THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEO ART AND THE MATURITY OF NEW MEDIA ART (2002)
By Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie

We can say that, across the board, Chinese art carries enormous vestiges arising both directly and indirectly from concerns present within society through the 1990s. These were compounded by the artists' instinctive responses to the allure of commercial culture and the popularity of postmodern theories. Against this, individual preferences for video art in China sprang up in a fragmented way, being neither conjoined to, nor bereft from, the social environment. On occasion, works proved to be quite successful. Video art might appear to have flourished in recent years, yet one must recognize that there was a great deal of ersatz work produced. Success is achieved only when the conditions are ripe, and a certain level of progress has been reached.

In 1990, Professor Mijka of the Hamburg Institute of Art brought to China a number of videotapes that had been shown on German television to mark the nine-hundredth anniversary celebrations of the city of Cologne. The video works were shown during two lectures to the teaching staff and students at [Hangzhou's] Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (renamed the China National Academy of Fine Arts in 1995). This was the first time a meaningful connection had been made between video and art in China. In a striking contrast, representatives from provincial television stations across China were simultaneously holding a meeting at Huajiashan Hotel in Hangzhou, during which the videotapes were also shown. The industry professionals showed not the least bit of interest in the works, and the screening was abandoned after one hour.

These events were a springboard that was responsible for structuring the basic development of video art in China. Video art was immediately accepted and utilized by artists. It was never employed as an actively political medium as was the case with early Western video art. Unlike The Street Video Group in Germany in the 1960s, Chinese artists were not interested in documenting news, recording social reform, or fighting the museum system. On the contrary, Chinese artists took video as a new mode of individual expression, placing emphasis on its aesthetic value.

In 1991, Zhang Peili, one of the organizers of the *Garage Art Exhibition* (*Cheku yishu-zhan*) in a storage space in Hengshan Road, Shanghai, showed the work *Document on Hygiene, No. 3* [*(Wei) zi 3 hao*]. This was the first showing of a video work produced by a Chinese artist in China. It showed the artist repeatedly washing a chicken with soap and water in a basin. In the exhibition space, Zhang Peili placed several rows of red bricks in front of the television monitor to evoke the sense of a meeting. This corresponded to "Political Pop," which had not yet become a recognized genre; yet it was more devious and ingenious in its use of language. Zhang Peili produced three video works in 1992: *Assignment No. 1* (*Zuoye yihao*), *Children's Playground* (*Ertong leyuan*), and *Water: The Standard Version Read from the* Cihai Dictionary (*Shui* — Cihai *biaozhun ban*).

Assignment No. 1 was an installation consisting of six videotapes showing blood samples being taken from human fingers. It was similar in tone to the breaking of glass in *30 × 30* (1988), and the chicken-washing exercise in *Document on Hygiene, No. 3*. *Water* showed a professional news broadcaster from CCTV (China Central Television), reading every explanation of the character "water" from a dictionary.[1] Zhang Peili re-created the same lighting, background, setup, and "face of the nation" as an actual news broadcast, but with the content replaced by a non-expressive and neutral lexicon. Mockery is the timed spirit of 1992, further demonstrated in the way that Zhang Peili synthesized the filmed sequence of washing the chicken to a soundtrack of ancient music entitled *Chun jiang hua yue ye* (*Blossoms in the Moon over Spring River*).

After graduating from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Yan Lei came to Beijing, where he produced the works *Dissolve* (*Huajie*), *Clear Away* (*Qingchu*) (1993), *1500 cm* and *Beijing Haw* (*Beijing hongguo*) (1994). *Dissolve* showed two hands repeatedly playing variations of cat's cradle. *Clear Away* followed the artist as he bent his head in concentration while plucking armpit hair with tweezers. *1500 cm* was shot in four segments, each focusing on a specific yet mundane act of human behavior. The act employed 1500 cm of rubber bands, which he washed, measured, forced into his mouth, and then pulled back out again as magicians do with handkerchiefs. In a similar style to Zhang Peili's *Assignment No. 1*, Yan Lei's three video works were all compiled of long shots taken with a fixed focus from a single camera position. There was almost no narrative within these events because with the aim of recording fact, truth itself was demonstrated to have no obvious process. Conversely, where the mere record of an object is meaningless, action becomes "truth" on the screen. In this regard, the single, fixed-focus, close-up shot then is a compelling medium.

If this interesting approach was found in the work of two artists alone, we might suppose some kind of collaboration or aesthetic influence to be at work between them. Yet, it soon became clear that more and more artists were also exploring this approach. In 1994, *Living with Jika* (*Yu Jika tongju*) by Li Juchuan, and *Watched Sleep* (*Bei zhushi de shuiyan*) by Tong Biao, among others, revealed that this phenomenon was the result of a problem: the lack of any other personal inclination. At the same time, if we take a wider view, the situation of that moment largely denied the artists ready accessibility to editing and postproduction equipment. Cameras themselves were often borrowed, so the original concept of these works was aimed at avoiding the subsequent problems of editing. This was a smart move. Unavoidably, the deliberate and repeated paring down of technical elements under these difficult conditions resulted in unbearably simplified work. A love of minimalism, an interest in extreme simplification, and an obsession with process further provided a seemingly profound and self-confident basis for this.

Video art had just colonized an area within visual awareness when it came up against limitations within technology and material. More creative artists actively engaged in the medium by exploiting the circumstance that they found themselves in.

The element of timely relevance has always been key to Qiu Zhijie's approach. In 1992, after three years of continuous work, he completed the piece *Assignment No. 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times* (*Zuoye yihao: Chongfu shuxie yiqian bian* Lanting xu). This was a video recording of fifty overwritings of the famous text. A hand-held brush was delicately moved across a sheet of paper, which was increasingly blackened as multiple layers of the text built up. It engendered a strange, disturbing tension. Following this, sensitivity towards the images became a particular feature of his video works: intense movement, dramatic altering processes, life experience evoked from the physicality of a recorded object, etc. The interests revealed in his works demonstrated less about contemporary concepts than about his broader awareness. Qiu Zhijie's installation works were often pivoted on concept and notable for their philosophical inspiration and inference. These aspects of the works reflect the diorama of his spiritual life. By the time he saw *Buried Secrets* by Bill Viola, whose work represented the U.S. at the 1995 Venice Biennale and who would quickly became the main force inspiring and driving video art in China, video art had become the central focus of his art.

As the 1990s progressed, video art flourished in the Western world, and became embraced by audiences as an independent medium. However, it was something quite beyond the imagination of ordinary Chinese people. Although the circumstances of the moment were difficult, an exhibition of video art seemed necessary. By 1995, the growing practice around the country, albeit scattered, indicated the importance video

art was beginning to assume. At the end of 1994, Zhu Jia produced his ingenious work *Forever* (*Yongyuan*), executed by fixing a small camera to the edge of a flatbed bicycle's wheel as the artist pedaled through the streets of Beijing. The image of the streets ceaselessly spins round and round with the changing speed of the flatbed bicycle. When *Forever* was later exhibited in Hangzhou, the images were accompanied by a soundtrack of loud snoring.

In 1995, Li Yongbin finished his first video piece by projecting color slides of his deceased mother onto buildings and trees immediately outside his apartment in the early hours of the morning. As the dawn broke, the image faded and eventually disappeared. His second work, *Face No. 1* (*Lian 1*), was shown at a group exhibition in Hangzhou the following year. Here, a videotaped image of an old man's face is projected onto the face of the artist. The two superimposed faces sometimes coincide and sometimes dislocate. Within the realm of video works composed of long shots, Li Yongbin evolved his own rationale and would continue experiments with projections.

Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao lived in New York for ten years prior to their return to Beijing in 1995. Wang Gongxin produced his first video installation work, *Sky of Brooklyn* (*Bulukelin de tiankong*) [pl. 36], soon after his return. For this, he dug a well within their courtyard home and placed a television monitor at the bottom, which showed the videotaped image of a blue sky over Brooklyn. A voiceover says: "What are you looking at? There's nothing to see here!" in a strong Beijing accent. The underlying metaphor of the work illustrated China's curiosity about the West and the element of desire inherent to that attitude. It appealed to the audience to draw near and then repelled them with a jolt.

In September 1995, Yan Lei held a solo show titled *Invasion* (*Jinru*) in Beijing. The video works *323 cm²* and *No. 031007* were less about art than his *Clear Away*. These largely functioned as documentation, relaying on the process of an event that had already taken place.

Chen Shaoxiong, an active member of the Big-Tailed Elephant group (*Da wei xiang*) in Guangzhou, has a unique approach to working with the video medium. With a strong capacity for logistical organization, his work is characterized by two tendencies. His video installations are tight contrapositions of images combined with lambent editing. This is counterpoised by his awareness of the physicality of visual experience. The former impels him to create intricately configured installation works, to frequently use elements to create a kind of rationale, or to follow his preference for forms like word games. The latter allows him to successfully translate what might originally have been relatively uninteresting epistemological issues into a direct, easy language and actual physical experience. Chen Shaoxiong began work on the Sight Adjuster series (*Shili jiaozhengqi*) in 1994, and has persistently pushed the subject to its limit, as demonstrated in the work presented for the exhibition *Image and Phenomena* (*Xianxiang, yingxiang*) in 1996.

In September 1995, Weng Fen and female artist Yan Yinhong held an exhibition titled *A Talk Between a Man and a Woman* (*Nanren dui nüren shuo, nüren dui nanren shuo*) in Haikou. This contained elements similar to a work of Chen Shaoxiong's, *The Bride Changes Her Mind When the Television Channel Is Changed* (*Gaibian dianshi pindao bian gaibian xinniang de jueding*) (1994). Liu Yi from Shenzhen showed her work *Who Am I?* (*Shei shi wo*) in Beijing. It showed a number of the artist's friends talking about her, which placed an overriding focus on linguistics within the work. The problems that underlie the works by these artists indicate a similar crisis: that their authors were content to focus on terribly simple ideas of little significance.

We find a similar problem in the work of Beijing artist Song Dong, but his obsession with tiny details comes closer to being Zen. Song Dong held a solo exhibition titled *Uncovering* (*Xiankai*) in Beijing. The work shown took the form of projected scenes or close-up shots of lifting a cloth covering various objects. This straightforward methodology became a fertile ground for his work. The installation *Shut Up and Listen to Me* (*Bishang zui, ting wo shuo*) carried a social metaphor. Song Dong placed two television monitors face-to-face, each one playing footage of a close-up shot of one mouth that appeared to be speaking to another, one in English, one in Chinese. His approach was similar to that of Weng Fen but the effect was more concise.

In 1994, Shi Yong and Qian Weikang gained recognition through a series of exhibitions in Shanghai. In Qian Weikang's installation works he often juxtaposes an object with the image of it on the screen, portraying the actual object as a simple physiological phenomenon, or even physical phenomenon. He was not inclined to make explorations of society, culture, and politics. Compared with him, Shi Yong was more of a humanist, although his work exhibited the same kind of straightforward form, smooth surface, and diverse processes. The materials he chose often imbued the work with metaphor. For instance, he approached film and sound based on his attitude toward the mass media. This engendered an independent relationship with electronic media.

As we approached the mid-1990s, Zhang Peili's persistent efforts in the field of video art were paying off. He had gained an increasing number of opportunities to exhibit internationally. As compared with the instinctive spontaneity in his earlier practice, his works now revealed the greater input of researched techniques from Western video art. Zhang Peili regularly used multiple screens in exhibiting his works as an installation in a gallery space. Compared with the close-up shots, fixed camera angles, and repeated movements that characterize his earlier works, he began to create a direct visual impact across the screens. If he merely arranged the monitors and electrical components of his installation to construct the desired effect, then obviously it would be more difficult to imbue the work with historical context and the thrill that derives from the integration of other objects. These generally appeared to be more delicate. As an excellent artist, Zhang Peili frequently breaks ground with his instinctive sensitivity and accurate grasp of technique and motion, creating a sensation of life with the simplest equipment. A representative later work of this period by Zhang Peili is *Uncertain Pleasure* (*Bu queqie de kuaigan*), produced in 1996.

After moving to Beijing in 1994, Qiu Zhijie spent much time thinking about his earlier work in Hangzhou, which was a series of conceptual works, focused only on pure academic notions. He reduced the enormous volume of content about social culture, at the same time trying to differentiate his work from other small-minded approaches to video, so that his works began to emphasize certain physical sensitivities, as in *Washroom* (*Weishengjian*) and *Hands of Escher* (*Aishe'er de shou*). This tact clearly runs through Zhang Peili's works, whereas Qiu often takes pains to avoid blankness in his video work, and turns the process to focus upon the body, or impels the body to adopt the gestures suggesting a more dramatic plot when the characters perform in front of the camera.

Experimental video as a medium emerged nationwide in China around 1996, and on the odd occasion was included in exhibitions. It was evident that more people were becoming interested in this field. The exhibition *Image and Phenomena* arose from this situation.

When Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun decided to take up this challenge, the biggest problem confronting them was funding. They had absolutely no experience of fundraising, yet through the friendship and trust of their friends Lin Shiming and Hong Lumei, who were doing business in Shanghai, they found sponsorship committed to

the event. Without their generous act, we would have had to wait a couple of years to continue the story. As it was, we were able to realize it in April 1996. Artists collaborated to produce two catalogues that were translated into English, but the most important work was to procure the equipment required and to insert an academic structure into the exhibition.

In a non-publicly distributed exhibition catalogue, exhibition curator Wu Meichun outlined her thinking on academicism in *Image and Phenomena*: What possibilities does video art bring to contemporary art? Does video art exist as the image of the phenomenon or the phenomenon of the image?[2]

When everything was prepared, the group of artists participating in *Image and Phenomena* included nearly the entire roster within the field of video art at that moment. "We wished to take a more active stance in facing reality. We could not sit back and wait for a general elevation in the quality and quantity of video works. We decided to take an exhibition as the starting point for exploring video in art. Neither the works nor the act of organizing an exhibition itself was a response to reality."[3] Such zeal tended to spoil things with its excessive enthusiasm and idealistic outlook that refused to acknowledge the reality. Following the exhibition, the exploration of video became a hot topic nationwide. Meanwhile the structural defects and difficulties that were exposed during the preparation for the exhibition provided an impetus for further efforts. The exhibition itself and the response to it became a landmark in establishing a healthy system and environment for creativity that is little more than the predetermined goal of the curator.

The works in the exhibition may be divided into two groups according to trends exhibited. First, the works that were introspective in regard to the medium itself, and which were generally simple in structure. Second, the intricately structured scenes, which pushed at the boundaries of the video's image by adding rich layers and a finer perception. Representative of the first were works such as *Uncertain Pleasure* and *Focal Distance* (*Jiaoju*) by Zhang Peili, *Breath/Breath* (*Huxi huxi*) by Qian Weikang, *Forever* by Zhu Jia, *Face* by Li Yongbin, *The Afternoon of August 30th* (*8 yue 30 ri xiawu*) by Tong Biao, and *Absolutely Safe* (*Juedui anquan*) by Yan Lei. Representative of the second, installation works, were *Present Progress* (*Xianzai jinxing shi*) by Qiu Zhijie, *Baby Talk* (*Yingyu*) by Wang Gongxin, *Fish Tank* (*Yugang*) by Yang Zhenzhong, and *Integrated World* (*Wanzheng de shijie*) by Geng Jianyi.

Image and Phenomena showed a group of unforgettable video works and initiated a series of research and exchange activities. The two catalogues produced, *Documents of Video Art* (*Luxiang yishu wenxian*) and *Art and Historical Consciousness* (*Yishu yu lishiyishi*), presented a compendium of important information about video art in China and abroad. The popularity of the two catalogues demonstrated the impact upon people's understanding and acceptance of video over the next few years.

Following *Image and Phenomena*, which was held at the art gallery of the China National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou in 1996, many high-quality solo exhibitions sprang up in Beijing, such as Wang Gongxin's *Myth Powder No. 1* (*Shenfen yihao*), Song Dong's *Look* (*Kan*), Qiu Zhijie's *Logic: Five Video Installations* (*Luoji: wuge luxiang zhuangzhi*), and so on. This indicated that Chinese video artists had not only become focal points within the artistic community but had also started to use more mature and individual methods to redraw the map of contemporary culture. Within China, people from different backgrounds such as documentary filmmakers, writers, and those engaged in experimental music or drama began to venture into video art, and various new possibilities for the art form began to develop. Equally, equipment became more affordable with each technological advance, and artists were able to

achieve richer effects using their own PC to carry out postproduction — if determined to do so. With the renovation of and change in video technology, this became a trend, along with the use of domestic digital cameras and non-linear video editing systems.

The results were displayed in *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China* (*97 Zhongguo luxiang yishu guanmozhan*), an exhibition curated by Wu Meichun. In the catalogue essay "Curator's Thoughts," she wrote: "The real question we face concerns the uses to which video art can be put, not what video art is. It is too early to define. Although standards for video art appear to be falling into place, they are not accepted by everyone. The inherent characteristics of the medium make it powerful yet cheap, intimate yet easy to copy and disseminate. It can expose the truth and be sensitive to the imagination. This exhibition is an attempt to show everything and not to select work to illustrate a specific theme. It is broadly inclusive in its selection and indicates our courage to exist in the world of media."[4]

Wu Meichun mentioned that standards for video art are constantly challenged by a multitude of experiments. At the end of 1998, Huang Yan curated *0431 — China's Video Art* (*0431 — Zhongguo luxiang yishuzhan*) in Changchun. And, in 1999, Chang Tsong-zung curated *Fast Shots: China, Hong Kong and Taiwan Video Art* (*Kuaijing: Zhong Gang Tai luxiang yishuzhan*) in Macao. The core elements took their lead from *Image and Phenomena*.

The activities of Chinese video artists had begun to attract the attention of international art circles. In 1997, new media works by Wang Jianwei and Feng Mengbo were exhibited in *Documenta X* in Kassel. In 1998, Qiu Zhijie participated in the Berlin video festival *Transmediale '98* and the *Esperanto '98* exhibition in New York, and received invitations from important video festivals in Bonn, Helsinki, and various other places. Chen Shaoping and Qiu Zhijie both participated in *Videos from International Artists* held at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne; Song Dong and Wang Jianwei both participated in *Infoart* in the Kwangju Biennale, curated by Nam June Paik. In 1999, Zhu Jia and Li Yongbin attended the *Worldwide Video Festival* held in Amsterdam. New media art festivals and institutions worldwide were expressing strong interest in holding an exhibition of Chinese video art. The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Berlin Video Forum each collected video works by Zhang Peili and Qiu Zhijie, and the works of China's new media artists began to appear frequently in festivals of new media art all over the world.

Meanwhile, members of the international art world made frequent visits to China. Rudolph Filindas, director of the New Media Art Center in Germany, gave several lectures introducing new developments at the Goethe Institute in Beijing and Shanghai. Robert Karn, the poetic master of French video art, visited the China National Academy of Fine Arts twice, and left a profound impression on the students. Barbara London, curator of film and video at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, traveled to China in the fall of 1997. She was amazed that China not only had excellent video artists, but also absorbed information at a very rapid speed. An essay of hers was later translated into Chinese, commenting that "the flourishing of China's video art is the starting point of a new circle since the circumference was already closed around new media art in the West."

Although the prospects of China's new media art are bright, the current situation has its problems. Until 2000, not one of the art academies in China had established a new media course, and although China's television channels have advanced equipment, they do not encourage experimental art programs. The interest of international art circles in Chinese new media art grows with each passing day, but we lack the institutional structure necessary to enter into a dialogue. The problems of gathering funds

and establishing venues and facilities are exacerbated by the fact that there are no stable institutions organizing video festivals or exhibitions. These structural deficiencies have further increased the restrictions on new media art. There is an urgent need for not-for-profit new media workshops operated by non-governmental institutions, technical support for experimental artists, and the investigation, exchange, collection, and popularization of new media art.

At the beginning of 2001, one non-governmental new media center did appear in Beijing. The Loft New Media Art Space (LNMAS) is located in Sanlitun, adjoining the Loft Restaurant and Bar, and is known for its cutting-edge cultural image and design. It is a space where people relax and celebrities meet, and which hosts a range of performances and art events. The space was established by artists Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao, and is run by Lin's sister Lin Tianfang. In September 2001, it hosted an exhibition of works by new media artists from France and the U.S. who were teaching at the Central Academy of Fine Arts together with the Chinese artists Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxin, and Qiu Zhijie. Wang Bo had a solo multimedia show here in November 2001. The Loft also participated in the International Alternative Space Seminar in Hong Kong that December. In March 2002, it was invited as a non-governmental organization to exhibit China's new media art at the Kwangju Biennale in Korea.

In June 2001, the New Media Research Center was established with the support of Xu Jiang, dean of the China National Academy of Fine Arts [in Hangzhou]. Its brief includes a theoretical research department and studios; it will launch new media art courses in 2003. At present, the center functions as follows: building a broad symbiosis with media centers, media institutes, and video festivals around the world; welcoming new media artists from abroad for the creation, investigation, and exhibition of new media artworks; conducting regular lectures about developments in new media art; organizing new media art festivals annually in China; and sending new media artworks to be part of various international activities. The prolific databank is available to artists, students, and researchers, providing the opportunity for research and curating exhibitions. The focus is on new technological advances, to which end invitations will be periodically extended to technical staff from computer and electronic appliance companies for the purpose of introducing new technologies, including regular training courses. It will also introduce developments in new media art from China and abroad via the Internet. The greatest, most positive success has been that achieved by *New Media Art Festival: Non-Linear Narrative (Xin meiti yishu jie: Fei xianxing xushi)*, which took place at the end of September 2001, and the intensive training courses organized in association with professors from the new media art department of Berlin University in March 2002.

In 2002, Phoenix Television launched a new program titled *DV New Generation* (*DV xin shidai*). Recognizing the booming popularity of digital video (DV) and the possibilities of independent production, it provides college students with professional digital cameras and then televises the works they shoot each day. The Phoenix Television initiative confirmed a new trend, setting a precedent within Chinese media. Its significance is immeasurable.

Video art is a medium that takes a morbid delight in constructing its own history. In the early days, the artistic standpoints of its cultural heroes were clear, albeit too exaggerated and simplified. Then again, it is only simple attitudes that are able to gain attention and understanding. More sophisticated insights are generally ignored.

Zhang Peili is the most important representative of the first stage of Chinese video art. He has consistently used the body to master the medium of video installation. Using multiple screens, each showing different images, he creates a sort of 3-D collage

and sets up contrasting, yet mutually involved, semantics. In the piece *Uncertain Pleasure*, more than ten monitors broadcast different close-up shots of a hand scratching a part of the body. The fleshy images within the neat monitors create a powerful tension. There is a similar sensation in the new work *Taking Food* (*Jinshi*). For Zhang Peili, video is a sort of "electronic mirror" with powers of amplification that can be used to examine the body in minute detail. It can expose certain elements that due to the defenses of our fragile psyches are usually filtered out by the naked eye. Zhang Peili's standpoint has influenced several younger artists, although the physical narcissism of young people gives their work even more intimate and countercultural characteristics.

Xu Zhen is one of these artists. His video *From Inside the Body* (*Laizi shenti neibu*), produced in 1999, comprises three screens. On the left and right ones, a man and a woman sniff their own bodies in a curious and exploratory manner, before they simultaneously enter the central screen and sniff each other's bodies. Xu Zhen's emphasis on an exaggerated sense of smell makes Zhang Peili's strategy of amplifying minute bodily motions and imbuing them with existential angst seem much more metaphorical. The obviously influenced artists are Yang Zhenzhong and Kan Xuan in Shanghai, an influence which may be traced back to Bruce Nauman.

Compared with works of an uninteresting or severe style, a number of other artists are keen on using realistic video images to create semantic meanings. These realistic images create a substitute reality, rather like an opera stage, with narratives and experiences being constructed directly within the framework of this imaginary space. Gao Shiming, Gao Shiqiang, and Lu Lei's *Visible and Invisible Life (Kejian bukejian de shenghuo)* is an angular framework for a room, constructed of welded iron. Three monitors separately show footage of feet passing through—in and out of—a door, hands turning a door handle, and the curtains blowing in the wind, all of which move, only to return to their original location. The substitute reality forms a kind of abstract room, and the audience needs to draw on their individual imaginations and experiences to fill in the details.

Aspects of a similar artifice can be found in *Butterfly (Die)* by Weng Fen, *In the Situation* (*Zai tian zhong*) by Feng Xiaoying, and *Hard to Restrain* (*Nan yu yizhi*) by Liu Wei, which were included in the exhibition *Post-sense Sensibility* (*Hou ganxing*); Song Dong's *Looking in the Mirror* (*Zhao jingzi*) in his solo show *Look*; and Yang Fudong's *Shen's Hutong* (*Shenjia nong*) in the exhibition *Period of Validity* (*Youxiaoqi*) in Shanghai. All were semantic installations. In a concrete stage set, a semantic relationship is formed between video images and "props." Not only can a semantic meaning be produced from visual images, but props can also be made use of to convey the artists' ideas.

The former is demonstrated by Wang Gongxin's works *Baby Talk*, *Sky of Brooklyn*, and *Face*. In *Baby Talk*, a baby's crib shaped like a shallow basin was filled with milk, which is constantly circulated by means of a pump, forming a whirlpool in the center. A video sequence was projected onto the surface of the milk, the images showing the facial expressions of older relatives teasing a baby, shot from the baby's viewpoint. The latter tendency can be illustrated by Song Dong's *Hit the Gambling Table* (*Pai du zhuo*) (1998), exhibited in Macao, and *Narrative of Non-Linearity: Elevator (Fei xianxing xushi: Dianti)* shown in *Non-Linear Narrative* in 2001.

When talking about works that use video in a symbolic way, we may also mention Yang Zhenzhong's *Face of Shanghai* (*Shanghai de lian*) in which the video projector projects upward from the bottom of a water tank. The stability of the picture is distorted by the effects on the water of vibrations caused by the amplification of low-pitched sound. The image is of a mask through which to view a street scene. In Qiu

Zhijie's *Outcome and Premonition (Jieju huo yugan)*, the lines of the artist's own palm were enlarged and projected on the floor of the exhibition space, with monitors placed at various positions according to the principles of palmistry. The images on the screens included a figure skating on a revolving compass, hands throwing dice, and distorted figures in a landscape; the sort of highly symbolic images often used by artists, as in Chen Xiaoyun's *Shears, Shears (Jianzi, jianzi)* and Shi Qing's *Latent Period in Summer (Xiaji qianfuqi)*, both of 2001. The interest of these kinds of pieces lies in their ingenuity of form, where the theme of reflections appears to be a pretext.

Chen Shaoxiong's short film *Landscape 2 (Fengjing 2)* comprises a street scene shot through a piece of glass placed in front of the lens, so that the doodling on the glass appears to be part of the scene. Zhao Liang's film *Game (Youxi)* has the picture gradually transform from blurry to clear in a process open to misreading. Liu Wei's *Hard to Restrain* draws an analogy between rolling, crawling, capering human figures and wild beasts.

Zhou Xiaohu's installation *The Strange Tale of the Emperor's Snake* (*Yu she chuanqi*), of 1998, is a strange and mysterious snake-dance invented by the artist, and similar to the performance of an amateur circus, enhanced by a kind of emotional appeal to weird, anecdotal things. Reactions to the piece varied widely.

Yang Fudong's *City Light* (*Chengshi zhi guang*) and *Back Yard* (*Houfang*), of 2000, place the tastes and poetic preferences of classical Chinese scholars (*wenren*) under a microscope, transforming them in the process. Jiang Zhi's *The Old Cruller (Yigen youtiao)* employed a curious logic to reflect an interlacing of innocent and subjective ideas.

Chain (Lian), produced by Cao Fei in Guangzhou in 2000, and *Where Did You Sleep Last Night (Zuoye ni zai xiangchu anmian)*, produced by Cao Kai and Wang Fang from Nanjing in 2001, both explored the controllable pace of change in the implications and meaning of images in the media age. Works of this kind especially tended toward the use of video to express illusions and were able to effectively develop a humorous, small-scale style of narrative.

In the mid- to late 1990s some other works—such as Qiu Zhijie's *Present Progress* (*Xianzai jinxing shi*) (1996), Chen Shaoxiong's *Sight Adjuster* (*Shili jiaozheng qi*) (1996), and Song Dong's *Family Portrait* (*Quanjiafu*) (2000)—further explored the interactive nature of video installations. Qiu Zhijie's *Present Progress* incorporated two floral wreaths placed at a 90-degree angle to each other, with a monitor in the center of each wreath. Each of the screens relayed prerecorded images of relatives gathered round a deathbed, shot from the point of view of the dying person. The camera passes slowly over the face of each relative, the black-and-white shots closely resembling portraits of the deceased. As the viewer faced this screen, his own visage appeared on the second screen, on the right, at right angles to the first. If he turned to face the first screen, then he would see the left side of his face in profile. Around the wreaths, many small screens showed looped images of flowers bursting into bloom. This was the first interactive video installation work in China.

Qiu Zhijie's most exceptional work from last year, *Prophesying Catalogue of "Pushing Back" (Tui bei tu)* (2001), pushed the interactive aspect of video to its most extreme. The work was divided into two parts, an interior and exterior portion. The four monitors around the exterior showed excerpts from the [seventh century] prophetic text *Pushing Back* (*Tui bei tu*) superimposed over images from the film *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi*). The synchronic relationship shared across the monitors led the images to form semantic meanings, while the plot of the film also carried forth its own narrative. The timing of the film on each monitor was furthermore offset by a two-second difference so that the images on the four screens together formed a sort of

picture-story book (*lianhuanhua*). In the interior space of the work, the image of a revolving compass was projected onto the ground. Excerpts from *Pushing Back* were superimposed over the projected compass, thus making a picture-in-picture. As the smaller frame of images from *Pushing Back* moved around the floor, participants were forced to rotate physically to follow them. Carrying trays filled with milk, they turned with the moving images and fruitlessly tried to "catch" the projected picture-in-picture on their tray. They had become puppets controlled by the video.

Song Dong's *Family Portrait* invited viewers to stand in front of an image projected onto a wall and have their photograph taken with the pretaped "family group." Song Dong intended to combine the warmth of family life with his video work, a preference that subsequently became one of his main approaches.

We are most directly able to experience the special spiritual aesthetics of Chinese people among the works of Qiu Zhijie, Song Dong, and Yang Fudong. Qiu's efforts are directed toward using the language of video art to capture the subtle poetics of everyday life, engaging in Zen-like meditations on unconscious details from diverse everyday-language environments. In his installation *Objects* (*Wu*) (1998), the videos show hands repeatedly striking matches to illuminate various objects, with unequal periods of darkness between the striking of one match and the next. The four videotapes were filmed in different rooms in the artist's family home. *Objects* strives to evoke a chance-like quality aroused by the interchange of light and dark, death and chance, where meetings are decided by fate.

Another of Qiu's installations, *Landscape* (*Fengjing*), consists of two projections facing each other. One cuts swiftly between images of different people against the same landscape, while the opposite projection shows the artist himself in various locations around the world, the landscapes slowly and constantly rotating. The antithetical relationship between the two is similar to a Chinese *dui lian*, a poetic couplet, and also draws out a typically Chinese wistfulness about life that is evoked in the image of a bird's delicate footprints left in deep snow.

In Song Dong's 1998 work *Father and Son* (*Fuzi*), he projected the image of his father onto his own face. Both related their life history to the camera. Visually, the superimposition and similarity of father and son created an emotional association between transmigration and reincarnation.

At the end of the 1990s, as the IT industry further advanced, editing equipment for PCs became cheaper and more widely available. Video could no longer be regarded as a mere sociological tool, and its cultural and aesthetic functions were researched more thoroughly. Not only did video art continue to flourish, but an increasing number of artists started to explore interactive multimedia and Internet-based works. The tendency toward sensuousness and the emphasis upon *in situ* works within art circles was embodied in the medium as artists began to work with sound. Internationally, the fact of having more opportunities for exchange greatly expanded the artists' field of vision, and an increase in the number and types of channels of circulation encouraged diversity. At this time, most concepts of "new media art" consist of video shorts and installations, which is a generalization of the wider practice, more inclusive than the original term of "video art." New media art is also recognized by a broader range of people.

The *New Media Art Festival: Non-Linear Narrative* curated by Xu Jiang and Wu Meichun took place at the China National Academy of Fine Arts from September 25 to 30, 2001. This exhibition brought together more than one hundred works from forty active new media artists from China and abroad, and included video installations, sound installations, short films, compilation digital images, conceptual photographs, and interactive multimedia and Internet works. *Non-Linear Narrative* aimed to

investigate the various emerging possibilities of new technology when aligned with the general meaning of concept. Furthermore, the direction of conventional approaches was explored, thus making room for artists to extend the new media. Compared with the video exhibition [*Image and Phenomena (Xianxiang, yingxiang)* at the art gallery of the China National Academy of Fine Arts] in 1996, there was a great deal more new technology involved.

When talking about multimedia and Internet works, we may also mention the *China Internet Art* exhibition in 2000 (*2000 Zhongguo wangluo yingxiang yishuzhan*) curated by Huang Yan and Hai Bo in Changchun. This highlighted the agenda of Internet experience and its influence on Chinese art. It was significant that such an avant-garde activity could be hosted by the Jilin Art Academy. Yet the works did not entirely conform to the title and theme of the show. On March 1, 2001, the *Loft Digital Art Festival (Cangku shuma yishujie)*, curated by Qiu Zhijie, Wu Meichun, and Li Zhenhua took place at the LNMAS in Beijing, bringing together local works in digital media from recent years. This included interactive multimedia works via CD-ROM, Flash works, and even newer and excellent computer games.

Shi Yong's Internet works take the subject of controlling people as their theme. This type of control acts from within the very structure of language itself, and is even more conspicuous in the current phase of postcolonial cultural exchange. The type of involvement used in his works does not provide a solution. Quite the contrary, part playful and part technical jargon, it intensifies our powerlessness in the face of many forms of art control. Feng Mengbo created the first model using electronic games employing a political symbolism that imbued the electronic game with a heavy dose of current affairs. He produced the first piece of interactive multimedia work, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu wei hushan*), in 1997. *A Silver Dollar* (*Yi kuai yinyuan*), created in 1996, was a work based on photographs from a family album through the past twenty years. It included images documenting the period, old records, copies of books, film clips, music and homemade discs, rather more like a historical biography than an artwork.

Shi Qing's works *Salvation Apocalypse* (*Jiushi qishilu*) (1999) and *Handbook of Home Suicide* (*Jiating zisha shouce*) (2000) were both based on games. Instead of playing with a lesser art form as some initially considered, he was making games into art.

Qiu Zhijie's video installations capture the poetry in the rituals of everyday life; his multimedia work *The West* (*Xifang*) appears like a report of the findings of a comprehensive investigation. It illustrates how the Chinese people's understanding of the West is full of self-contradictions, both serious and comic. Interactive multimedia provided the best way to re-create this kind of feeling. Due to the limitless complexity of its subject, this work is as labyrinthine in form as the concept itself.

Computer network technology changes with each passing day. The 1999 edition of Flash 4 enhanced cartoon production and script editing, giving rise to a rapid growth in Flash works in just a year. The new media art show in Hangzhou included MTV-type works like Jiang Jianqiu's *Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March (Xin Changzheng lushang de yaogun)* and Qi Zhaohui's *Love Song 1980 (Lian you 1980)*; animated shorts like Zhou Xiaohu's *Nezha Breaking through the Outpost (Nezha chuang guan)*, Qi Zhaohui's *City Three Love Songs (Dushi san lianqu)*, and Jiang Jianqiu's *The Bandit's Paradise (Qiangdao de tiantang)*; interactive games like Zhu Zhiqiang's *Gu Du Qiu Bai*, *Guoguan Zhanjiang*, and *King of Kungfu (Gongfu zhi wang)*, and Wang Bo's *Play With Me (Wan wo)*. Although Internet art is still in an utopian period of dynamic change, Flash animation has now become a popular mass media fad. Yet, we still have not truly grasped its nature.

When the millennium turned, the aesthetic possibilities of video art had already been fully excavated and the revolutionary mission of video art was already accomplished. Through DV cameras and the stirring slogan "Digital-Video Revolution," it will be passed on to the masses and become a new writing tool for the average person's diary. 3-D computer animation techniques have brought little in the way of new possibilities to video, most of the time they have been turned into a method for simulating surrealism. Those who truly aspire to use digital forms to "do art" have been pushed to a peripheral media movement. Within new media art, there have emerged very clear peripheral trends that possess the defining characteristic of hybridization with other mediums: video has been increasingly used in performance art, theater, dance, music, etc. . . . . sites for performing arts. And, it doesn't merely appear on the stage, but also participates and enters into the very structure of these mediums. This, in turn, has caused new media art to take on these essential hybridized elements.

Beginning last April, many theaters and performance halls in Beijing became arenas for new media artists to carry out large-scale infiltrations into other art mediums. Wang Jianwei produced the play *Screens* (*Pingfeng*). In his persistently independent approach, the drama not only included stage, lighting, scenery, and performance, but incorporated video and performance within the performance space, not just as a backdrop.

Additionally, Wu Ershan took part in a jazz festival, Qiu Zhijie directed *Fashionable News* (*Xinchao xinwen*), and Song Dong participated in [choreographer] Wen Hui's *Dance with Workers* (*He mingong yiqi wudao)*. Zhang Hui's *Oh, My Sun* (*O, Wo de taiyang*), shown in *Non-Linear Narrative* in 2001, integrated live dramatic performances with prepared video works, and using minicameras attached to a marker used on-site to record numerical notations, created an interactive relationship with the audience. All of these works demonstrated that new creative forms in media were quietly developing in China.

Works by Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxin, and others are now becoming mainstream video art and familiar to many people. While Shi Yong's and Shi Qing's works show the possibility of new media art engaging in cultural contemplation and critique, Qiu Zhijie and Song Dong explore the possibilities of combining new media art with the refinement and rich experience of traditional Chinese fine arts. These are newly emerging tendencies; they are all opening up ways for new media art to develop.

New media artists working in China—this place of great energy and desire—have already become deeply involved in pondering the ideas of maintaining a continuous dialogue with technological advances, exploring a Chinese language, and advancing toward a globalized new media art.

Notes

1. *Cihai* (Sea of Words) is the name of the best-known and most-complete Chinese dictionary.
2. Wu Meichun, "Image and Phenomena," in a privately published exhibition-related book.
3. Ibid.
4. Wu Meichun, "Curator's Thoughts," in *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China* [*97 Zhongguo luxiang yishu guanmozhan*], exhibition catalogue, [Central Academy of Fine Arts], 1997.