

VIDEO art, though an exotic genre of art, is not merely a consequence of following the trail of Western society. The emergence of video art in China, or its acceptance by Chinese artists, only happened due to certain cultural conditions. Therefore, before we get into the topic of Chinese contemporary video art, I believe that it is necessary and meaningful to review the process of how video art appeared in China. If in the past the artists had sensed the danger of art being controlled by politics, then the cynical realism and political pop at that time would make young artists feel that framed paintings, driven by commercial interests, were imposed by Western postcolonialism. Art controlled either by mainstream politics or by the art market is based on the outdated art medium and on creative methodology (realism-utilitarianism). Against such a backdrop, the Chinese artists began to introduce and experiment with video art. Young artists desired to find a new art medium which would not be commercialized by Western galleries and which also poses a strong contrast to the official art. The medium would not only allow the existence of personalized feelings and languages but also be easy to use, disseminate, and communicate. Under such circumstances, video art became their choice.

In terms of young artists, the time it takes to perceive video art leads to a deeper experience than with any traditional medium. The experience gives the works a stretching force which enables them to surpass the literal description, that is, video, which, unlike realistic paintings, is fully interpreted in words. It requires audiences' real experience over a certain period of time.

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The Evolution of Video Art in China

Meanwhile, the interaction of the video installation invites physical involvement during the reception process. In 1996, China held its first exhibition of video art called *Phenomenon and Image* (现象和影像). In Chinese, the title has more meanings than just ‘phenomenon and image’. Video means ‘reflection’ (象) and image indicates ‘response’ (像). Young artists chose video as a medium because video art embodies ‘reflection’, which is rather deeper and closer to the nature of art than traditional paintings. The curator of the exhibition, Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰), who is also a video artist, wrote in the preface, ‘the falsehood of historical determinism is to simply consider the human being as a perceptive object, while man not only perceives and senses, but also imagines and takes it into action.’¹ Here is the equation:

Traditional media = reaction = virtual individual = perception = unilateral video = reflection = real individual = perception, imagination, action = interactive

In 1989, the German artist Ernst Mitzka² was invited to the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou to give lectures. He brought 8 hours of video art material with him, including work by Gary Hill, Bill Viola, and Matthew Barney. Works of these artists inspired two generations of artists like Zhang Peili (张培力) and Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰)³ to access the complete video art information and realize the possibility of this medium, whereas they chose different ways. Zhang Peili is known as one of the earliest experimentalists not only of Chinese contemporary art, but also of video art: in 1988, he completed his first video work (on view in the exhibition *Micro Era. Media Art from China*).⁴ Generally speaking, Chinese artists in the 1980s were mostly concerned with the ‘grand narration’ of society and culture, which made them apply the language style of logic and conceptualism. In short, Zhang’s early work was greatly influenced by Gary Hill and the style of Fluxus artists in their early works. Such orientation was even more distinctive in the works of his famous series *Uncertain Pleasure* (不确定的快感, *Uncertain Pleasure I* from 1996 is also on view in *Micro Era*). They were going all out to distinguish video art from mass TV programs. Therefore, he denied the existence of any traditional measures, sound effects, or any figuration conventions of TV appearing in his works. Zhang’s style influenced many artists, for example, Zhu Jia (朱加), who tied a video camera onto a wheel to facilitate shots, or Kan Xuan (阚萱)

1 Qiu Zhijie, Foreword, in 1996 *Xianxiang/yingxiang: yishu yu lishi yishi (1996 Phenomena/Image: Art and the Historical Consciousness)*, ed. Qiu Zhijie, self-published: Beijing, 1996, page unknown. Exhibition: *Phenomena/Image—'96 Video Art Exhibition*, 现象影像—'96 录像艺术展, curated by Qiu Zhijie, 邱志杰, Wu Meichun, 吴美纯, with: Chen Shaoping, 陈少平, Chen Shaoxiong, 陈劭雄, Gao Shiming, 高世名, Gao Shiqiang, 高世强, Geng Jianyi, 耿建翌, Li Yongbin, 李永斌, Lu Lei, 陆磊, Qian Weikang, 钱康, Qiu Zhijie, 邱志杰, Tong Biao, 佟彪, Wang Gongxin, 王功新, Yan Lei, 颜磊, Yang Zhenzhong, 杨振中, Zhang Peili, 张培力, Zhu Jia, 朱加, The Gallery of the China Academy of Art, 中国美术学院画廊, Hangzhou, China, 14–19 September 1996.

2 Video artist Ernst Mitzka spoke at the China Academy of Fine Arts on invitation by his colleague and fellow professor at the Hamburg Academy of Fine Arts, the painter K.P. Brehmer. Mitzka screened the entire program of Kunstkanal (Art Channel), a television program created as part of the arts festival celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of the city of Bonn. Aired in late September 1989, each episode contained original experimentation with visual design, screen text, motion graphics, and other electronic effects, as well as video works like Bill Viola’s *Anthems* (1983) and Peter Campus’s *Three Transitions* (1973).

3 Zhang Peili was born 1957 in Hangzhou, China; Qiu Zhijie was born 1969 in Zhangzhou, China.

4 *30×30* (1988), Single-channel video (PAL), colour, sound, 32'9".

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and Yang Zhenzhong (杨振忠), who repeated daily life in their works. What was similar yet different from Zhang is one artist, Wang Gongxin (王功新), who resided in New York for a decade and was greatly influenced by Bill Viola. The magnification of trivial details from everyday life resulted in unconventional experiences. Such means undoubtedly generated many works with strong visual effects. Such differences between the West and China may lie in the different resources: the rebellion towards the system in the West; the focus on the media itself in China. It is perhaps due to the different origins of Chinese and foreign video art.

As a result, younger Chinese artists consider these works to be ‘standard video art’ or ‘insipid tradition’. The possibilities presented by video technology and, in turn, how it embodies aesthetic values have been focused on by artists, as represented by Qiu Zhijie. For him, the route that Zhang followed was to treat Western video art as sort of classical, while he ignored the opportunities that the new, inexpensive equipment and techniques have brought. For Qiu, the reason why he found early video art meaningless is the anti-system sentiment, along with financial and technical reasons. As a result, in the second video art exhibition in 1997, the curator Wu Meichun (吴美纯) wrote: ‘what we are facing is not what we can do by means of video art, but rather, what the video art is. It is too early to define video art. The so-called “standard video” is destined to be weary, although still in its process of formation. Born as a medium, it is challenging, powerful, but inexpensive; private and personal, but easy to duplicate and spread; it is intuitive but full of imagination.’⁵ Under the instruction of such thoughts, video art in the last decade of the twentieth century in China started to develop in three directions: documentary, narrative, and interaction.

Documentary

In the mid-1990s, the movie circle in China launched a large-scale campaign of the New Documentary Movement. Directors represented by Wu Wenguang (吴文光) emphasize the absence of the photographer during photo shoots and try to exhibit the real state of the objective revealed. The movement is regarded as resistance to the grand narration of the governmental TV programs since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Such orientation leads to no improvement in the documentary language and method. To be strict, what they created is ‘real documentary’ rather than ‘new documentary’, though this movement interflowed with video art in the art circle, combining a ‘new documentary art’ beyond documentary. Wang Jianwei is a unique pioneer in this respect. In his

5 Wu Meichun, ‘Curator’s Thoughts’, in *Demonstration of Video Art '97 ('97 luxiang yishu guanmozhan)*, ed. Wu Meichun, self-published, Beijing, 1997, page unknown. Exhibition: *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China ('97 Zhongguo luxiang yishu guanmozhan)*, curated by Wu Meichun, Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China.

Zhang Peili
480 Minutes, 2008
Nähmaschine, 30-Kanal-
Videoinstallation, Farbe,
Ton / Sewing machine,
30-channel video
installation, colour, silent,
480'



Living Elsewhere (生活在别处), he traces the life of four farmers in a villa under construction and discloses the villa's original function. Among his works, Wang created a very 'nonprofessional' documentary, in which some of the images stand still for 8 minutes, which for him is necessary, since his purpose is to study the phenomena rather than to simply record.

Narrative

As the reflection of standard video art, narration appeared also to be seen as an element. Video techniques enabled video art to share many achievements with movie aesthetics—with disposal measures adopted by classical movies being applicable to video at all times. Moreover, the time disposal in the video has more flexibility thanks to the help of digital measures: various digital stunts, which created various relationships of temporal dimensions and greatly enriched the traditional movie language. The involvement of three-dimensional animation makes it possible for every whim to become a visual reality. All of this created many possibilities for younger artists. Representative artists in this field include Yang Fudong (杨福东) and Jiang Zhi (蒋志), among others. These artists have received more influence from movie aesthetics than from the video art tradition. Moreover, they are seeking more chances to shoot film. From them, we can see a possibility of applying video to conduct personal writings.

Interaction

Interaction is actually derived from a questioning of video art. Will video art finally be devoured by movie aesthetics and insipid tradition? Will digital technology bring new aesthetic values, aside from better image quality and convenience? With these questions, video art installation matters, as a 'right time, right place' art. That is to say, besides the attribution of video installation and video itself, this form of art also includes the uniqueness of the installation as more than the sum of the two. Telecasting of multilayer monitors or various reflected images distributed in predesigned structures have formed a three-dimensional dramatic structure. Chinese video art has developed into two distinguished installation forms, which focus on knowledge and experience respectively.

Video installations which focus on knowledge always appear in a specific scene. The image generates some semantic connection with property, while at the same time producing meaning. The filming tools can be used to highlight the topic of a work. For example, *baby talk* (婴语) by Wang Gongxin (王功新) and *Screen* (屏风)

Cao Fei
Whose Utopia, 2006,
Ein-Kanal-Video, Farbe,
Ton / One-channel video,
colour, sound, 20'



by Wang Jianwei (汪建伟). In *baby talk*, the facial expressions of families teasing a baby were projected onto the bed. The milk flows out from the mouth of the image and then is backed from other points, in turn, to formulate a sort of circulation. In *Screen*, Wang discussed the relationship between the secret and its revelation under the ‘cultural shield’. This work is more like a visual version of the ‘archaeology knowledge’ by Michel Foucault. The indication provided by the two works keeps swinging between vague and clear. The visual, audio, and kinaesthesia experience on site sometimes transcends the original enactment of the author to foster complex and profuse imagination. Video installations that are focused on experience sometimes calculate the trace of the audiences’ physical movement in the interior structure of the installation, such as in *the present tense* (现在进行时) by Qiu Zhijie and *Sight Adjustor* (视力矫正器) by Chen Shaoxiong (陈绍雄). Such works are based on ergonomics, awaiting the audiences’ approach from a certain location and route. Audiences’ bodies were predesigned as a factor that will influence the installation composition and scene itself on site. The phenomena established by the bodies of passers-by is not exterior knowledge, but inner experience being evoked.

Interaction has been the priority for video installations. Artists try to ascertain the possibility of video art through the pursuit of interaction. But sometimes there is risk, which means that the more you seek interaction as a temporary relief, the more you suspect the spaces provided by the video art, which results in disaster. Therefore, many artists have begun to seek other interactive modes besides video installation. Artists who were focused on experience began to abandon video art and in turn seek the possibilities provided by new technology. More technical and interactive multimedia art appeared around this period. At the same time, those focused on knowledge were trying to seek a connection to the spacial context and social interaction by overcoming media boundaries. In 1999, Wu Ershan (乌尔善)—together with installation artists, jazz singers, and modern dancers—held the event *Evolution@JAZZ* (进化爵士). If Wu Ershan’s involvement was not spontaneous but by accident, then that of Wang Jianwei (汪建伟) could be seen as active. He invited video artists, puppeteers, and performance artists to complete the play derived from *Screen*. In these works, the overall stage was a magnificent interactive work of synchronized video, installation, and performance.

Through the development of video art in China, we can see that a new era is approaching. Western video art originated from artists’ rebellion towards the system, while in China video art derived from artists’ interest in media. The professionalization of video art was strengthened in Western society due to its acceptance in the art world since 1968. In the West, video art was protected from movies, TV, and photography and then brought into galleries, which led to a combination of video and installation. During

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this process, video art turned from criticism of informational culture to the combination of social thoughts, which in turn results in the validity of video art itself. It is the duty of video art to criticize the informational culture, but that is not all. Personalized manual contemporary art cannot dialogize commercialized informational media substantially, nor can it rein it in. Judging by video art practice in the West before 1968, we will see clearly that the relationship between video art and mass media is like that of a strong fly and a fly flap. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Chinese artists, as other artists worldwide, gradually realized that they can only find their own territories and techniques beyond the scope of mass media.

Consequently, well into the new millennium, these conceptual changes have led to several new characteristics of video art in China, which are represented by some artists, for instance Cao Fei (曹斐) and Yang Fudong (杨福东). They had just entered the stage at the very beginning of the twenty-first century, but were obviously distinguished from their predecessors. Cao Fei comes from a highly commercialized city, Guangzhou. Her works are visually connected with pop and visual culture. Moreover, purposefully, she pursues a combination of both documentary and fictional narrative. For example, the piece *Whose Utopia* (谁的乌托邦), a short film focused on the industrial workers who immigrated to Shenzhen—which, by being mixed with documentary recording and performance, created a new form of narrative that sticks to reality while keeping some distance from it. Such narrative style is highlighted in her later works, which thereby shape her unique style.

For Yang Fudong, films and the film industry are what spark his interest consistently. Yang's work *A Strange Paradise* (陌生天堂) shows his preference towards the texture especially presented by cinema films in his early years. Another work, *The 7 Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest* (竹林七贤), rediscovered a tradition among China's films of the 1930s. In the latter, the records of work from the filming site and the refined film were released in the exhibition hall, spontaneously. Until very recently, with a sort of ambition, Yang transformed the exhibition hall into the filming site, which allowed the 'filming process' to become the subject being viewed besides the filming work itself.

To simply generalize the changes of China's video art at the turn of the new millennium, there is an emphasis on viewing the technological revolution generated by the soaring new media, especially during the 1990s. At the same time, these artists, who are facing the artwork being commercialized rapidly around the world, are trying to create a new trend—by means of video art works—towards decommercializing the works, that is to say, by creating a brand-new media that can avoid being commercialized. Thus, video art works have become a particularly unique means of communication. Besides the characters mentioned above, after the year 2000, the

Lu Yang
Electromagnetic Brainology
Brain Control Messenger, 2017
 Zwei-Kanal-Video, Farbe, Ton /
 Two-channel video, colour,
 sound, 10'8"

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connection between artists and pop culture has been far more complicated. As of 1999, China enjoyed a soaring economy after joining the World Trade Organization. In this respect, pop culture, commercial culture, and the mechanism behind these two cultures have provided the filmic language with an enormous richness that has been noticed by artists. Significantly, because of the thriving economy and the development of the Internet, there is little difference between Chinese artists and those from the West in terms of how they accept the information, the technique they adopt, and the funding resources. More significant is how, with increasingly intense globalization and the popularity of social media, a Chinese artist's living experience is no longer as extraordinarily distinguished as it was in the past. For example, the work of Lu Yang (陆扬), which is based on the subculture of a new generation, is no longer labelled with 'Made in China', but with the proposition of globalization and visual experience. Thus, based such a context, those even younger artists started acquiring new techniques and working formats to produce more sophisticated and larger-scale video art works.

The worldwide financial crisis followed close on the heels of the Olympic Games held in Beijing in the year 2008. Since then, an age witnessing the unprecedented crisis of globalization is here. One of the related phenomena is an anti-globalization force emphasized by all sorts of movements: the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Anti-WTO movement, Trumpism, the Yellow Vest movement, the Sunflower movement, and the Umbrella movement. Another phenomenon, the continuous ban on some social sites like Google and Facebook in China, can be seen as a corresponding reaction to the crisis of globalization. At the same time, China's political and cultural environment has changed rapidly, which was accompanied by the constitutional reform of the president's term. All kinds of phenomena in this age—for example, the soaring social sites, the crisis of globalization, the popularity of populism, the sudden rise of neo-authoritarianism in China, the 'chilling effect' throughout mainstream media—are of mutual cause-effect, which indicate the advent of the Post-Truth Era. This signifies the break-up of the monopolistic authoritative information mechanism, while more and more personal points of view are assembled. The anxiety of the Post-Truth Era increasingly equates to the globalized living experience, which seems to embody more possibilities for the artists.

These possibilities are evident in some works. One such case is the works of Fang Di (方迪), which is a reflection of a mixture of anti-colonialism history in Asia and Africa and the blended reality under the 'one silk road'. *The Beijing Ballroom Project* (北京舞厅) by Hao Jingban (郝敬班) is a second case, which is a rearrangement on the rise and fall of ballroom dancing throughout the twentieth century—a work combining records, archives, a field-trip study, and image writing to create the mingled clips which are composed

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of historical and social fragments. The work of Shen Xin (沈辛) is the third case, which is also a combination of performance on stage, documentary, and archives, aiming to blur the border between reality and illusion, while nevertheless purposely referring to both the stretching force and the contradictions between two fields: one field is identity and power, while the other field is the development of globalization and science. The works made by these artists represent a specific way of thinking by contemporary artists. In other words, since we are in an era—a globalization time when the intellectual experience, mode of production, and technique are increasingly of no difference—we should raise such questions as: What, then, is the point of video art creation? For today's artists, neither national identity nor the 'Made in China' label counts any more, but the values of works rooted in the personal experience and the local experience do. Globalization means mobilization and migration, while the personal experience and the local experience carry the meaning of 'gravity'—a force of rooting and immobilization, which is particularly true in terms of video art within a globalization context.

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Fang Di
Minister, 2019,
Ein-Kanal-Videoinstallation,
Farbe, Ton / Single-channel
video installation, colour,
sound, 60'