



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.2 No.4 Oct.-Dec. 2024

Concept and Medium: China's First Video Art Piece and Zhang Peili's Early Artistic Creation

Xiaonan Li, Shuyuan Tian

To cite this article: Xiaonan Li, Shuyuan Tian, "Concept and Medium: China's First Video Art Piece and Zhang Peili's Early Artistic Creation," *Art Frontier* 2, no.4 (December 2024): 53-64, <https://doi.org/10.64212/DDWW1339>.

DOI: 10.64212/DDWW1339

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

© 2024 Frontier Press.

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org

Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



Concept and Medium: China's First Video Art Piece and Zhang Peili's Early Artistic Creation

Xiaonan Li, Shuyuan Tian

Abstract

This paper takes China's earliest video artwork *30×30* and the early works of video artist Zhang Peili (張培力) as a foundation to study and explore the relationship between the origin of Chinese video art and the modern art movement in the 1980s. With the language of compulsive repetition Zhang Peili shifted his artistic creations from painting to video. The logic of conceptual art was pivotal in the early development of video art, and was further enriched through the exploration of the media language of video art, becoming the cornerstone for contemporary Chinese video art.

Key Words

Video art, '85 Movement, compulsive repetition, conceptual art

The first artwork in China using moving images as a medium is the single-channel video *30×30* (1988) created by Zhang Peili. Compared to the video works created after the 1990s, *30×30* is both an integral part of the avant-garde art movement of the 1980s and a precursor to Chinese contemporary video art. After this work, the idea of using moving images as a medium for artistic creation was shelved until three years later. While it was set aside the *1989 China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* (1989 現代藝術大展), which marked the end of the '85 New Wave Movement ('85 新潮運動), took place in Chinese contemporary art and video art entered the 1990s at a historical turning point.

1. *30×30* as a Medium of Time

30×30 is a video artwork which documents the artist's behavior. The recording equipment used was a relatively professional shoulder-mounted camcorder, the (Panasonic VHS-M7), rather than the handheld home video recorder (launched in 1965) that early Western video artists widely used. The work was filmed in an office of the Hangzhou Customs Building with the assistance of customs staff. Such anecdotes highlight the specific hardware environment and locations where the artist first came into contact with video equipment. The expression of *30×30* is very straightforward, utilizing a fixed camera position to record a pair of hands (the artist's) wearing medical

rubber gloves as they break a 30cm square mirror, glue it back together, break it again, and glue it once more. The process features no camera zooms or position changes and is shot entirely in natural light. During this process, the repetitive and tedious action is presented. The camera focuses on the distance between the hands and the glass, akin to a close-up, to show the specific actions clearly while conveying the strangeness of the medical gloves, the threat of injury from the broken glass, and the irritation of the shattered mirror. Influenced by the content and visual effects of the work, the audience's sight inherently contains a certain forced viewing effect. The recording duration is based on the length of the videotape, which is 180 minutes, and was later edited down to 32 minutes, 9 seconds. The whole work gives people the experience of being lengthy, meaningless, and depressing (figure 1).

Zhang Peili prepared *30×30* for the internal documentation of the *Huangshan Conference* (黃山會議) in 1988. Originally referred to as the '88 *Symposium on the Creation of Chinese Modern Art* ('88 中國現代藝術創作創造研討會), the *Huangshan Conference* included more than a hundred young and middle-aged artists and theorists from across the country. While many participants prepared very formal works, Zhang Peili seemed to intend to play a joke on the attendees with this video, which appeared rather informal. His original plan was to lock the doors of the screening room when the audience was watching the video, but it was ultimately



Figure 1. Zhang Peili. *30×30*. Video art, 1988.

not feasible due to conditions at the time, and it was eventually played in fast-forward mode.

From the perspective of the work's original design intent and its realization process, the superposition of a large number of prolonged repetitions and meaningless actions create a visual compulsion that reflects the persistent emphasis on the issue of artistic democracy within the Chinese avant-garde art movement of the time and its broader context. The work employs video as a temporal medium to document the performative process, serving as a Duchampian mockery of the state of art during that period, while the use of objects like medical gloves and shattered glass accompanies connotations of danger and warning, evoking a serious and oppressive atmosphere. Here, the artist's interest lies in the temporality of video as an artistic medium distinct from painting, rather than exploring the intrinsic boundaries of video art itself. Temporality becomes a means of expressing concepts, with the camera functioning purely as a tool to document actions. In the unconscious use of the camera to make the performance complete, the temporal characteristic of the video medium is amplified,

merging performance, concept, and video. The act of documenting performance thus becomes a method for the artist to utilize time-based media, highlighting a strong desire for the work to intervene in real time and space by restricting the time and place of viewing. This approach aligns with the overarching agenda of the whole Chinese avant-garde art movement in the 1980s, which sought to engage art with reality. It is this line of thought that gave birth to this video artwork.

2. From Conceptual Painting to Conceptual Video

The significance of *30×30* must be considered within the context of the artist's other works from the same period. This line of thinking draws us into the close relationship between Chinese video art and the avant-garde art movement in the 1980s. *30×30* connects the artistic practices of painting and video by prioritizing concept over form. At the same time, utilizing new mediums, it opens new forms for contemporary Chinese art.

Zhang Peili participated in the avant-garde art movement of the 1980s in China. He organized and

participated in the *85 New Space* (85 新空間) exhibition and was one of the main members of the Chi She (池社) group. Chi She emerged during the '85 Movement ('85 運動) under the influence of Western rational thought, advocating to replace impulsive art fanaticism with pure reason.¹ Zhang's creations at the time were mainly oil paintings with a rational and cold style, among which the medical gloves series and saxophone series both presented such visual effects in the extreme. He emphasized seriousness and order in art and rejected spectacle, which was considered to be connected to class attributes, serving as a proletarian method of countering the degeneration of "petty-bourgeois culture."² This

emphasis on rules became one of the driving forces behind Zhang's work during this period. Painting no longer served aesthetic experiences but became a medium for realizing artistic concepts and political attitudes. His paintings began to include extensive textual explanations of the design concepts and effects, metaphorically transforming the entire work into a political stance. This approach is exemplified by the series *X?* (1986–1987) (figure 2), and the later work *Procedure of Play First and Behead Later-Regarding X?* ("先奏後斬"的程式——關於《X?》), (1987) (figures 3, 4) which in the form of texts about the creation of *X?* and *Art Project No. 2* (藝術計畫第二號) (1987) are works that are completely in the



Figure 2. Zhang Peili. *X? Series No. 3*. Oil on canvas, 180×198cm, 1986.

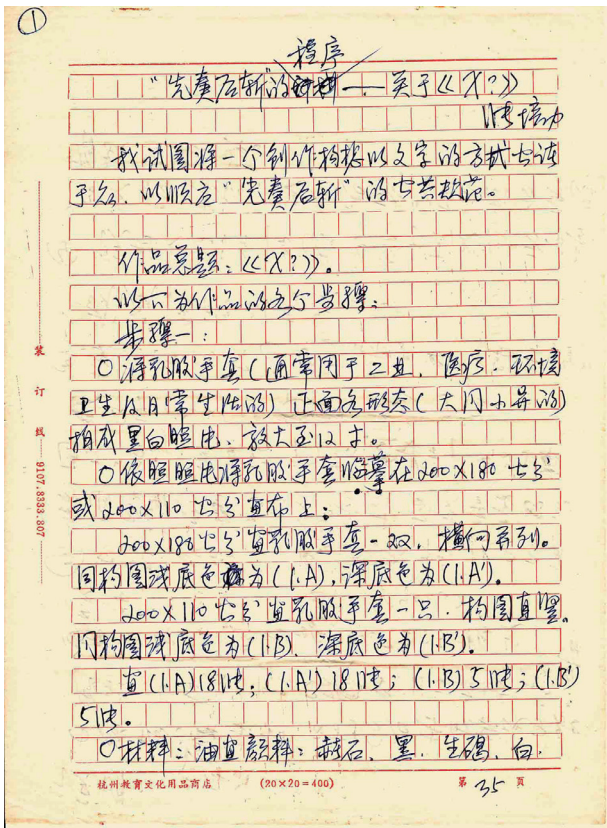


Figure 3. Zhang Peili. *Play First and Behead Later-Regarding X?*. Text, manuscript first page, 1987.

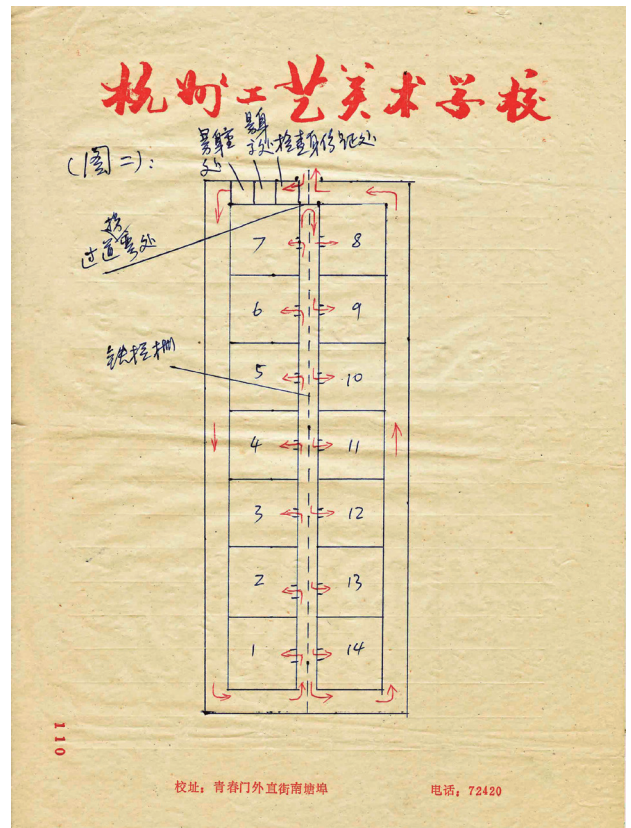


Figure 4. Zhang Peili. *Play First and Behead Later-Regarding X?*. Text, show space manuscript Figure II, 1987.

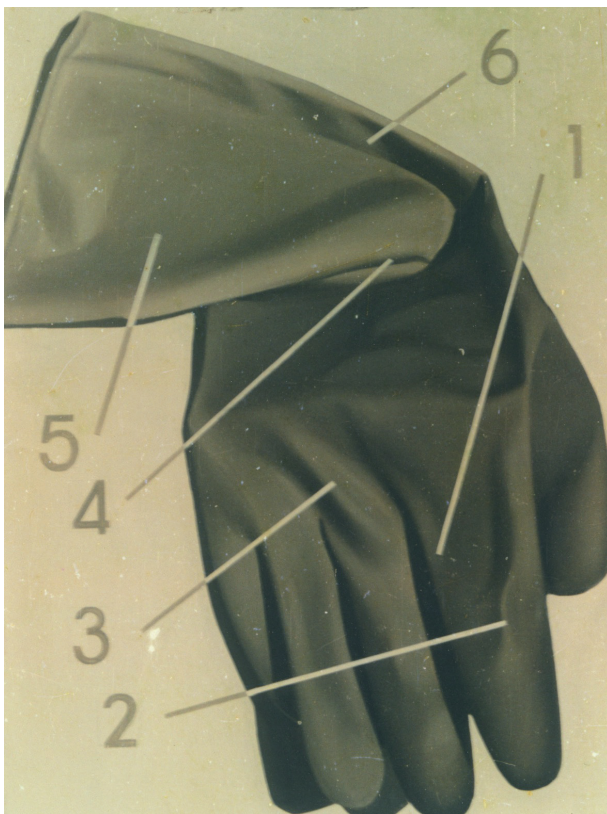


Figure 5. Zhang Peili. *X? Series*. Oil on canvas, 78x58cm, 1987.



Figure 6. Zhang Peili. *X? Series*. Oil on canvas, 99x79.5cm, 1987.

form of documents that establish the rules themselves.

The plan for the *X?* project was to replicate one hundred enlarged photographs of medical rubber gloves and treatment chairs in a repetitive manner (figures 5, 6, 7). The process of creating and exhibiting these works was governed by a stringent set of rules, laying out an ideal protocol for exhibition and viewing. Exhibition rules were established, such as “viewers entering the room must remain for no less than 23 minutes and no more than 33 minutes, otherwise they will be penalized with an additional 33 minutes in the room.” Later, the procedural description of the work evolved independently into *Procedure of Play First and Behead Later-Regarding X?* which became the basis for retrospectively understanding the glove paintings.³ Zhang’s artistic practice during the Chi She period was to get rid of the obsessive ritual of painting in the form of painting, and finally he found an alternative medium to realize the concept through the work *30×30*. To a certain extent, *30×30* employed a more economical approach, avoiding lengthy descriptions of painting procedures and viewing conditions, but directly manifesting the concept. This idea of directness and economy was also emphasized by

Geng Jianyi, another member of Chi She, in his essay *Recent Paintings of “Chi She”* in 1987.⁴

If we investigate the paintings of this period in isolation, we tend to overlook the conceptual nature of Chi She paintings and their connection to politics. The method used in these paintings shares a deep internal consistency with *30×30*. Firstly, the works were copied mechanically, strictly according to photos. Secondly, repetition and compulsion are the most important characteristics of this group of works. This desire for rationality and compulsion aligned with the broader goal of avant-garde artists in the 1980s, who sought to reshape China’s political consciousness and culture through the styles of Western modernist art. With the understanding of these works in mind, it is not difficult to grasp that *30×30* is the first work to appear in isolation with moving images as the medium. It was the involvement of the video that made the unrealized conceptual intentions of the *X? Series* to be fulfilled (although *30×30* was not finally realized). Between the unfinished and finished, we see how the video medium opened up a new world for artists. Its unique characteristics created a distinction between video art and other artistic mediums, enabling



Figure 7. Zhang Peili. *X? Series*. Oil on canvas, 105×124cm, 2012 (Originally created in 1986, damaged and remade by the artist in 2012).



Figure 8. Zhang Peili. *Document on Hygiene No. 3* working photo, 1991.



Figure 9. Zhang Peili. *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary*. Single channel recording, 1991.

art to connect more directly with society, culture, and politics.

3. Compulsive Repetition in Early Video Works

Rules (compulsion) and repetition always appear in pairs. In *Art Project No. 2*, Zhang Peili imitated the format of legal texts to stipulate an exhibition procedure about seeing, being seen, and dialogue, trying to establish an ideal relationship between artists and the public. He advocated a shared interest relationship between artworks and the audience, and showed in the above works an experiment that “art has a direct restraint and oppression on the audience.”⁵ There is no doubt that, if this compulsive requirement could only be presented in textual form, it would be difficult to achieve and would merely function as a declaration. *30×30* is one of the most important attempts in this phase, continuing those compulsive and repetitive features from *X?*. Although this experiment on compulsory repetition failed to fully

realize its original idea (the film was fast-forwarded during playback, and the audience could leave at any time), the symptomatic release formed by the close combination of the two (compulsion and repetition) began to evolve into the core language of Zhang Peili's early video works.

If the emotion stemming from personal experiences and memories fails to effectively establish a shared interest between the audience and the artist—such as the intrinsic connection between personal memories and trauma in *X?* or *30×30* involving medical rubber gloves (which relate to the artist's memory of undergoing hepatitis treatment)—then the introduction of collective experiences might further strengthen the internal connection between art and viewing. As Geng Jianyi, a member of Chi She, remarked when commenting on the *X? Series* and similar works, repeatedly presenting identical units would ultimately achieve an effect akin to a religious ritual within the integrality. He connected this kind of repetitive form to uniform clothing, behaviors,



Figure 10. Zhang Peili. *Children's Playground*. Video installation, ten channels / ten monitors, 1992.

flags, continuous bell tolls, slogans, etc., and other political memories, suggesting that the political power historically generated through repetition would bring a unique form of reflection to Chi She's works.⁶ It was in his later works that Zhang Peili's idealized state of compulsory repetition was gradually introduced as a kind of specific reflection.

In 1991, after two years of accumulation, Zhang Peili picked up the camera again and created the video works *Document on Hygiene No. 3* [(衛) 字 3 號] (figure 8) and *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* (水 —— 辭海標準版) (figure 9). These two works bring us into the daily experiences of that time, showing themselves with a strong criticism towards daily life. Like *30×30*, they also employ the language of repetition and circulation, and also conduct compulsive viewing with the fixed camera position, displaying characteristics of tedium and the dissolution of meaning. However, unlike *30×30*, where the artist's action of piecing together broken glass with medical gloves carries abstract symbolic meaning, these later works shift toward content and themes that are specifically connected to social, political, and cultural contexts. The internal structure of compulsive repetition as a

symptomatic feature was further deepened.

Document on Hygiene No. 3 recorded the whole process during which the artist repeatedly washed a live chicken with soap and water for the duration of a videotape, 150 minutes. The audience can hear a man reading a propaganda article about the "Patriotic Health Campaign" (愛國衛生運動) in the voiceover. In the final edited version, the video is cut to 24 minutes, 45 seconds and made silent. The concept of this work was inspired by the hygiene census of the 1980s and is a satire on the special civil administration method during a particular phase in China. The repetitive act of washing the chicken seems to imply the repression and monotony of individual life in the daily routines of ordinary citizens. The subsequent work *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* features Xing Zhibin, a news anchor from CCTV's *Xinwen Lianbo* (a daily news program produced by China Central Television), reading dictionary entries with the word water as the starting point. The video is filmed using the standard visuals typical of Chinese television news, immediately immersing the audience in a familiar visual and ideological framework. The mechanical selection of dictionary entries emphasizes the monotony of visual

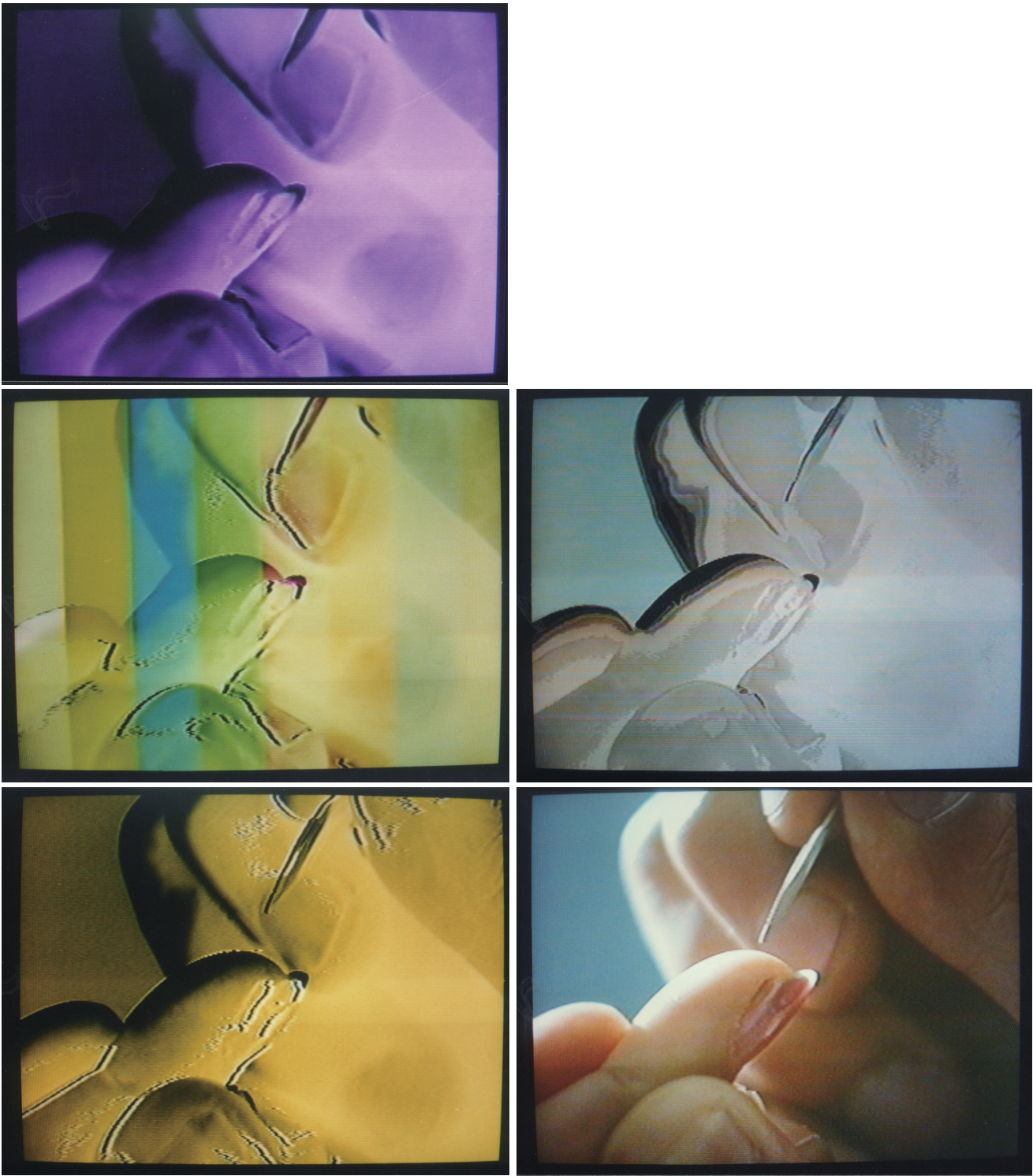


Figure 11. Zhang Peili. *Assignment No. 1*. Video installation, six channels/twelve monitors, 1992.

form and deconstructs the authority of the propaganda mainstream media.

Zhang Peili's video artworks opened a new chapter in Chinese art through video art. In 1991, Wu Liang curated the *Garage '91 Show—Reality of Current Experience* in the basement of the Shanghai Education Hall, showcas-

ing the works of eight artists, including Zhang Peili's *Document on Hygiene No. 3*. This was the first public display of *Document on Hygiene No. 3* in China. Although both *Document on Hygiene No. 3* and *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* were still filmed with a fixed camera, presenting significant

documentary characteristics, we can notice that the artist began to consciously incorporate signifiers from visual culture into the composition of the works, making them an important part of the conceptual framework, such as the patient gown worn by the artist in *Document on Hygiene No. 3* and the political metaphors created by the image of Xing Zhibin in *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary*. If repetition is inherently compulsive, like the symptoms of neurosis, then such acts in the above works indicate precisely the return of trauma in reality and the cultural context in which it emerges.

4. Language Awareness of Video Medium

In 1992, Zhang Peili created the video installation *Children's Playground* (兒童樂園) (figure 10) with ten-channels/ten-monitors, and the video installation *Assignment No. 1* (作業一號) (figure 11) with six-channels/twelve-monitors. From these two works onward, he consciously began to explore the characteri-

stics and functions of the video medium itself, gradually moving away from purely conceptual forms of expression. Starting with these works, the relationship between the concepts of time and space in the video medium, as well as the connection between filming and editing, was progressively established.

In *Children's Playground*, a rotating toy was filmed from several perspectives, with three little penguins of different colors endlessly climbing up the stairs. *Assignment No. 1* features the repeated action of taking a blood sample from a finger, with post-production techniques altering the speed, color, and contrast of the video. In these two works, Zhang Peili's focus shifted from documenting events and content to exploring and analyzing the inherent characteristics of the video medium itself; the relationship between multi-angle spatial effects and nonlinear time began to enter his creative thinking. This exploration continued in his four-channel/twenty-monitor video installation *Best Before 8/28/1994* (保鮮期——8/28/1994) (figures 12, 13) in 1994. In this work, close-up shots of actions of cutting



Figure 12. Zhang Peili. *Best Before 8/28/1994*. Video installation, four channels/twenty monitors, 1994.

chicken, tearing chicken, licking chicken, and chewing chicken were shown on the four screens, while several electric stoves cooking chicken soup were placed on the ground near the monitors. The background music is *Moonlight over the Spring River* (春江花月夜). The relationship formed by the images on the monitors and the real chicken soup and stoves in the physical space directly hints at the primary purpose of this work, which is to explore the possibilities and uniqueness of the video medium's ability to represent reality. In the video installation *Opposite Space* (相對的空間) in Barcelona, Spain in 1995, Zhang Peili placed a monitor and a camera in each of two spaces that were divided into two, so that the audience could see the situation in the opposite room, which was also a continuation of the investigation of the spatial characteristics of the image medium. Through the above works, we can see that Zhang Peili consciously explored the artistic expression ability of the image and the image installation medium. Beginning with *Children's Playground*, his works no longer focused on the artist's actions but instead shifted

the center of creation towards the sensory intensity and spatial reconstruction capabilities that the video medium could present. In the work *Uncertain Pleasure* (不確切的快感) in 1996, Zhang Peili's exploration of the language of the video medium reached a significant milestone, marking a key achievement in his work.

Uncertain Pleasure is a four-channel/twelve-monitor video installation, and each screen of this work depicts a close-up shot of scratching an itch on different parts of the body. Viewers inevitably find themselves drawn into this "itching" event. The focus of its video language lies in exploring the differences between the moving image medium and painting, photography, installation, and performance art. It is also this kind of video installation method that more effectively achieves the establishment of a deeper and more trustworthy connection between the work and the audience. To some extent, this goal has been continually experimented with since the Chi She phase, in an attempt to capture the most effective communication between the work and the viewer, which aligns with the artist's initial desire to connect the audience



Figure 13. Zhang Peili. *Best Before 8/28/1994*. Video installation, four channels/twenty monitors, 1994.

in the reality world. To a certain extent, it is about exploring the special and inherent connection between seeing and being seen. Only by realizing this specific connection can artistic democracy be fundamentally achieved. While *Document on Hygiene No. 3* still contains elements of performance and conceptual art, by the time of *Uncertain Pleasure* Zhang Peili had begun exploring the perceptual potential of the language of the video medium through the physical connection between the image and the audience. This exploration also developed an internal pathway within the video medium to establish a more direct relationship between the artwork and its viewers.

It was this kind of experiment that revealed the medium-specificity of video art. Artists who used this medium in their creations began consciously exploring the scope, characteristics, and rules of the language of video art, which became a key feature in the development of video art in the mid-to-late 1990s. Video art began to gradually emerge as a distinct field within the broader context of contemporary Chinese art from then on. Here, we can observe a gradual retreat from the conceptual elements in the artists' works, giving way to a deeper investigation into the language of video art itself. This shift opened up a path toward researching the essential nature of video art, enabling artists to work more deeply within the medium to explore the various possibilities it could achieve. This focus on the essential

nature of art had been mentioned in the manifesto of Chi She, which discussed the laws of artwork itself. However, by this time, artists had fully turned their attention to the video medium, engaging in the production of concepts within video art.

In Zhang Peili's early artistic creation, we can see how the Chinese avant-garde art movement in the 1980s had a close conceptual connection with the occurrence and development of video art, and how a new medium broke through the artistic language of the existing medium and brought the expression of artistic concepts to a new stage. In the case of his early video art practice, broad cultural and social issues were tightly connected to the characteristics and language of the medium, displaying a strong sense of spontaneity and creativity. This can be seen as being nourished by the intellectual resources of the Chinese avant-garde art movement of the 1980s.

XIAONAN LI, Associate Professor, School of Arts, Renmin University of China.

SHUYUAN TIAN, PhD candidate, Chinese Studies, University of Cologne.

Editor: Yao Xiao

ENDNOTES

1. Chi She was founded on May 27, 1986, with members including Zhang Peili 張培力, Geng Jianyi 耿建翌, Song Ling 宋陵, Bao Jianfei 包劍斐, Wang Qiang 王強, and Guan Ying 關穎. Their artistic practices mainly encompassed installation art and oil paintings. In the Chi She manifesto, the artists expressed their reflections on art through a stream-of-consciousness writing style, emphasizing pure rationality in art, internal rules, metaphorical artistic techniques, and a focus on the proce-

ssual nature of art. Gao Minglu 高名潞, ed., *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources* [‘85 美術運動: 歷史資料彙編], (Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), 198.

2. Zhang Peili, "My Art Perspective" [我的藝術觀], in Gao, *The '85 Movement*.

3. Huang Zhuan 黃專, Wang Jing 王景, eds., *Artistic Working Manual of Zhang Peili* [張培力藝術工作手冊], (Hongkong: Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2008).

4. Geng Jianyi, "Recent Paintings of 'Chi She'" ["池社" 近期繪畫], in Gao, *The '85 Movement*, 203-204.

5. Zhang Peili, "Intentions of Art Project No. 2" [藝術計畫二號的出發點] (1988), in Gao, *The '85 Movement*, 215-216.

6. Geng Jianyi, "Recent Paintings of 'Chi She'" ["池社" 近期繪畫] (1987), in Gao, *The '85 Movement*, 203-204.

觀念與媒介——中國第一件影像藝術作品與張培力的早期藝術創作

李笑男, 田淑媛

摘要: 本文以中國最早的影像藝術作品《30×30》以及影像藝術家張培力的早期作品為研究起點, 探討中國影像藝術的發端與1980年代的“現代藝術運動”之間的承續關係。通過“強迫性重複”語言, 張培力的藝術創作媒介從繪畫走向影像, 觀念藝術邏輯在影像藝術早期發展的過程中起到決定性的作用, 並在影像藝術媒介語言的發展探索中逐漸深化, 成為奠定中國當代影像藝術發展的基石。

關鍵詞: 影像藝術; 85 新潮美術; 強迫性重複; 觀念藝術