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## Breaking and Entering: In His Videos, Zhang Peili Destroys and Restores to ‘Capture and Emphasize Time’

BY BARBARA POLLACK

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Zhang Peili, *30x30* (still), 1988.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, HANGZHOU

In 1988, Chinese artist Zhang Peili presented one of his artworks on a television screen at a conference in Huangshan. The piece, a three-hour video, titled *30x30*, has gone down in history as the first example of video art in China. The work depicts the artist repeatedly breaking a mirror and gluing together its shards over the course of three hours. While undeniably monotonous, it represented a breakthrough for the Chinese art scene, which was then experiencing upheaval and rebirth following the repressive Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, the country was still struggling in isolation from the rest of the world. Since that time, Zhang has been called the “godfather of video art” in China, not only for his own projects as an artist, but also as an influential educator at the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou where he has taught new media art for the past 20 years.

Now, with his first retrospective in the United States, [at the Art Institute of Chicago \(http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/zhang-peili-record-repeat\)](http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/zhang-peili-record-repeat), Zhang will reach a wider audience with his experiments in video art.

Curated by Orianna Cacchione, the succinct and elegant exhibition, which presents 12 major works, most on multiple monitors, is the museum’s first devoted to a single Chinese artist. In addition to *30x30*, there’s *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (1991), in which Zhang washes a chicken in soapy water, and *Assignment No. 1* (1992), as well as a series of 12 color videos depicting blood being drawn from a finger, captured with varying degrees of clarity. Zhang’s suite of single-channel video projections—*Happiness* (2006), *Last Words* (2002), and *Actor’s Lines* (2002)—appropriate footage from Cultural Revolution-era propaganda films. Although the connections between these works initially seem elusive, they all raise questions about power and subversion. The final work in the exhibition, *A Scene in Black and White Unfolded Four Times* (2007), foregrounds these issues by installing motion sensors that trigger images of a picturesque neighborhood in Hangzhou on a series of 28 monitors as viewers approach the installation.

On the eve of his opening in Chicago I sat down with Zhang to discuss the development of his work and his recent decision to retire from teaching.



Installation view of "Zhang Peili: Record. Repeat.," 2017, at [Art Institute of Chicago](https://www.artnews.com/t/art-institute-of-chicago/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/art-institute-of-chicago/>).

COURTESY THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

**In the 1980s, you emerged as a leading painter in the '85 New Wave Movement. But almost as soon as you had achieved some success, you transitioned to performance art to express your dissatisfaction with the growing commercialization of the Chinese art scene. When you made your first video, *30×30*, did you think of it as a new art form or as an extension of performance art?**

I think it's both video and performance. I wanted to do something and say something about video, but I felt that I was also doing a performance. It was a performance without an audience. People could only view the performance through the video. In this sense, the work is both video and performance. I felt that video differed from other mediums in that it could convey something about time. I feel that *30×30* is a video work, even though the content is about process and gesture. But this isn't important, because the most important element for me is, as I said, time. This work precisely captures and emphasizes time.

**When you made works like *30×30*, had you seen Western video art?**

It was impossible to see any Western video art at the time. We couldn't get pirate copies, nor could we see exhibitions of the work in China. Moreover, the first time that video art was systematically introduced to China was in 1992, when a German professor, who must have been an expert in the video art medium, came to China Art Academy to do a lecture introducing Western video works. That was the first time.

**Why did you decide to perform mundane, even boring, tasks, like breaking a mirror or washing a chicken?**

Actually, whenever I choose something, there isn't a 100 percent sure reason for doing so. An act like breaking the mirror, putting the pieces together, and doing something repeatedly for three hours, is very boring. But for me, these boring and meaningless acts held a lot of meaning. Washing a chicken is the same. These acts are filled with contradictions and hidden metaphors. You can find many reasons for breaking the mirror, putting it together, giving a bath to a chicken, etc., in Chinese proverbs—such as the phrase *po jing chong yuan* (which is a metaphor for people or things reuniting after a rupture). But for me, the most basic motivation or departure point for making this work is monotony and meaninglessness.



Installation view of "Zhang Peili: Record. Repeat.," 2017, at Art Institute of Chicago.

COURTESY THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

**How did you figure out that video art could be your medium, since there were no other video artists at the time?**

I didn't figure it out—I was only interested or curious about it. There are many things in life where you could not know everything before dedicating yourself to it. It is something that I thought I could control and not control at the same time, that I was both familiar with and yet not familiar with. This held tremendous appeal for me.

**Was there something going on in China then that made it seem like video art was better than painting?**

Maybe it was the opposite. Nobody knew what meanings video art held, or what it meant for art. Painting was different. It could be sold, and many people appreciated and paid attention to paintings and painting exhibitions. Whether it was Chinese people or Westerners, their interest in Chinese art was primarily in painting. Rarely anybody knew what video art meant.

**Was something going on that made you feel that you were tired of painting?**

This is all part of a process. Many things happened that influenced me before I turned to video. After we graduated from university, we saw good Chinese films by Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, or Chen Kaige. There were also many Western films by directors like Ingmar Bergman that influenced us a lot. We read a lot of Chinese, Western, and, also, Latin American literature, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, or existentialist works by Kafka, Camus, and Beckett. The questions we engaged with at the time were similar to questions these authors and artists had in mind. The central questions were about life itself, about time. I felt that my biggest inspiration came from cinema and literature. The question of time could not be conveyed and expressed by painting. I could not make films myself, as it is very expensive, so I thought that I could experiment with video.

I would like to add, Chinese video happened later than Western video art by 20 or 30 years. But for both, the departure point is the same. If there wasn't the universal pervasiveness of television, or the transformations taking place in concepts of art, or the invention of cameras, video art wouldn't exist. It is the same for China as for America. This is different from the history of oil painting, which was introduced to China by Western missionaries. Many Chinese people learned oil painting from these missionaries. Court painters started to do portraits for royalty, who took a liking to painting. The situation for video art is different—it wasn't introduced by a specific person. As living conditions and concepts about art changed, it was a natural that people started turning toward video to make art.

**How do you feel when people say that you are the godfather of video art in China?**

I feel that they are joking. Art-making is unlike sports or scientific research, where the person who runs the fastest is the winner. I agree that I was the first Chinese artist—or one of them—to do video art. But in terms of being the godfather, it is unfair to other video artists to define me as such. They were not influenced by me—they started turning to video art because of changes in the general social environment. People's fates are different. Perhaps I preceded them by one year or six months, but that doesn't make me the godfather.



Zhang Peili, *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (still), 1991.

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, THROUGH PRIOR PURCHASE FROM THE MARY AND LEIGH BLOCK FUND

**I wanted to ask about the video where you talk about the Cultural Revolution. That work seems very Chinese. A lot of your other work doesn't feel as if you are as interested in Chinese identity. Can you talk more about these works?**

I am very sensitive to the question of identity. You have to tread carefully. Artists should not intentionally avoid question of identity, nor should they overemphasize it, because identity could drive your work into a dead end. It could be a kind of cultural capital, a resource that clarifies our cultural characteristics to Westerners who do not understand China. At the same time, it could also be a burden. As a result, artists have to be careful as to what could become their burden. Another point is that, as I said about *30x30*, that which seems the most ordinary and meaningless could be the most meaningful. A lot of my works come from these kinds of everyday, boring experiences. Regardless of whether you are Chinese, European, or African, you face the same mundane situations, and that universalizes most artistic questions.

I emphasize the attitude of going with the flow. If viewers look at my works carefully, they could find elements specific to the Chinese environment or experience. For example, the reason I thought of washing the chicken in the first place was that, at the time, chicken was a very precious food. It was rare that we ate chicken at all. We would feed the chick and watch it grow up. Once it was grown, we would either have it lay eggs if it was a hen, or wait until the Chinese New Year to eat it if it was a rooster. Or if you were super ill, you would need the nutrition from the chicken. The relationship between the chicken and men unfolds around your observation of it. Because I spent so much time taking care of them, I noticed that chickens never washed themselves with water—they only cleaned themselves with dirt, rubbing it all over themselves, rolling around in it, and eventually getting rid of lice and other parasites by shaking the dirt off. This is their way of taking a bath. Yes, my act of washing the chicken seems to be forcing it against its will, which is related to China's environment at the time. There were increasingly patriotic hygienic campaigns, which on the surface purported to be about hygiene, but they were in fact political. It controls people's private lives. With this I want to say, if a work isn't directly talking about identity, it doesn't mean that it doesn't engage with very specific social or cultural environments that gave rise to it. You don't have to take advantage of superficial cultural symbols.

**From your perspective, you've taught for many years at China Academy. How do you feel that video art has changed in China?**

Firstly, people don't feel that video is not an acceptable art form as they did back in the day. Everybody generally accepts video art, which is **featured (<https://www.artnews.com/t/featured/>)** in important exhibitions like the Shanghai Biennial. Young people have the opportunity to go abroad to see other video works as well as exhibit their own works. Young artists are exposed to digital technologies like video-editing from a very young age. From a technical standpoint, a lot of my students have way exceeded my capabilities. The language of video art has also transformed. Whereas artists doing video art in my time had similar styles, now it is very diverse. This is a good phenomenon.

