

DIGGING A HOLE, BUILDING A HOUSE: THE VIDEO INSTALLATIONS OF WANG GONGXIN (2008)

By Barbara Pollack

Born in Beijing in 1960, Wang Gongxin grew up in a courtyard house in a *hutong*, decades before this style of living would be supplanted by high-rise developments and shopping malls. After graduating from Beijing Normal University in 1982, his own personal upheaval took place when he received the invitation to be a visiting scholar at the State University of New York [at Cortland and Albany], an opportunity that brought him to the United States. He came with his wife, the artist Lin Tianmiao, then a textile designer, and the couple soon had their son, Sean. They could have been mistaken for any other Asian immigrants in New York. Yet, like many other Chinese artists who left China during this period, they retained their independent identities even as their curiosity led them to study and absorb the contemporary art movements of New York.

While it would be incorrect to presume that most Chinese artists had a thorough knowledge of Western art movements, it is important to acknowledge that Wang Gongxin developed an in-depth understanding of the aesthetic of the era during his period in New York. By the late 1980s, Wang Gongxin was working with photo-based installations, showing at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and many university art galleries. It was a time when "multiculturalism" was the art world's favorite phrase; a movement that was as much political as aesthetic, geared to diversifying the type of artists and art projects shown at traditional art institutions. No longer was the "artist" defined as being American or European, and art no longer had to be made in the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. Art merged with politics, and artists were encouraged to explore their "identities," their social and cultural heritage, their roots.

For a Chinese artist living in New York, such self-exploration was complicated. How to convey the Chinese experience — as opposed to the immigrant experience — to an audience that presumed the goal of identity was assimilation? How to share a history — by and large unknown to New York audiences — that was already undergoing huge revisions? Wang Gongxin undertook this monumental task through installations that functioned as metaphors for the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. In one work, *Dialogue*, 1995, two light bulbs dangled over a pool of black ink, drawing a perfect circle by dipping into the ink until their illumination was obliterated. In another installation, *BIAO*, created at a former army base in Ludwigsburg, Germany, also in 1995, Wang lined the floors and walls of a drab military warehouse with rice paper, turning the space into a white shrine. He then laid out framed photographs — close-ups of numbers, markings, and demarcations in the original site — in a grid on the floor. In this single installation, he compressed two time frames (past and present) and two functions (military and art exhibition), so that viewers could experience both simultaneously. The architecture of the space played a key role in the artwork, as audiences were encouraged to walk among the photographs, orchestrating their own reception of the piece by their personal body movements. This is a technique that Wang Gongxin has mastered and has used most effectively in his most recent video works.

Wang Gongxin was in no way alone in exploring this use of installation art during the heyday of multiculturalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He would have certainly seen important group shows taking place in New York at the time, most notably *The Decade Show* at the New Museum, a survey of artworks exploring what at the time was called "identity politics." Here artists ranging from Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger to Alfredo Jaar and Leon Golub demonstrated an encyclopedic range of ways

to conflate art and politics. More importantly, the show brought together a wide range of Asian American artists, such as Shu Lea Cheang, Albert Chong, Ken Chu, Pok-Chi Lau, Yong Soon Min, and others, who were specifically exploring the issues of transmigration, cultural confusion, and transplanted histories in works that often incorporated video and installation strategies.

Video art itself was undergoing a transformation during this period in New York, evolving from single-channel works to full-scale video installations. Video art had been under development in New York since the 1960s, with such pioneers as Nam June Paik demonstrating that the medium could function as much more than a television show. By the late 1980s, artists such as Gary Hill, Mary Lucier, and Bill Viola were exploring the impact of filling a room with monitors or, bigger yet, projecting their images on walls and screens. Though shown in darkened rooms, these projects were not movies and defied the usual structure of a film narrative. Instead, there was almost a sculptural element to this use of video, carving up and rearranging the architecture through the use of opaque screens and sheer scrims. These works would also insinuate themselves into Wang Gongxin's imagination.

At the same time, Wang Gongxin would also have had to notice the rise of alternative spaces in New York, exhibition venues that certainly supported these particularly political art installations. By the late 1980s, places such as The Kitchen, founded to feature performance and video projects, as well as Franklin Furnace, Exit Art, Artists Space, and P.S. 1 were becoming key cultural institutions. These venues afforded artists the opportunity to experiment without interference. Artists suddenly felt empowered to bring their personal, cultural, and political experiences from the margins into the spotlight. There was a flood of art projects exploring gay identity, Latino identity, African American identity, feminist identity, as well as Asian American identity. Wang contributed a global perspective to this dialogue, not as a "hyphenated American" but as a Chinese artist. He realized that in a world undergoing vast changes due to globalization, the inability to dialogue would be the new universal experience. It is from this position that he began to make his later, more mature works.

But also, and equally important, Wang Gongxin noticed the development of these new alternative art venues as much as the artworks on display. It was time when artists in New York established collectives, such as Gran Fury, Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, or more particularly a group of Asian American activists called Godzilla. It was a time when artists openly discussed how to create an alternative space, how to fund such an undertaking, and how to make an impact with its exhibitions. The whole undertaking made an impact on Wang Gongxin. When he returned to China in 1994, he brought home ideas not only about art-making but about making more art possible.

"In New York, my work was about identity, but once I was back in China for a little while, I was more concerned with the changes that I saw taking place around me," says Wang Gongxin. Yet, the shift is not as much of a leap as it would seem, or at least, he makes it look like an easy hop, skip, and jump. His first project on his return to China and his first video work — *Sky of Brooklyn*, 1995 — pulls together several themes that have been prevalent in his work, before and ever since. In 1995, Wang Gongxin literally dug a hole in the floor of his courtyard house, chopping through the surface and building tunnel, three meters deep, below the ground. At the bottom, he put a video monitor on which he displayed footage of the sky, filmed from his home in Williamsburg before his return to China. Viewers looked down the hole to look up at this sky. They also heard a voice, first shouting, "What are you looking at?," then quietly murmuring, "It's nothing. Just the sky."



Wang Gongxin. *Sky of Brooklyn*. 1995. Installation with television set and videotape with sound, depth of well 11' 6" (3.5 m). Collection the artist

"Digging a hole to China" is of course an old American phrase, sometimes directed toward children shoveling sand at the beach. But, more often, it is a metaphor for futility or pursuit of an impossible utopian dream. "What are you doing, digging a hole to China?" It is also a saying born at a time when the only way one could think about getting to China was to dig a tunnel through the center of the earth. Neither airplanes nor boats could make the impenetrable country more accessible. By the time Wang Gongxin dug his hole — to Brooklyn — the entire situation had been reversed, which is of course, what the artist is commenting on. He himself had been able to fall through the endless hole and arrive in New York, a Chinese Alice in a contemporary art Wonderland. But, by placing this piece in Beijing, rather than New York, he was inviting his fellow artists to think globally, to think about a sky that reaches around the earth, the absurdity of differentiating clouds by national boundaries.

— Excerpted from her text of the same name in Barbara Pollack and Barbara London, *Wang Gongxin: Works 1993–2008* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 10–23.