



Zhang Peili, *The Front View of an Apartment Building*, 2013, digital video, color, silent, 24 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Yang Chao Studio.

Zhang Peili

SPURS GALLERY

Zhang Peili's "Now That" did not extend the most hospitable greeting to its viewers. Upon arriving at the gallery, one immediately found oneself barricaded in an imposing open-roofed structure made of shiny metal railings, whose doors then opened up to allow passage into the space. Inside, a dozen new and used mattresses—some leaning against a wall, others resting on the floor, were scattered about. Lying down on any of the mattresses, one heard a digitally simulated voice reading out names.

Whose were those names enunciated at five-second intervals? And what was the relationship of this piece, *Audible Mattress*, 2018, to the construction at the entrance, *Access Control System*, 2018? As it turned out, the names broadcast in *Audible Mattress* are those of randomly selected Chinese Communist Party members, wanted criminals, and lost children. When asked why he mixed these names together, Zhang was evasive. He said it was the "uneasiness" of the three groups that interested him. I'd argue that these groups can be perceived as representing, respectively, power, its rejection, and lost innocence. If Zhang's earlier work *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary*, 1991, made power concrete by embodying it in the figure of China Central Television anchor Xing



Zhibin, *Audible Mattress* highlights power's insidious and abstract attributes. *Access Control System* also addresses its pervasiveness: For those living in China, the railings in this work are quite common. Their ubiquity makes them feel ordinary, hardly intimidating. Who are these security doors keeping out—thieves, intruders, or the neighbors? Have we so deeply internalized the need for protection that we've become each other's prison guards?

While the works on the gallery's ground floor dealt with a form of surveillance that occurs in real communal space, upstairs Zhang took on its digital equivalent. *Open Video—From My WeChat Moments*, 2018, which makes accessible months' worth of the artist's WeChat moments (similar to feeds on Facebook and Instagram), places the viewer in the censor's chair. Normally, one would require a user's permission to view such moments. Zhang reminds us how easy it has become to access any individual's images and contacts and perhaps provides a glimpse of the looming point when the government will be able to surveil moving images—currently a medium that remains difficult to monitor. A somewhat earlier work on view here, *The Front View of an Apartment Building*, 2013, suggested the pervasiveness of surveillance. As uneventful and boring as this twenty-four-minute video may seem, it underscores the fact that all facets of our lives can be recorded.

Adopting conjunction phrases as the titles of all his recent solo exhibitions, Zhang highlights the relational nature of the conditions he wishes to address. The viewer is always placed at the center of these situations and is expected to complete the sentence “Now that x, then what?” Although the artworks contained in these exhibitions may have uniquely Chinese contexts, they posit conditions that are global. With “Now That,” Zhang did not claim to offer viewers a way in which to dethrone power; he simply asked us to be aware of our complacency in the face of the realities he documents in both the physical and virtual worlds. Only if we are can a search for alternatives begin.

—Fiona He

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