasizes the abstraction of signs. As I said earlier, single-channel video easily creates narrative and anticipation, often related to specific time and place. But these elements are no longer the basic determinants in multi-channel video. For example, we were used to seeing Chairman Mao’s images everywhere, filling spaces between earth and sky. The meaning generated by such innumerable images differs from that of a single portrait. So the specificity of a single-channel video would be compromised by multiplying the images, which will dissolve its specificity into repeated signs.²⁰

20. Ibid.



Zhang. *Installation view of Document on Hygiene No. 3. 1991.*

Third, whereas the formulaic propaganda photographs discussed in the preceding section embody a perpetual present, *Document on Hygiene No. 3* resurrects the artist's memory of a bygone historical moment. I have cited Zhang's account of the relationship between this work and his memory ("Years ago when we saw a film in the open air or attended outdoor public gatherings, we always sat on bricks"). In the installation, the passing of time is indicated by the empty stools as relics of collective TV viewing, a past event that had largely been forgotten in the early 1990s. Fourth and finally, the continuum between the video and installation suggests a renewed symbolic reading of the work. Commenting on this work, Zhang once said, "All sorts of wonderful reasons were used to confine people's thinking from their childhood. I hope to reveal such a compulsory condition of human life."²¹ This statement refers to both the video and the installation. On the one hand, it again speaks to his memory of the Cultural Revolution, during which "wonderful" revolutionary ideals propagated by television influenced a generation of people. In the installation of *Document on Hygiene No. 3*, the rigid formation of the brick stools defines such political education and entertainment as coercive persuasion, not individual thinking. On the other hand, the performance in the video stages a metaphorical coercive act on behalf of a good cause—during a government-sponsored "patriotic hygiene campaign," a member of a "Model Hygiene Neighborhood" compulsively cleans a live chicken until it becomes immobile and paralyzed.

TV and Effacement

Several serious video artists emerged in China in the early 1990s. Zhang started earliest and holds several "firsts."²² As early as 1988, he had made a three-hour long video called *30 x 30* and showed it at a national conference of avant-garde artists and art critics.²³ *Document on Hygiene No. 3* was the first video installation in a domestic exhibition. In 1993, he became the first Chinese video artist featured abroad, at the House of World Cultures in Berlin and the Galerie Crousel-Robelin in Paris. His piece in the Berlin exhibition was *Water: A Standard Edition of the Ocean of Words Dictionary* (*Shui: Cihai Biaozhun Ban*, 1992). Played on a small television, the video seems no different from a direct recording of the most authoritative Chinese TV program—CCTV's "central news." A Chinese viewer in the early 1990s would have confused it with the official broadcast even more readily, because the woman in the video was the real Xing Zhibin, a well-known CCTV

21. Maggie Ma, "Zhang Peili: Yingxiang de mijin" (Zhang Peili: A maze of images), http://new.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid270_cn.html.

22. See Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, "The Rise and Development of Video Art and the Maturity of New Media Art," in Wu Hung, ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, exh. cat. First Guangzhou Triennial (Guangzhou and Chicago: Guangdong Museum of Art and Art Media Resources, 2002), pp. 51–52.

23. This conference was held in Huangshan, Anhui province.

newscaster whose face and voice were seen and heard every evening throughout the country. For his work, Zhang “rented” CCTV’s newsroom with the help of a friend and invited Xing to make a mock broadcast for a nonexistent audience. Over the course of thirty minutes, she reads a section from the Chinese dictionary *Ocean of Words*, consisting of a string of disconnected words listed under the character “water” (*shui*) and sample sentences illustrating their uses.

The title of this work has been rendered in English as *Water: Standard Pronunciation*.²⁴ Partly because of this (mis)translation, authors writing in English have interpreted the video exclusively in terms of the politics of language.²⁵ According to this view, because the CCTV newscast is a quintessential showcase of *putonghua* (“common language,” better known in the West as Mandarin Chinese), Zhang could realize an antiauthoritarian intent by rendering this officially sanctioned spoken language meaningless. This interpretation is not wrong, but there are other elements in the video that deserve attention as well. As Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie have noted, the television announcer reads the dictionary “in a setting identical to the CCTV network news, under the same lighting, against the same background, using the same microphone. Even her face is the familiar ‘face of the nation.’ Only the content of the newscast is replaced by neutral, meaningless dictionary entries.”²⁶ Here the two authors make an important point in contrasting the visual and audio aspects of Zhang’s work. While the video painstakingly retains the *form* of the CCTV program, it abolishes its *content*—the news—with equal determination. The substituted text—nonnarrative dictionary entries—does not fill the void left from such erasure, it only reinforces the split between form and content. What the video achieves, therefore, is to turn the official network into an empty facade.

We can thus call this work an act of *effacement*, which means to obliterate an existing sign and to reduce a once powerful image to insignificance. The methods of effacement are various, ranging from physical destruction to appropriation, fragmentation, deterioration, and decontextualization. A technique Zhang uses repeatedly to efface canonical representation is repetition, not only in his video works but also in his paintings, prints, and photographs. In *Water: A Standard Edition of the Ocean of Words Dictionary*, the broadcaster reads a series of broken sentences in a rhythmical voice; the unchanging visual display reinforces the feeling of repetitiveness. Zhang’s statement about the effect of multiple-channel video in eliminating narrative reveals his fascination with ways of transforming description into abstraction. Interestingly, the same statement also indicates the origin of this

24. The catalog of the Berlin exhibition does not contain this video and only reproduces a companion painting by Zhang Peili under the title *The Standard Pronunciation of 1989*. This is probably why the video became known as *Water: Standard Pronunciation*. See *China Avant-Garde* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1993), p. 190.

25. An example of such interpretation can be found in Karen Smith’s *Nine Lives*, p. 391.

26. In Wu Hung, ed., *Reinterpretation*, p. 230. Partially retranslated based on the original text published in the Chinese version of the catalog. Wu Hong (Wu Hung), ed., *Chongxin jiedu: Zhongguo shiyan yishu shinian* (1990–2000), p. 230.

fascination in the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution, when Mao's images were displayed everywhere, and when a few model operas and films were repeatedly shown on television. Such repetition had begun to deplete the officially sanctioned audio-visual texts when the Cultural Revolution was about to reach its end. As Nicole Huang has noticed, "Watching television in the mid-1970s might indeed be entertaining if viewers—adults or children—could memorize words and scenes from programs shown repeatedly, crack jokes, and evoke laughter amongst a highly informed audience that was profoundly familiar with the cultural repertoire presented to it. The meanings of what they viewed were most probably twisted, and words were often lifted out of the context to suggest something entirely new to these insider viewers."²⁷ But if this 1970s phenomenon indicated the emergence of a vernacular popular culture, contemporary Chinese artists of the post-Cultural Revolutionary era derived images and tactics from the same propaganda art to forge an alternative "experimental art." This effort was especially noticeable in the early 1990s, when Political Pop's appropriation of Cultural Revolution images came to be a prevailing trend, and when art projects initiated by Zhang and his comrades closely focused on the issue of historical memory.²⁸

One of these projects is Zhang's 1993 photographic series *Continuous Reproduction*. In it, he copied a propaganda photograph twenty-five times, each time using the previous copy as the source material. The result is the deterioration of a single image: the healthy, exuberant revolutionary young woman in the original photo gradually blurred, disintegrated, and finally disappeared. The work can be read in two ways, as the gradual distancing of the Maoist era and as the self-defacement of propaganda art (which relies on the infinite reproduction of limited iconic images). Both readings imply a temporal perspective rooted in Zhang's personal relationship with the Cultural Revolution. For a younger generation of Chinese video artists, however, repetition assumed a broader, more general significance as a means of erasure and effacement. A representative of this generation is Qiu Zhijie, who graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) eight years after Zhang. To Qiu, the process of effacing an existing sign became more important than the result itself, an approach best demonstrated by his performance/video project *Assignment No. 1: Copying "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times*.

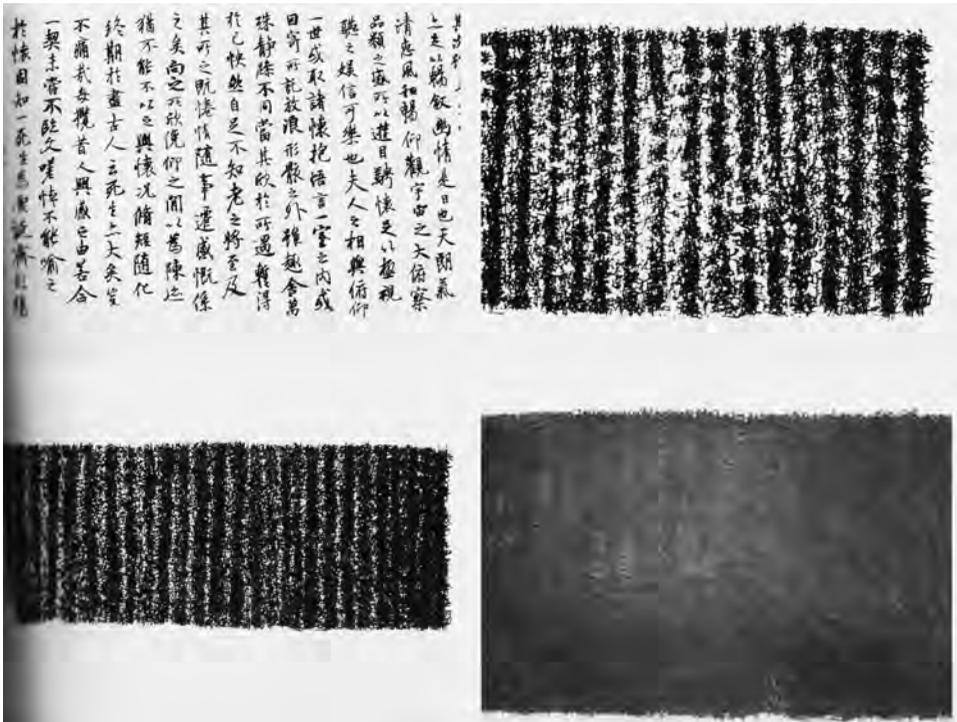
This project is at once a deconstructive analysis of China's cultural heritage and of the artist's own artistic experience. Born into a scholar's family in southeast China, Qiu studied calligraphy when he was a boy. Following the traditional method of calligraphic learning, he copied ancient masterpieces, often in the form of ink rubbings reproduced from stone steles. In 1992, when he was still a second-year college student, he started *Assignment No. 1*, a project that would establish his position

27. Huang, "Sun-Facing Courtyard," p. 181.

28. Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," in *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), x-xxii. See also, Wu Hung, *Transience*, pp. 20–21.



Zhang. Continuous Reproduction. 1993.



Qiu Zhijie. Still from Assignment No. 1: Copying "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times. 1992–95.

as a leading experimental artist of the 1990s. For the next three years he kept copying the “Orchid Pavilion Preface,” the most celebrated masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy, albeit on a single sheet of paper. The enduring exercise produced two concrete results: a piece of imageless calligraphy and a video that records the gradual obliteration of the original text. Later he recounted this second component: “I also video-recorded the process of writing for the first fifty times. As the text was written the first time, the calligraphy was clearly of Chinese characters. As the number of times increased, the characters were destroyed by the act of writing and turned into a purely visual ‘ink form’ similar to an abstract painting. After the fiftieth time of copying, I started to write on a completely black ground. The brush no longer left any ink trace.”²⁹

When this work was shown in the first Guangzhou Triennial in 2002, for which I served as the chief curator, Qiu played the video on a TV next to the imageless “Orchid Pavilion Preface”—a piece of paper covered with a thick layer of dry ink. Puzzled by what the artist was trying to achieve, a visitor commented cynically, “It is better to call it *How to Destroy ‘Orchid Pavilion Preface!’*” This may indeed have been Qiu’s goal, but a goal achieved only through using the traditional method of learning calligraphy.

Like Zhang’s *Document on Hygiene No. 3*, the television in Qiu’s installation has a double function/significance as a video player and a concrete object. Differing from Zhang’s installation, however, these two aspects in *Assignment No. 1* are no longer connected by a particular historical context, but instead signify the temporal and spatial dimensions of an art project. This must be why Qiu has felt at ease altering the way he presents this work on different occasions, sometimes showing the piece of paper alone, sometimes combining it with the video. It is interesting to note that whenever a compact TV set is used to play the video, it automatically alludes to an interior space, turning the work into an installation. Inevitably, the obliteration of the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” also appears as the effacement of television—when Qiu’s brush gradually erases tangible images on the screen and transforms it into a black hole.

Because *Assignment No. 1* reflects on China’s cultural heritage as well as on Qiu’s artistic background, its effacement of an ancient masterpiece is not just an iconoclastic gesture, but also a way to question one’s self-identity. This second direction then guided many of Qiu’s works in the 1990s, among which the 1996 video installation *Washroom* is representative.³⁰ The video shows Qiu with a grid painted on his face. An identical grid covers the wall behind him. These two grids are in line with each other when he has “zero” expression, making him “disappear” in a unified field of a single sign. In Qiu’s words, in this field “the outlines [of the subject] have vanished or nearly vanished. Information flows in and out. The boundary of an individual has disappeared. Separation is

29. From the caption accompanying the work in Wu Hung, ed., *Reinterpretation*, p. 150.

30. For a discussion of these works, see Wu Hung, *Transience*, pp. 168–74.

replaced by continuity.”³¹ The purpose of the video, however, is not to comment on a mandatory “loss of individuality” in the contemporary world—which would constitute a tired declaration of postmodern theory—but to register the perpetual tension and negotiation between individual expression and social/technological control: when Qiu is about to smile, frown, or weep, any minute movement results in the distortion of the grid on his face, thereby destroying its harmony with the ground.

This video has been seen in different exhibitions on single or multiple monitors. The most dramatic presentation, however, was to show it on a TV in a real washroom. The mosaic tiles covering the surfaces of the room extend the grid on the television screen into the real world, bestowing the work with a heightened metaphorical significance as an abstraction of the contemporary environment. Here Qiu reuses Zhang’s tactic in *Document on Hygiene No. 3* to insert a TV into an installation, but neither the TV nor the installation indexes China’s historical experience.



Qiu. *Installation shot of Washroom*. 1990.

TV, Voyeurism, Fetishism

After two seasons of field research in China during the 1980s, James Lull concluded that “the introduction of television into the homes of Chinese families may be the single most important cultural and political development in the People’s Republic since the end of the Cultural Revolution.”³² Television’s domestication process was charged with emotion and anxiety because to most Chinese in the 1980s, a TV set, especially a color model, was still a luxury object; its ownership meant not only affluent economic status but also social privilege. Moreover, compared with other sought-after commodities at the time (such as luxury furniture or a gas stove), the television was special in granting its owner access to a tantalizing visual world. Many televised images were forbidden in the previous years, including shots in foreign films that would have been considered “pornographic” (*huangse*) during the Cultural Revolution. The excitement of obtaining a

31. Qiu Zhijie, “Ziyou di youxianxing—‘Wo’ di wenti ji” (The limit of freedom—Questions about “I”), 1994–96, unpublished manuscript, p. 6.

32. James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 59.

television was thus mingled with a strong sense of voyeurism. The combination of these two desires—material ownership and sexual fantasy—is the central theme of *Ermao*, a film directed and produced by Zhou Xiaowen in 1994.³³

The story in the film is set in the early 1990s. The heroine, Ermao, a woman living in a rural village with her impotent husband, is a skilled local pastry maker. Competing with her better-off neighbor, she engages in a single-minded quest for “the largest TV set in the village.” She makes frequent trips to the department store in the city to see the set she is saving up to purchase. Her desire for the object is not entirely materialistic: when she lays eyes on it for the first time, the television is showing a love scene from the American soap opera *Dallas*. “She darts her eyes quickly to each side,” writes Jason McGrath in a sensitive reading of the film, “as if to make sure none of the other shoppers has taken notice of her particular voyeuristic enjoyment, then widens her eyes as she looks directly back at the scene on the TV, letting herself be immersed in its erotic fantasy world.”³⁴ As the story develops further, Ermao’s obsession with the TV leads her to work for a restaurant in the city, to have an illicit relationship with the man who finances the restaurant, and to sell her blood to a hospital—a series of events that shows how Ermao’s desire for the TV eventually transforms her into a commodity and sexual object.

Shortly before Zhou started making this film, Liu Wei executed an oil painting called *Spring Dream in a Garden: Dad in front of the TV*. Liu is a major exponent of Cynical Realism, an early 1990s trend in contemporary Chinese art characterized by a strong anti-idealistic tendency. In the words of Li Xianting, who helped coin the term Cynical Realism (*Wenshi xianshi zhuyi*), artists working in this trend “used a roguishly cynical approach to illustrate themselves and their immediate and familiar environment, with its tableaux of boredom, chance, and absurdity.”³⁵ The painting portrays Liu’s father standing in a rigid posture next to a large TV set. His military uniform discloses his professional occupation as an officer in the People’s Liberation Army. Depicted in profile, he seems to be avoiding a direct confrontation with the television. But his pupils are turned so hard toward the TV screen that we can only see the whites of his eyes.³⁶ What is shown on the screen is a scene from the famous traditional opera *The Peony Pavilion*: longing for love, the beautiful girl Du Liniang takes a walk on a spring day in her family’s garden. There she falls asleep and dreams of a handsome young scholar, who makes love to her and vanishes afterwards. (The lyrics of the opera are filled with allusions to sexual intercourse; for this reason the play was banned during the Cultural Revolution and returned to the stage only in the 1980s.)

33. For a close analysis of this film, see Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 106–20.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” p. xx.

36. Liu Wei reuses this image many times in different paintings, including *The Revolutionary Family: Mom and Dad* (1990), *Good Old Dad* (1991), and *Dad with Mom* (1992). But only in *Spring Dream* is this image integrated into a narrative image.



Liu Wei. Spring Dream in a Garden: Dad in front of the TV. 1992.

Consciously or unconsciously, Liu borrows the compositional formula of propaganda photos representing revolutionary masses watching CCTV news, as he too pairs a television viewer with a TV set, with the TV screen turned toward the onlooker to expose the program being broadcast. The painting, however, radically reduces the distance between the television and the television viewer. With his face almost touching the screen, the father seems to have become a third character in the play, and the beautiful girl on the screen seems to be directly gazing at him. But her bold gaze only highlights the gap separating the fantasy world in the TV and the mundane reality outside it: the images on the screen—the colorful costumes and rich makeup of the actor and actress, as well as the exotic plants and lovely bird—contrast sharply with the gaunt, grayish face of the military officer and his shabby room, resulting in a satiric depiction of unfulfilled desire.

In *Ermao* and *Spring Dream in a Garden*, the mere presence of a television set is an important aspect of representation. But we can also imagine that when Ermao sees the love scene in *Dallas* in the department store, or when Liu's father finds the girl Du Liniang gazing at him, it is the image on the screen, not

the machine itself, that makes their blood race. Another kind of representation of television in contemporary Chinese art, however, displays the TV set only and omits broadcasted images. Not coincidentally, works in this category all focus on the television's significance as commodity fetish.³⁷ It seems that the fetishization of the television must eventually dismiss its use value and turn it into a pure object. The most dramatic example of this type of representation is Wang Jin's 1996 performance/installation project *Ice: Central China (Bing: Zhongyuan)*.

The context of this project was a commercial scheme. In 1995, a major department store in downtown Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province, burned down in a fire. The new shopping center was completed a year later, and the manager planned to make the opening a grand event, including not only various commercial promotions but also contributions by artists. Through personal connections, Wang was hired to make a "sculpture" in the square in front of the store. What he created was a thirty-meter-long wall of ice composed of more than 600 individual ice blocks. Over 1,000 individual objects were frozen inside the translucent ice. Song Xiaoxia's report describes the nature of these objects and the sensation they caused:

These included bottles of perfume, cellular phones, leather goods, TV sets, watches, and gold rings—things which would excite a contemporary shopper most and things which best symbolize an urban lifestyle. But the artist froze these desirable goods in ice blocks. At the time when a "commercial war" between investors had become white-hot in Zhengzhou, he built this ice wall in the heart of the city's commercial district. The day when the wall was unveiled, many people heard about it and rushed to the site. They crowded along the wall in thick layers; such a scene was truly unheard of. The publicity of this installation helped the investors [of the new shopping mall] to achieve their goals. The excited public then competed to break open the ice to take away the things inside. Their desire had been heated up by the commercial promotion campaign. The goods in the ice wall were full of seduction, not just because of their practical value but also because they symbolized a perfect lifestyle advertised by the commercial culture.³⁸

In the picture of the crowds gathered along Wang's ice wall, what impresses me most is not the mass participation in the artistic event, but the audience's unusual relationship with the installation. Rarely do we find such a situation in which a massive installation attracts viewers to come so close to it, to the extent that they press their faces to its surface. It seems that when people walked into the square and came close to the wall, the translucent ice had disappeared from

37. In addition to Wang Jin's *Ice: Central China* discussed below, other examples include Zeng Hao's paintings of interior space and the Gao Brothers' photographs of themselves sitting on TV sets.

38. Song Xiaoxia, "Xiaofei shidai zhong di shijue yishu" (Visual art in a commercial era), *Ershiyi shiji* (The twenty-first century), 1997.12, pp. 102–4; the quotation is from p. 104.



Wang Jin. *Installation view of Ice: Central China*. 1996.

their field of vision. Their eyes were fixed solely on the commercial goods suspended in the ice blocks. Their desire to possess these goods was temporarily denied: the wall was still there, blocking the visitors' physical contact with the objects. (In other words, the wall had turned the objects into sheer images.) The only way to possess the objects—to transform them back from images to material things—would be to break the wall.

We can link this project with TV in two ways. First, television sets were among the most sought-after objects frozen inside the ice blocks. Second, in its transparent presence, the ice wall resembles a television set that constantly broadcasts commercial advertisements; its unplanned destruction reveals the degree of violence that a commodity fetish can evoke.³⁹

39. Wang Jin did not plan the destruction of the ice wall. When it happened he hoped that the objects, even though looted by people as commercial goods, would have been "purified by the ice." Wang Jin, "Guanyu Bing. 96 Zhongyuan zuopin" (About my work *Ice: Central China* in 1996), *Dangdai yishu* (Contemporary art series), no. 11 (1996), p. 39. But as Song Xiaoxia has argued, this hope may only testify to the artist's own idealism. When the ice wall was smashed, any effort to transform material desire into artistic desire was rejected by the consumer/audience itself. Song Xiaoxia, "Xiaofei shidai zhong di shijue yishu," p. 104.

Coda

Entitled *Techniques of the Visible*, the 2004 Shanghai Biennale coincided with World Television Day, for which the Shanghai municipal government also organized a series of celebration events. Hoping to connect these two programs, Qiu, now a professor in the Department of New Media in the China Academy of Art, designed a three-part installation in the lobby of the Shanghai Art Museum. One of the three parts was a raised walkway imitating a famous bridge in Shanghai. A unique feature of this bridge, according to Qiu, is its “nine bends,” which artificially prolong the process of crossing a stream while creating varied angles for travelers to see the surrounding scenery. Relating such viewing experience to the notion of “tele-vision” (vision over a distance), he installed nine closed-circuit video cameras along the zigzag walkway, which transmitted live images of surrounding views to a series of TV monitors attached to the same structure.

If the real-time images shown on these closed-circuit TV monitors embodied the temporality of the present, the second part of the project had a strict “past” tense. Intersecting the raised walkway was a large, eye-shaped installation composed of many old televisions. Dating from different periods, these TV sets were used to play film clips that show how television viewing has changed in China over the past forty years. Qiu typifies four such “changes”: “in the 1950s and 1960s, hundreds of workers in a big factory watched a black-and-white TV”; “in the 1970s, men and women from a Shanghai neighborhood crowded into a small room to watch a color TV”; “in the 1980s, members of a family watched TV in their living room, constantly turning the channel selection dial to search for a better program”; and “since the 1990s, a couple watches TV in bed and keeps changing the channel with a remote control.”⁴⁰ Probing into people’s historical relationship with TV, Qiu also asked thirty-three students to conduct a survey, asking their parents three identical questions: When was the first time they watched television? When did they acquire their first TV set? When do they plan to purchase a digital model? The parent’s answers were compiled into an archive, and the recording could be heard in the exhibition.

Symmetrically positioned against such historical memories, the third part of the installation was concerned with the future: Qiu’s students imagined the future development of television and exhibited their drawings as part of the installation. This is the weakest part of the project because it abandoned the television in presenting imagined TV technology, and because most of the designs show unfamiliarity with the media network of television. But this should come as no surprise. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, when experimental art emerged in China in the 1980s and ’90s, it had already missed the

40. Qiu Zhijie, “Plan for the Project ‘Nine Bends, A Big Eye.’” Manuscript provided by the artist.

opportunity to engage in the creation of network TV. Since then this art has shown remarkable sensitivity in reflecting upon the TV-viewing experience and commenting on the sociological implications of television, but such reflection and commentary also demonstrate the artist's role as critic of, not as inventor of or participant in, the technology and culture of television in China.

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