

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

UNDERCOVER
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ZHANG PEILI





Left: Two stills from Zhang Peili's *30x30*, 1988, video, color, sound, 32 minutes 9 seconds.

Right: Zhang Peili, *Uncertain Pleasure (I)*, 1996, four-channel video on twelve monitors, color, silent, 30 minutes. Installation view, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan, 1999. From the 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale.

Opposite page: Zhang Peili, *X?*, 1987, oil on canvas, 39 × 31¼". From the series "X?," 1986–87.



STATES OF EXCEPTION

PAULINE J. YAO ON THE ART OF ZHANG PEILI



ARTIST ZHANG PEILI has spent his thirty-year career willfully evading categorization. “I’m not a person who sticks to rules,” he noted in a 2011 interview. And as the diversity of his body of work suggests, he has never followed the unwritten rule that the successful artist must develop a recognizable style. There is, however, a label he cannot escape: “the father of video art in China.”

Zhang earned this mantle with *30x30*, 1988, a three-hour, unedited, fixed-frame close-up shot of a pair of gloved hands dropping a mirror on the ground, gluing the shards back together, picking it up, and dropping it again, repeatedly. China’s first work of video art, *30x30* is widely hailed as a pioneering innovation, a visually and historically charged interrogation of the moving image. But while the plaudits are well deserved, they are too rarely inflected by a consideration of the work’s initial reception. *30x30* was created not for a standard exhibition but for an intimate audience of peers.

By the late 1980s, the Chinese New Wave movement was gaining momentum, with the 1988 exhibition “China/Avant-Garde” at the National Art Gallery in Beijing marking a new level of institutional acceptance. In the run-up to the show, a group of artists eagerly positioning themselves as the avant-garde had decided to organize the Huangshan Conference, the third in a series of similar gatherings. While generally supportive of the movement, Zhang remained wary of its self-appointed leaders’ air of superiority. He feared that their drive to dethrone existing power structures and standards of taste was leading them to unintentionally create their own, equally doctrinaire structures and standards, thereby replicating the very establishment they purported to oppose. Invited by the conference organizers to present a report on the



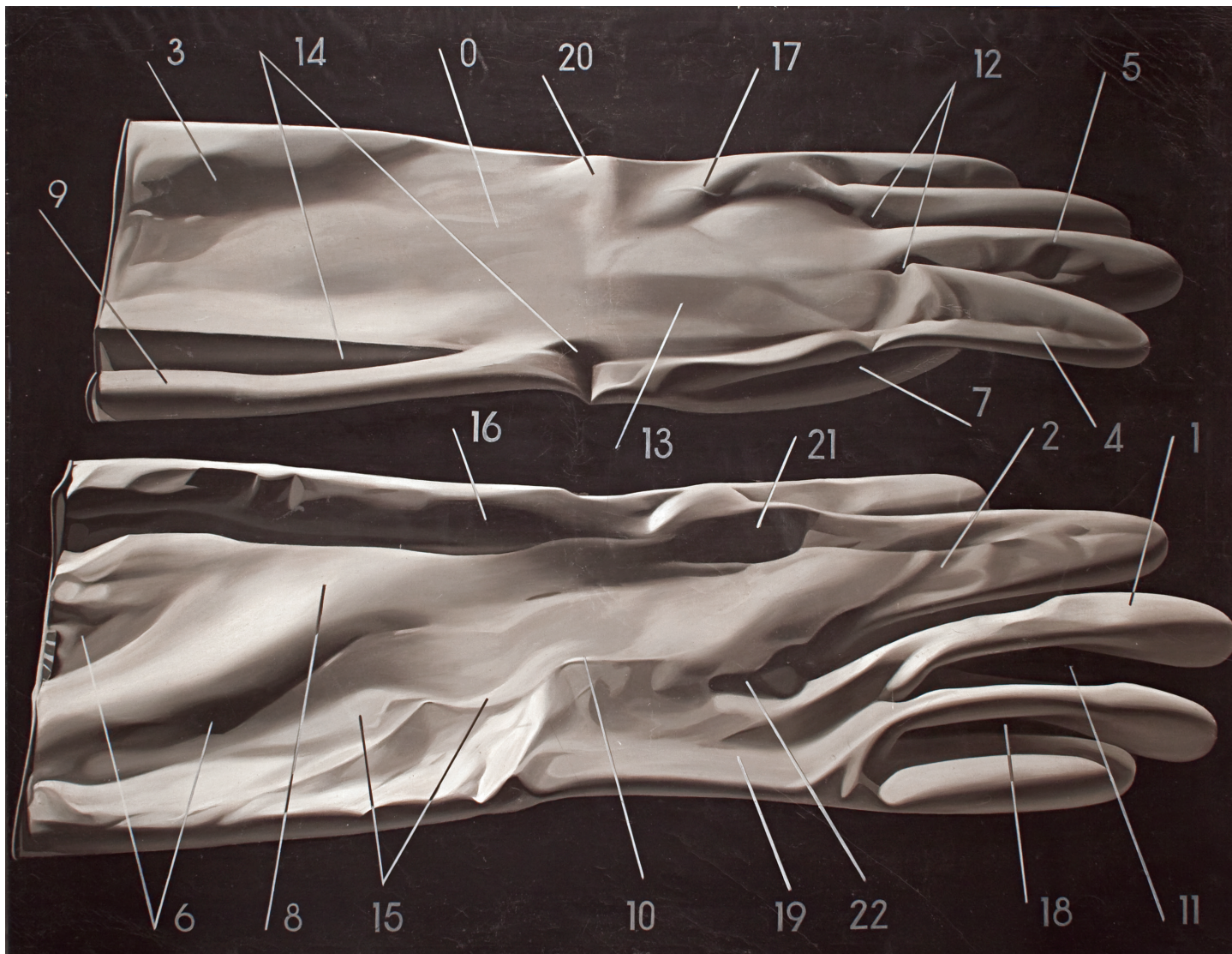
creative scene in his home city, Hangzhou, Zhang instead presented 30x30. The screening was cut short when someone suggested fast-forwarding to the “action,” which was impossible, as there was no action. Watching the video in its entirety is as grueling as the above description suggests (a thirty-minute cut that is sometimes exhibited is still quite a challenge), but the piece is no exercise in durational rigor à la structural film. Nor does it offer any readily decipherable reproach to the artists, writers, and thinkers who constituted its first audience. Rather, it works by creating a situation, short-circuiting the complacency of this nascent artistic establishment; it is, in fact, resolutely postmedium.

Zhang has never been interested in chasing the ontology of art; if his work has investigated questions about what form art may take or whether certain objects or gestures qualify as art, it has done so almost

incidentally. “An experiment with principles is not experimental at all,” he has said. In other words, it is particulars, not principles, that interest him.

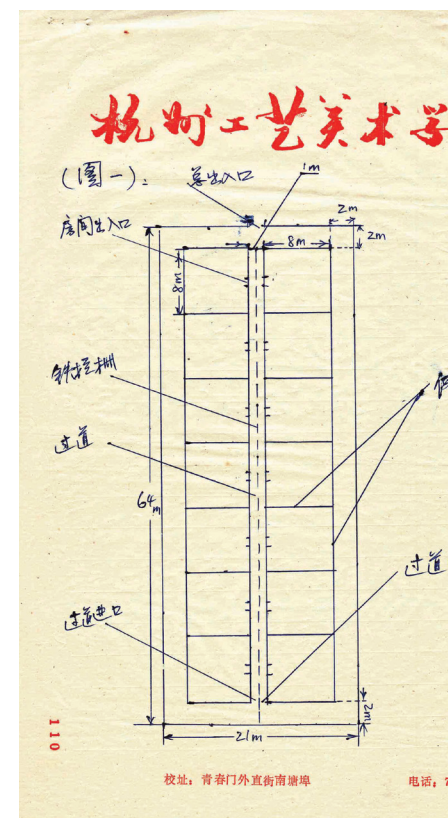
For Zhang, every work is a kind of experimental response to a specific set of contexts and concerns, and the presence of a viewer is always integral to completing the circle of meaning. This is true even when that viewer is then subjected to dislocations and to negations of embodiment, as in the works that immediately preceded 30x30, Zhang’s “X?” paintings, 1986–87. Some of the most recognizable and sought-after works to emerge from the Chinese ’85 New Wave movement, the paintings are bleak photo-based renderings of rubber gloves, usually in pairs, in varying tints. In the mid-’80s, as disillusioned graduates of the painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou, Zhang and his classmates Wang Guangyi

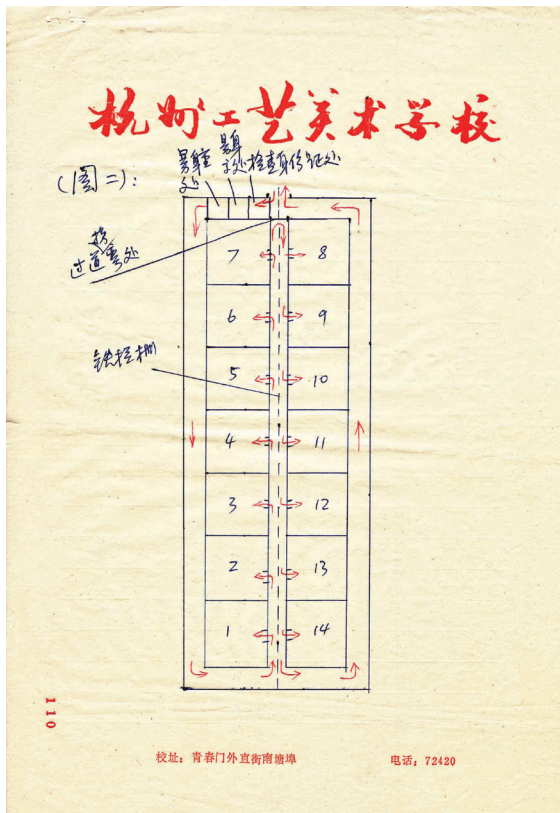
and Geng Jianyi had developed a mode of cold realism: scenes of daily life, blank-faced figures, or quotidian objects, smoothly rendered in dreary palettes. As morose as anything produced by Wang or Geng, the “X?” paintings push further toward the unnerving and the uncanny: Floating against monochrome backgrounds, the empty gloves are enigmatic ciphers. They point to hygiene, sanitation, the institutions of medicine and science, with the occasional addition of diagrammatic lines and numbers heightening the clinical effect. They point, too, to nothing at all—that is, they register the absence of the hand and its digits; there is only this synthetic skin, unnatural, flaccid, and collapsed, incapable of either pointing or painting, referring or representing. Even though they are nearly photorealistic, to confront them is to feel the loss of or disconnection from reality quite profoundly, and quite eerily.



Left: Zhang Peili, *X?*, 1986, oil on canvas, 55 1/4 × 63". From the series “X?”, 1986–87.

Below: Zhang Peili, *Procedure of “Ask First, Shoot Later”: About “X?”* (detail), 1987, ink on twelve sheets of paper, each 10 3/4 × 7 1/2".





Left: Zhang Peili, *Procedure of "Ask First, Shoot Later": About "X?"* (detail), 1987, ink on twelve sheets of paper, each $10\frac{3}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ ".

Above: Zhang Peili, *Children's Playground*, 1992, ten-channel video, color, sound, 24 minutes. Installation view, Galerie Crousel-Robelin, Paris.

Right: Two stills from Zhang Peili's *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary*, 1991, video, color, sound, 9 minutes 35 seconds. Xing Zhibin.



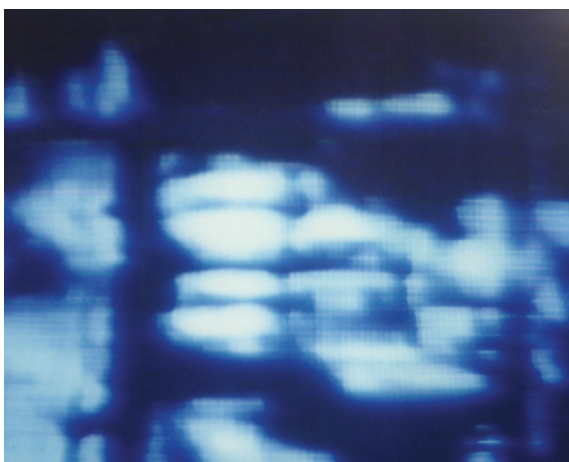
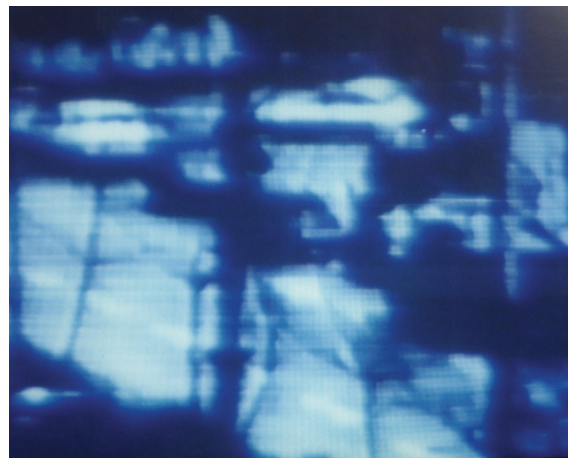
In Zhang's work, the agency of the viewer becomes a double-edged sword, working to occlude perception as much as to facilitate it.

In 1987, Zhang unveiled *Procedure of "Ask First, Shoot Later": About "X?"*, twelve pages of handwritten instructions on A4 paper, outlining, in excruciating step-by-step detail, the process of creating a glove painting, with meticulous elaborations on composition, pigment choices, shading, and so on. *Procedure* also lays out strict parameters on how the paintings are to be exhibited, including rules for how long visitors may spend in front of the works (not less than twenty-three minutes and not more than thirty-three), the number of visitors allowed per room (two), permissible height and weight of said visitors, what colors they may wear (no one in red, yellow, or green garments allowed), and so on.

From an artist who never follows the rules, the rigid dictates of *Procedures* cannot be taken at face value. Their sheer impracticality is telling, as is the linguistic excess—in contrast to the cogent brevity of

Sol LeWitt's guides, for example, the verbiage here will challenge the most intrepid reader. Just as *30x30* was not intended to be watched from start to finish, these instructions were apparently not meant to be followed, and perhaps not even to be read in their entirety. Two years before Zhang produced *Procedures*, another notable Hangzhou alumni, Huang Yong Ping, had endeavored to destroy the sanctity of art by creating paintings according to chance operations; meanwhile, the Xiamen Dada group pursued anti-art activities culminating in the outright immolation of works. While such enterprises were complex engagements with the legacies of the historical and postwar avant-gardes, *Procedures* exists in an especially confounding relationship to art history—to Chinese as well as Western art history, but most obviously to Conceptualism. It's an instruction piece that can't be followed: It comprises highly impractical directions

and postdates the creation of the objects it offers instructions about. And against the Conceptual dematerialization of the artwork, it serves to rematerialize the artwork—not just any type of artwork, either, but paintings on canvas, arguably the most readily reified art objects of all. As with *30x30*, the "X?" series and *Procedures* together operate against the orderly flow of the circuitries they're entangled in, in this case those of received history and institutional practice. If there is any thread linking all of Zhang's work, it is that mode of obliqueness and entanglement. And if so much of the modernist project, both Eastern and Western, has been to grapple with the general—with type, institution, canon, ontology, dogma—Zhang takes art to the opposite extreme: irreducible singularity, where each work is the outcome of an impossibly specific and unrepeatable series of decisions, contexts, and conditions.

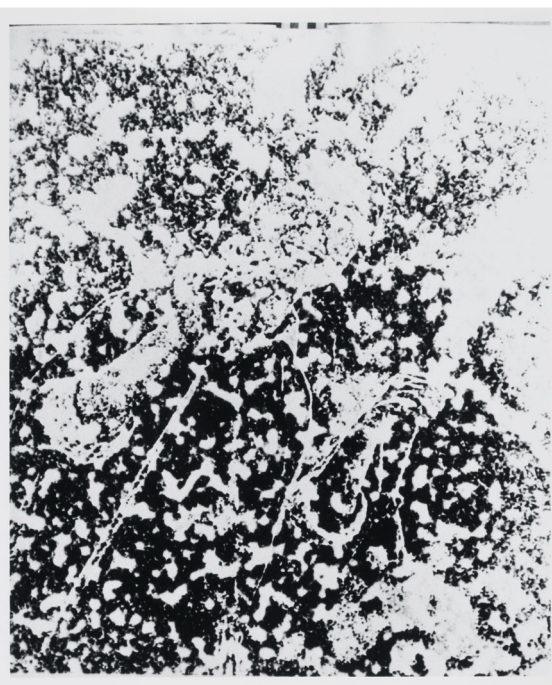


Seven stills from Zhang Peili's *Focal Distance*, 1996, eight-channel video, color, sound, 15 minutes.

THE 1990S was a decade of fervent experimentation for Zhang, marked by his full-blown immersion in video. The follow-up to *30x30* was *Document on Hygiene No. 3*, 1991, a work that, like its predecessor, featured absurd, repetitive gestures in real time (although the temporality was less a function of artistic intention than of lack of access to editing equipment). In the video, Zhang sits before the camera in a striped shirt that resembles prison garb and proceeds to wash a live chicken in a soap-filled washbasin. With this work and those that followed, such as *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary*, 1991; *Focal Distance*, 1996; and *Eating*, 1997, Zhang used video to investigate the deep instability and intense incongruities of China in the final years of the century. This was an era defined by the consequences of the Open Door policy, namely the collapse of ideology, the dawn of privatization, the rapid influx of foreign goods, and the dramatic reshaping of the urban

environment. Zhang's works from the period tacitly refer to the social and political circumstances—*Document on Hygiene*, for instance, would appear to be a response to a concurrent government cleanliness campaign. Though it seems too meditative and ambiguous to be construed as satire in any conventional sense, one detects a commentary on the futility of such initiatives in a society increasingly resistant to an overweening state.

Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary also trembles on the verge of outright parody. The video features Xing Zhibin, an anchor on Chinese Central Television, reading the dictionary entry for the character for *water* and all associated words, over and over. Xing was the main CCTV anchor in the days following the events of Tiananmen in June 1989, and her image was seared into the memory of Chinese citizens. Zhang somehow prevailed on the network and Xing to participate in the making of the piece, and



Zhang Peili, *Copied Consecutively 25 Times* (detail), 1993, twenty-five gelatin silver prints, each 11¼ × 9½".

Zhang used video to investigate the deep instability and intense incongruities of China in the final years of the century.

set up the shot to perfectly mimic a newscast. What viewers see is an ostensibly credible figure reading words that are manifestly true (in the sense that she is in fact reciting the actual definitions of terms), but that carry no meaning or weight. Her presence is one of calm neutrality, and her face is expressionless. She seems completely unaware of the emotions her visage may trigger, or of the irony embedded in the extraordinary spectacle Zhang has created.

If in *Water* words are emptied of meaning via reiteration, *Copied Consecutively 25 Times*, 1993, finds the image subjected to similar treatment. Zhang photographed and rephotographed a propaganda image twenty-five times until the image gradually disappears. The same logic governs *Focal Distance*, but the process has been modified for greater complexity. To produce this work, Zhang shot fifteen minutes of footage of a street, played it on a monitor, filmed one corner of the screen, and then repeated that process until he had

eight increasingly abstracted clips. When the work is on view, these are played simultaneously on eight monitors that are sometimes arranged one behind the other, rather than in a more intuitive side-by-side fashion. It's probably apt to read these works as poignant reflections on the loss of an index, but there is just as surely a political valence to these implosions of meaning. The same could be said of *Eating*, whose three stacked monitors show a person consuming a piece of cake, shot from three perspectives—a literal exemplar of the unstable and subjective consumption of truth. We can further surmise that Zhang chose to depict cake eaten with a fork, instead of Chinese food, as an allusion to the influx of Western customs and the changing culinary preferences of the time.

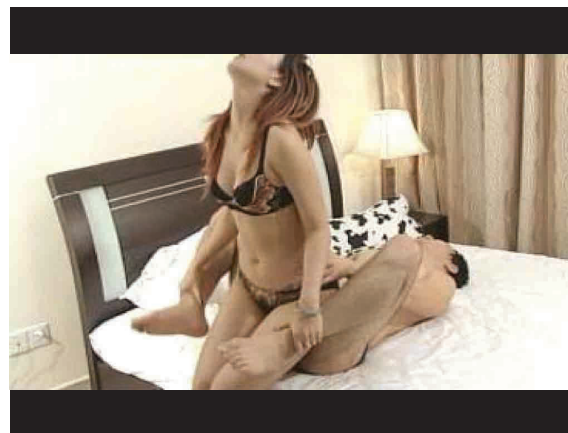
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM, Zhang has often plumbed cinematic source material, mining this rich vein to find ready-made materials for large-scale video



Above: Zhang Peili, *Document on Hygiene No. 3*, 1991, video, silent, 24 minutes 45 seconds. Right: Zhang Peili, *Eating*, 1997, three-channel video, color, sound, 28 minutes.



Below, clockwise from top left: Zhang Peili, *Happiness*, 2006, video, color, sound, 6 minutes 39 seconds. Zhang Peili, *Last Words*, 2003, video, color, sound, 20 minutes 27 seconds. Zhang Peili, *Lowest Resolution*, 2005–2007, still from the 14-minute 42-second color video component of an installation with plasma screen, motion sensor, and two speakers. Zhang Peili, *Collision of Harmonies*, 2014, sound, metal track, microphones, megaphone speakers, computer, fluorescent light tubes. Installation view, Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing. Zhang Peili, *Last Words*, 2003, video, color, sound, 20 minutes 27 seconds. Zhang Peili, *Happiness*, 2006, video, color, sound, 6 minutes 39 seconds.





Zhang Peili, *Go Ahead, Go Ahead*, 2004, two-channel video, color, sound, 8 minutes 46 seconds.

If so much of the modernist project has grappled with the general—with type, canon, dogma—Zhang takes art to the opposite extreme: irreducible singularity.

installations. Heart-wrenching death scenes from propagandist revolutionary films have been spliced together as a Beckettian melodrama in *Last Words*, 2003, while the two-channel *Happiness*, 2006, achieves a decidedly unsettling effect by juxtaposing two looping clips from a mid-'70s movie about shipyard workers: In one, we see a man giving a speech, while in the other, we see his audience clapping ferociously and smiling as if nothing in the world could inspire more delight than the speaker's bromides. Another two-channel work, *Go Ahead, Go Ahead*, 2004, incorporates footage from American as well as Chinese movies, shown in two large-scale projections and carefully edited to create the impression that the two sides are confronting each other.

Someone is caught in the crossfire in *Go Ahead, Go Ahead*—that someone, of course, being the viewer. Yet if theorists such as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh have stressed the political capacities of a physical audience, the potential to instantiate a public sphere in the collective and simultaneous experience of art, Zhang's work expresses a marked skepticism or wariness toward embodied spectatorship and, by extension, toward collective experience as such. If anything, Zhang has chosen to emphasize individuality in the space of collectivism. Particularly in his work of the past decade or so, the agency of the viewer becomes a double-edged sword, working to occlude perception

as much as to facilitate it. Via the use of motion sensors in works such as *Lowest Resolution*, 2005–2007, and *Phrase*, 2006, Zhang makes the viewer a trigger that initiates distortions or morphings of the moving image. In *Lowest Resolution*, a video plays on a small LCD screen; when anyone approaches, the image begins to pixelate, becoming sheer visual noise by the time the viewer reaches the optimal viewing distance. Upholding the maxim that things become more obscure the closer you look, *Lowest Resolution* also suggests shifting attitudes toward sex in China—its source material is a store-bought sex-education film. The source clip for *Phrase*, doubled on two plasma screens, is taken from the well-known Chinese film *Sentinels Under the Neon Lights* (1964). It shows a PLA soldier saying to an American diplomat: “The United Nations? It knows me, but I don’t know it.” As viewers walk toward one screen, the footage speeds up; when they walk toward the other, it slows down. The clips play at a normal rate only when the spectator is a bit too far away for comfort. These works elicit a desire for proximity, only to make proximity the condition of illegibility. Viewers move backward and forward, left and right, in hopes of achieving a stable position.

More recently, Zhang has figured instability in sculptural installations. *A Necessary Cube*, 2011, is essentially a gigantic air bag, a form somehow monstrous and delicate at the same time, slowly inflating

and deflating in eerie respiration. In *Collision of Harmonies*, 2014, two retro-style megaphones hang from a track and—not unlike a viewer trying to find a vantage point—slide back and forth, each emitting the sound of mellifluous chanting. But as the megaphones approach each other, they start to produce feedback, which reaches ear-popping maximum intensity at the point of physical contact. It makes little sense to ask which sound is the signal and which the noise. That could only be answered via the kind of collective spectatorship, and, by extension, interpretive consensus, that Zhang works against.

The artist's move away from generalities and toward the creation of infinitely singular experiences speaks to the dramatic shifts in China over the past three decades. The once-homogeneous state, based on ideals of collectivity, is reluctantly giving way to increased social differentiation and individuation while facing its own paradoxical situation vis-à-vis time—promoting hyperspeed development, yet never outpacing a sense of belatedness. In the face of such radical extremes, it is no wonder that irreducible heterogeneity—that condition so famously theorized as inherent to video—is the ground of *Collision of Harmonies*, as it is of every situation Zhang creates. □

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