

Do You Understand Chinese Media - art?

[Art Projects by Yang Zhenzhong, Zhang Peili,
Zhou Hongxiang and Hu Jie Ming]

Since Chinese artists and theoreticians are entering the stage of international festivals for media art and culture, the global "here and now" confronts us with the question, on what basis we can engage in a common discourse about media art. Such reflections are engendered by the fact that China, needless to say, can look back on an artistic and cultural history that is completely different from that of the West.

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In Europe in particular we presume a kind of continuity in the development of media art concepts, which, to a certain extent, can be traced back to the great anti-art movements of the 20th century. There clearly exist divergent perceptions on whether – and if so, how – media arts can be subsumed into the canon of traditional art history. What can be assured, however, is the fact that the technological transformation of Western society should be viewed as a continuing historical process whose repercussions in the social, political and economic spheres have significantly changed the practices of 20th-century art.

For this reason we do not conceive of artistic development purely immanently, as a "life of forms," but rather investigate social and cultural history in order to identify those factors that contribute to generating the modes of appearance of art, and which, conversely, are also reflected by them. The new ways of experiencing space and time that emerged in the wake of technological developments in the domains of transport, communications, and information all contributed decisively to transforming artistic perceptions. In the course of the 20th century, when many of the functions of the arts were progressively being assimilated by technology (for instance, photography and cinematography), the arts reacted by demanding autonomy, but

also by enormously expanding their sphere and range of action. So the experiments involving viewer participation and the incorporation of the audience, the principle of the open artwork, the dissolution of the work principle, the end of the author, the end of history, and so on are all programmatic examples that accompanied the enormous transformation of the concepts associated with art. Today, we can see the activities of the arts expanding into all domains of society, approaching a point of near-vaporization in which society itself would become the raw material of the arts. With regard to these historical developments, the question arises as to whether Chinese artists might be willing to adapt to the history of modern art in a kind of crash course. Or are we, in this age of globalization, witnessing something like the beginning of a new kind of common "world art history," where the West might act as the driving force, explaining and teaching its concepts of art all over the world? If we continue to understand culture, and in particular the history of art, as historical and dynamic processes, how then can we promote and develop, if not preserve, a conception of diversity which regards cultural heterogeneity as a positive quality and not as a disadvantage, i.e., as a form of developmental-historical backwardness that urgently requires catch-up measures?

One of the issues raised by such theoretical processes of adaptation is the fact that Western thought – and hence also the construction of our societies – has been shaped, to a large extent, by a conceptual and perceptual matrix, which to a degree goes back to the beginnings of the Early Modern era (meaning the Renaissance, humanism, and the Enlightenment). This matrix is not exactly new, and it can hardly be expected to coincide in any immediate way with China. In the West, the concept of the autonomy of the individual, which, in historical terms, incidentally, is closely linked with the concept of property ownership, is still valid as a guarantor for both the freedom of the bourgeoisie and the sovereignty of the subject.

In China, by comparison, the concept of the autonomous individual hardly exists. The interests of the individual, in contradistinction to the practice common in Western democratic societies, are subordinate, as a matter of principle, to those of the state. China has individualism at the behavioral level, but not at the ideological one. Collectivism on all levels of society is valued much more highly than individualism. This low ranking of individualism is manifest in close and committed membership in "groups," whether families, extended families, or extended relationships. This condition is not necessarily or usually imposed – rather, it is accepted in society as a matter of course. Is it relevant, with regard to Chinese art practice, to ask to what extent China has witnessed the emergence of an awareness of the value of the self-expression of the individual?

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The Chinese language knows no ontological definition of the individual. Man is always defined by a relationship between him and his environment. He does not define himself (as a subject), nor does he define the other (as an object). Byung-Chul Han, in his book on "hyperculturality" (*Hyperkulturalität. Kultur und Globalisierung*, Berlin 2004, p. 57) notes that, in this context, the Far East has developed neither a "substantial ontological" concept of culture nor of Man:

Man, too, has no clearly outlined substantial or individual unity, i. e., no "person." Nor does he have any "soul." Already the Chinese ideograph for "man" points to his being of no substance. The cipher for "between" is already contained in the word "man." Man thus is a relation. Western categories like inter-subjectivity or inter-personality, which tend to bring about a relationship between the individuals and the subjects, subsequently are alien to the Far Eastern way of thinking.

If Far Eastern thought is not interested in substance but in relationships, then the world, too, might be seen as a network of relations rather than a fixed state of being:

The Far East thinks in a net-shaped way," Byung-Chul Han continues. "This may be the reason why interconnectedness has accelerated itself with more intensity in the Far East than in the West. [...] The Far East apparently has a very 'natural' relationship towards "technological" networking.

One could go a step further and ask how this "natural relationship towards technological networking" translates itself into artistic approaches to interactivity. How do Chinese artists relate to this "inter-," connected to that particular kind of "activity," which the West prefers to project into the relationship between humans and computers? Could it mean that within Asian cultures artists do not attribute the same "substantial" and explicit significance to that "activity" between humans and networks, between humans and interactive media in general, as does the West, simply because they already conceive themselves to be part of a network? We have to be aware of the fact that the Western understanding of activity between humans, computers and computer networks is led by a distinction constituted by the dichotomy between the subject and the object. For this reason, the concept of an open artwork, in which the recipient itself is seen as influencing and completing the artwork, must be seen as a conceptual consequence of the Western matrix of perception. From this, we can ask whether we can identify, from a Western viewpoint, the kind of interest that characterizes Chinese approaches towards media art without misunderstanding them.

In analyzing some of the Chinese artworks, one becomes aware that interactivity has been applied very minimally, if at all. Many of the works do indeed focus on using media for the figuration and intermediation of relationships – between individual and society, between viewer and media perspectives, between the subjective and the objective, and between the subject and the object. But interactivity is not explicitly employed as an operative "subject" of art.

In terms of its content, *Surrounded*, a work by Yang Zhenzhong, aims at fixed formats of social behavior. In its formal aspects, however, it displays a virtuoso interplay between the spectator's and the camera's points of view, between subjectivity and objectivity. The work consists of a 360-degree projection of eight synchronized videos from eight projectors. The visitor positions himself at the center of the room and finds himself surrounded by a large number of men, women and children who are looking at him and move towards him with hectic, sometimes jerky movements, apparently chasing him. The mass of perpetually moving faces is completely uncontrollable by the viewer.



Yang Zhenzhong, *Surrounded* (2004)



To accomplish the recording of the images required for this piece, the artist rebuilt a wheelchair and equipped it with a 360-degree camera surround system. On a public square, he asked passersby to push the wheelchair, in which he was sitting, back and forth or in all directions. The resulting footage showed the faces of the people from the perspective of the artist and the "subjective" point of view of the camera.

In the exhibition space, the visitors take the "objective" position of the camera. By being exposed to the uncontrollable and somewhat threatening effect of the images, the visitor simultaneously experiences the "subjectivity" of the camera. The viewer's perspective and the camera's thus oscillate, along with the corresponding concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, in their relationship to one another. It is not possible for the exhibition visitor to influence the work (e.g. through his own movements) in any interactive way; "participation of the participant" occurs, in a manner of speaking, from an external position.

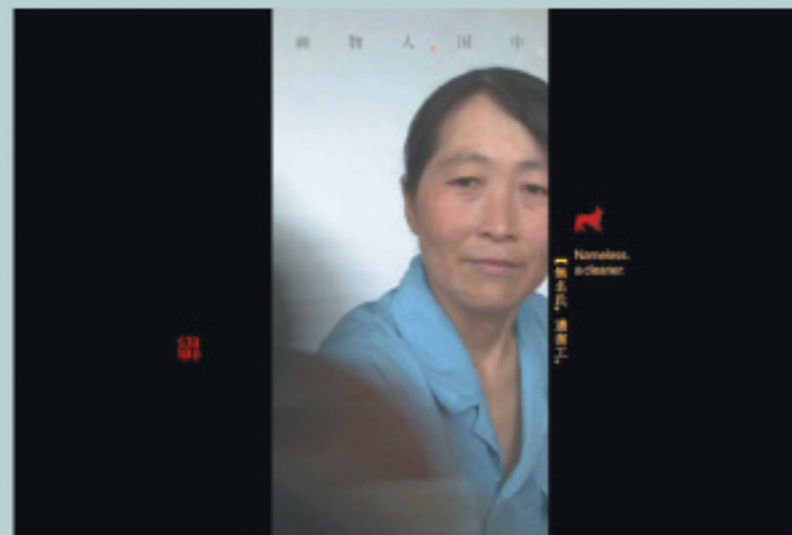
Subjective perception in relationship to its (re-)production by the media is also shown in *Lowest Resolution*, by the renowned Chinese video artist Zhang Peili. At the end of a long corridor stands a screen displaying a computer-generated image. The closer the visitor gets to the screen, the fuzzier the image becomes, until its resolution is reduced to a single pixel. As the viewer moves away from the screen again, the image reappears, from a

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Zhang Peili, *Lowest Resolution* (2005)

threshold distance of about six meters, completely in focus again. The distance between the visitor and the screen, however, becomes so great that the image can no longer be recognized. The participant is thus involved in the issue of choosing the correct distance and attitude with respect to the reception of content produced by media, or by digital means. The most immediate position, directly in front of the screen, appears, in this light, to be the least favorable one.



Zhou Hongxiang, *Chinese Portraiture* (2006)

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Chinese Portraiture, by Zhou Hongxiang, is a conceptual video installation 12 minutes and 50 seconds long. It is presented as a visual work in the manner of traditional Chinese scrolls. Portraits of various people scroll past before the spectator's eyes: workers, policemen, an emperor of the Qing Dynasty, intellectuals, a monk, old people, children, a beggar, a farmer, a judge – all of them depicted with their most specific characteristics, morals and habits. Watching the portraits is like looking at photographs, but then suddenly something small happens in the image: a smile appears, something falls, or the person unexpectedly moves.



Zhou Hongxiang, Chinese Portraiture (2006)

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Obviously, this work is playing with the spectator's expectations, with his uncertainty about whether he is dealing with the static medium of the photographic image or the movable medium of video. In this way, a semblance of interactivity is generated purely through looking at the image, much as though the process of perceiving was having some active effect on it. In terms of content and form, this work uses media to hint at the dynamic of the individual in contradistinction to his fixed role in society.

The relationship between the individual and society is also the topic of the interactive work *Go Up! Go Up!* by Hu Jie Ming. This installation, made to be shown in public space, consists of a vertical series of 20 video monitors depicting individual schematic figures that appear to be climbing upwards. The interactive potential consists in the audience's ability to create various noises (calling out, clapping) and thus cause the climbers to crash, speed up or come to a standstill. Much to the audience's delight, these modern-day Sisyphuses of an achievement-oriented society always start climbing afresh.

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Hu Jie Ming, Go Up! Go Up! (2004)