



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

# Contemporaneity

Vol 6, No 1 "Boundless" (2017) | ISSN 2153-15914(online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2017.230  
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

***Zhang Peili: Record. Repeat.***  
Art Institute of Chicago, March 31 – July 9, 2017

Ellen Larson

## Exhibition Review

Exhibition catalog: Orianna Cacchione, *Zhang Peili: Record. Repeat.* Exh. Cat. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2017. 96 pp.; 50 color ills. Hardback \$25.00 (9780300226225)

Exhibition schedule: Art Institute of Chicago, March 31–July 9, 2017

### **About the Author**

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## **Zhang Peili: Record. Repeat.**

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Widely recognized as “the World’s factory,” China is responsible for manufacturing most electronic devices used in our everyday lives. The laptops that have become integral to our daily productivity, the smart phones we use to record and share life’s moments, the touch-screens we view and interact with every hour of every day; these devices were likely manufactured and assembled in China.

Chinese contemporary culture and economy thrives on the newest electronic communication devices. Yet, paradoxically, the earliest electronic video and camcording devices were only introduced to Chinese households in the 1980s. Near the end of this decade, in November 1988, Chinese contemporary artist Zhang Peili premiered what has become widely recognized as the first work of Chinese video art. The three-hour video work, *30x30* (Figure 1), presents a cropped visual image of the artist who, after shattering a mirror on the ground, engages in the monotonous task of gluing it back together piece by piece.

Zhang Peili recalls that during the first screening of the work, viewers became increasingly impatient with the static presentation of this nonsensical action, demanding that he fast-forward to the end. In this earliest example of Chinese video art, Zhang Peili confounded the beholder’s expectations, disrupting the accepted notion that artworks and moving images are created for the sole purpose of entertainment. *30x30*, in demanding patience from an impatient audience, underscores Zhang Peili’s continuing artistic practice of encouraging audience awareness of the existence of time, while presenting metaphorical imagery that comments on the particularity of Chinese sociocultural conditions. Almost thirty years later, Zhang Peili is regarded as the father of video art in China, referring not only to his artworks, but also to his role as teacher and mentor to many of the most successful young artists working today.

*Record. Repeat.*, curated by Orianna Cacchione and presented at the Art Institute of Chicago, marks Zhang Peili’s first retrospective exhibition in the United States. The exhibition presents a unique opportunity for an international audience to encounter videos created by one of the most influential Chinese artists in the past several decades. *Record. Repeat.* features twelve iconic works produced between 1988 and the mid-2000s. Each work provides an engaged viewer with an interactive and sometimes confounding viewing experience, addressing particular sociocultural conditions through subtle metaphor. Passive visitors unfamiliar with China’s sociopolitical climate during the past three decades may have difficulty extracting the subtle meaning and cultural critique layered within this assemblage of moving visuals.

Individuals experiencing this challenging and intriguing exhibition are confronted by three primary groupings of Zhang Peili’s experimental video work. The first category of works presents a series of formal exercises in repetition and disruption of daily life. Following *30x30*, these canonical videos are also motivated by Zhang Peili’s interest in capturing or emphasizing time through repetitive, meaningless exchanges and forcing his audience to become aware of the passage of time. The artist’s monotonous actions purposefully eliminate any sort of pleasure or entertainment value the viewer might be able to extract from her or his experience. *Eating* (1997) is a three-channel video that captures the mundane act of eating from three different perspectives. Three 1980s-era television monitors are stacked on top of one another, displaying a close-up presentation of the artist’s jaw, a plate of various food items such as boiled eggs, cucumbers, and tomatoes, and a glimpse of the artist from the perspective of the plate. This video compels viewers to become hyper-aware of their own



**Figure 1**

Zhang Peili, *30x30*, 1988, single-channel color video, sound, 32:09 minute loop, collection of the artist.

participation in the simple, often forgotten actions of daily life, while remaining cognizant of the presence of time.

Other videos contemplate themes of power and submission in a Chinese sociohistorical context. Shot in a similar manner to *30x30*, Zhang Peili's 1991 piece, *Document of Hygiene No. 3*, features three retro-monitors simultaneously presenting different views of the artist's hands methodically engaged in the process of washing a hen. Though initially resistant to this unnatural and intrusive act, the hen soon becomes passive in response to the artist's persistence. This video enlists subtle metaphor to respond to government-instituted hygiene programs prevalent in China during the early 1990s.

*Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* (1991) incorporates commonplace images from popular culture. The artist filmed television anchor Xing Zhibin, a figure widely recognized by those familiar with official Chinese State media. While Xing Zhibin sits at a news desk, her customary role as disseminator of state rhetoric is undermined as she reads aloud from the standard *Cihai* dictionary, defining terms that begin with the character *shui* (the Chinese word for water). The video confounds spectators' expectations of popular culture by challenging their passive acceptance of the current situational environment perpetuated through official rhetoric.

A second category of videos presents Zhang Peili's influential experimentation in new media and his active exploration of new recording and transmitting technologies introduced into Chinese entertainment and popular culture during the mid-1980s. Several works in this section also reflect the artist's continued investigation into new forms of analog and digital media, introduced to China in the 1990s.

*Focal Distance* (1996) is an eight-channel video, the first screen of which captures a busy Hangzhou street. Subsequent screens are increasingly manipulated until all visual understanding of place has been lost through a process of technical deconstruction. *Focal Distance* presents viewers with a gradual optical disintegration of image; the presumed reality of photographic video slowly deconstructs until it is nothing more than abstracted pixels and colors. This work explores the disruption of visual and audio information through experimentation with digital media. This experimentation creates an awareness for the spectator that images seen in popular media may appear to represent experiences of real daily life, but are in fact forms of manipulated visual data.


Building on these themes—and especially evident in more recent artworks—a third category of videos shocks the audience out of passivity, compelling them to confront art as more than simply a form of entertainment. These videos insert the viewer directly into the experience of the work. They suggest that media technologies can be employed by artists to generate greater audience participation and, by extension, more profound social value and cultural critique.

*A Scene in Black and White Unfolded Four Times* (2007) also elicits an unsuspecting audience participation into the work, becoming a catalyst in creating meaning. Twenty-eight digital photographs of Hangzhou's Venice Water Town appear on monitors connected to motion sensors. As individuals approach the images, the photographs go black. Only at a distance can the viewer extract any meaning from the photographs. The public is encouraged to observe this media from a distance, but not to look too closely. Spectators are reminded and frustrated that close analysis of ocular information is not permitted.

*Actors Lines* (2002), *Last Words* (2003), and *Happiness* (2006) all appropriate video clips from popular Chinese revolutionary films. Moving images are presented in a dark, theater-like space, far removed from the rest of the exhibition. The visuals are remixes of climactic moments from the films, creating repetitive dialogue and actions. As the short film segments are projected in this cinema-like space, the intended drama of these various scenes is undermined as the clip is played over and over. The actions become increasingly ridiculous each time they are repeated, gradually becoming devoid of meaning and drifting toward abstraction.

Through methodical, exaggerated, and often ridiculous means, Zhang Peili's works distort the media of popular culture and actions of daily life. Using video technologies as a means for cultural critique, his work continually questions the role of images in society. The exhibition presents spectators with an excellent introduction to Zhang Peili's work and to important experimentation in video taking place in China in the 1980s and 90s. Many of the works are presented on television monitors from the period, creating an intimate relationship between image and form. Audience members who lived during this era may experience nostalgia, while those born in the past two decades are transported to an era of imperfection and impermanence initiated by the original analog format. The curation and presentation of *Record. Repeat.* encourages individuals to actively enter Zhang Peili's practicing space and time, and consider the historical context, legacy, and preservation of these moving images. Calling for more active participation in the exhibition experience, the artist remarks in the exhibition catalogue, "perhaps the time for supplying pleasure should be over. It is in the artist's power to give it away and for (him) to take it back again."

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