There aren’t many artists who can engage in research from within the currents of contemporary Chinese art history. This is because of not only the complexity of the historical era but also the nature of its continuity. Those participants who lack a strategic logic either leave the art scene after a dazzling run with the trends of the time or make a hasty retreat after placing bets on their success within it. Zhang Peili is one of the few artists who endures because he has always been at the leading edge of trends or served as a creator of trends, and his position during this period of history has been established through his constant questioning and testing of those trends. His almost pathologically sensitive reasoning pushes him to challenge all manner of contemporary myths: of philosophy, of movements, of conceptualism, of the market, of anti-Westernism, and of technology. This act of challenging has led his art to maintain its open and individualistic state. More to the point, his art has always existed as a counterpoint to mainstream contemporary Chinese art, and this provides us with a paradoxical dimension for our investigation into his overall production.

Zhang Peili’s work is full of skepticism for all forms of a priori conceptualism. He has always emphasized that he never sets any underlying principles for his work and that what he does amounts to nothing more than concrete facts that are “full of serendipity.” Even words such as “experiment” leave him uncomfortable: “Principled experiments are anything but experiments. Perhaps discarding with experimentation is an experiment.” Such witticisms are always turning up in his discussions of linguistic style, video technology, the art market, the relationship between East and West, and even education. “I just want to place myself in a state of relative freedom.” It is precisely this simple yet fundamental attitude towards his work that has determined that he will always play an important yet unclassifiable role in contemporary Chinese art.

Painting
Zhang Peili’s art began as part of the turbulent modernist art movement of the 1980s in China. This art movement, set against a backdrop of modern rational enlightenment and political rebellion, seemed to affirm its collectivist properties from the very beginning, which imbued the movement and its values of individual liberation with paradoxical properties. Dubbed the ’85 New Wave Movement, it extended the passion for political resistance exemplified by the Stars Group of the late 1970s but
bestowed it with a determinist grand destiny that stripped it of any self-reflection. Join us or leave—this seemed to be the “non-choice” choice of the movement’s scene.

From 1983 to 1987, having just graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art Oil Painting Department, Zhang Peili created a series of paintings in a surreal style that included _Midsummer Swimmers_ (1985), _Stop Note_ (1985), _No Jazz Tonight_ (1987), and _X?_ (1986), and took part in the 85 New Space exhibition (December 1985), which he organized with his academic colleague Geng Jianyi. Although later art historians would interpret these works as being overly expressive, the artist seemed more content to view them as a form of tactfully raised doubts about the philosophical modern art movement at the time, with its goal of creating a “grand culture” and a “grand spirit.” After the fact, he once said, “Painting should not take on so much stuff—like the Wanderers School did; too much narrative content and historical responsibility will dilute the value of painting in and of itself. We believe that such an era should end, an era of sentimentality. . . This [pointing at a painting from the 85 New Space exhibition] shows what is different from the other art groups. We were more concerned with individual experience and concrete things.” In this “manifesto”, he writes,
“Too much expounding on philosophical expressions of human nature has started to pain us.” He also declared an intent to “break the boundaries between languages and promote a muddled form [of them].”

In the Swimmers series—Midsummer Swimmers (1985), Swimmers in the Water (1985), Swimmer Facing Upwards (1986), and Swimmer by the Pool (1986)—and the Music series—Appreciate Jazz (1986), Stop Note (1985), Profile of the Saxophonist (1986), Front View of the Saxophonist (1986), Man with Saxophone (1986), and No Jazz Tonight (1987)—two such types of early memories and individual experiences were presented using highly realistic painting methods. But amongst the highly philosophized rational painting and various irrational expressive painting movements of the ’85 New Wave Movement, Zhang Peili’s painting style, which came to be called "cold expression," imperceptibly took on a value of rethinking that transcended individual experience. This rethinking was first rooted in skepticism about the expression of “meaning.” In these seemingly solidified images of figures and objects, meaning became a non-referential signifier. Both Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi eschewed the sloppy philosophical and spiritual legends that often permeated or attached themselves to the images of the 1980s in order to dissociate themselves from this movement.

Zhang Peili, X7, 1986, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
The Xi series, created between 1986 and 1987, was a visual starting point for the various forms of Zhang Peili’s conceptual art that would soon follow. The medical latex gloves, a sign that he would simply and repeatedly use, encompassed many of the codes in his later art and came from his early experiences with personal illness. That at least was obvious, but the hard edges, monochromatic colour schemes, and the meaningless mathematical signs added to the picture stifled any possibility for the expression of individual psychological experience, drawing these works into a state of abstraction. Their meaning was infinitely suspended, like full containers waiting to be poured open.

Text

The year 1987 was a turning point not just for Zhang Peili but for Chinese modern art history, especially for the history of the Chinese conceptual art that would follow. In that year, the turbulent ’85 New Wave Movement was beginning to grow silent. Wu Shanzhuan of Zhoushan had begun the “textual painting” of his Red Series and Red Humor Series (1987); Huang Yongping of Fuzhou, having organized the Xiamen Dada exhibition, was shifting his work towards individual research and created a series of classic works of Chinese conceptual art such as Towards the Small Wheel and Chinese Painting History and Modern Painting History (1987); Wang Guangyi began his “image revision” in the Red Rational Series (1987) of his early rational painting; and Gu Wenda, who had left the country, extended his feelers into experiments in installation art incorporating Chinese characters with The Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground (1987). All of this signified that an undercurrent of conceptualist art flowing against the enlightenment-oriented ’85 New Wave Movement was rising to the surface and gaining recognition.

1987 was the year that Zhang Peili also created two conceptual text pieces, Program that Acts First and Reports Later On and Art Project No. 2. Together with Brown Book No. 1 (1988), which came the following year, these conceptual artworks completely did away with visual expression. As the artist described them, these works were aimed at escaping from the “’Cultured, ’ affected petite bourgeois culture” and using a predetermined artistic programming method to express a focus on “standards” and “restrictiveness.” Compared with other conceptualist art of the period, the “conceptuality” of these works appeared more thorough and pure. Compared to Wu Shanzhuan’s Red Series, Xu Bing’s Book from Heaven, or Gu Wenda’s textual work Inspiration Stems from Tranquility, Zhang Peili’s works did not even draw from any cultural carriers (such as Chinese character symbols or big character posters), religious or philosophical concepts (Zen or modern linguistics), or classical texts. Compared with such “non-self” conceptual works as Analysis Group’s Touch or Huang Yongping’s Non-Expressive Painting and Towards the Small Wheel, Zhang Peili’s artworks preserved certain traits of psychology. When discussing his art with others, he prefers to use technical terms or descriptive language in an attempt to avoid grandiose interpretations of “meaning” or “value” so

that his artworks can be understood in a certain perceptive or experiential way. This aspect was presented in a slightly dramatic, biographical way in 1988 with Report on Hepatitis A. In that year, he became a victim of the Shanghai/Hangzhou hepatitis A outbreak. While many died in the hospital, he survived after forty days of quarantine and treatment, but this experience again suddenly revived his early memories of illness. This mental experience was directly transferred onto this installation piece; for example, it incorporated surgical gloves, plaster, and blood serum.

**Video**

In 1988, Zhang Peili created his first video artwork, 30 x 30, for which he has become known as “the father of Chinese video art.” But in discussing this artwork, he maintains that he was simply trying to use a home video camera to create something that was different from the appeal of television: “I wanted to create something vexing. It didn’t employ any tricks to evoke joyful sentiments; I wanted to make people aware of the existence of time. The temporal aspect of video happened to suit this need.” This artwork attempted, in its use of repetitive video clips, to affirm how the element of “time” resisted the linear narrative and entertainment function of traditional television or cinema. Actually, the idea for this work was created for the Huangshan Conference (whose official title was 88 China Modern Art Creative Symposium), which was being planned at the time. This conference is viewed as having been another important gathering for the ‘85 New Wave Movement, alongside the 1986 Zhuhai conference. It was seen as the planning conference for the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition that was to be held the next year. But compared to the Zhuhai conference two years prior, the situation for New Wave art had changed dramatically. The overly philosophical and cultural New Wave Movement had been pushed into gradual decline as a result of attacks from all manner of analytical and critical conceptualist art, and the...
leaders of the New Wave Movement, who had hoped that a large group event would help to re-energize their forces, clearly were unable to attain the resonance they had found in the Zhuhai conference. As Zhang Peili puts it, “Not long after 1985, we didn’t really like the word ‘movement’ anymore.” It was in this mindset that Zhang Peili brought the plan for this 30 x 30 to the conference, but it didn’t arouse the interests of the other participants—he was asked to present his first screening in fast-forward. If we were to say that the first encounter of this proposal, his first video work, was understandable given the context of the time, then the fact that this video, with its set camera angle, no added sound and no editing, would become a lasting topic of discussion in Chinese video art history was likely something the artist had never anticipated.

Video art has always played a melancholic role in contemporary Chinese art. It has had little chance of gaining the kind of commercial success enjoyed by canvas art, and it was never a natural symbol of the cutting edge, like performance art, with its aspect of “liveness” that made the state wary of it. Such a role has led video art in China to maintain a certain elitist tone. As in the West, Chinese video art emerged at a revolutionary time, but unlike in the West, it did not quickly become a member of a guerilla team declaring war on mainstream culture, nor could it become stranded as a captive of the technical sponsorship system. This unique ideological environment turned a naturally mass-oriented medium into something like a game of solitaire. Early Chinese video art (from the late 80s to the early 90s) was more like a moving camera; its main function was documentation, and it lacked linguistic properties such as “electronic syntax.” In Zhang Peili’s 30 x 30, we can see the typical traits of early Chinese conceptualism, such as a simple and repetitive narrative method influenced by minimalism, but this work, when compared to similar video works in the West such as Andy Warhol’s Sleep (1963) or Thierry Kuntzel’s Still (1980), also used cinematic methods to extend the psychoanalytical narrative logic of his earlier works: the broken glass and its repeated shattering and reforming conjured up powerful physiological and psychological metaphors. This psychological trait would persist in his later, increasingly technically sophisticated works.

After 30 x 30, video became the primary medium for Zhang Peili’s art, leading him to become one of the most experienced video artists in China. Continuing with the production model of this work, the artist created several artworks over the next decade that would enter into Chinese video art history, including (Hygiene) Permit No. 3 (1991), Work No. 1 (1992), Water—Full Dictionary Standard Edition (1991), Good Until 1994/8/24

(1994), Relative Space (1995), Related Beat, (1996), Imprecise Stimulation (1996), Focal Length (1996), Screen (1997), Fast 3 Slow 3 Fast 4 Slow 4 (1999) and Continuously Expanded (2000). The technique he uses evolved from a single track and single angle to simultaneously recorded video installations with multiple tracks and multiple angles. As a representative of Chinese video artists, Zhang Peili mostly employs a steady analytical attitude, creating a sensitive and concrete visual atmosphere in his work, where the ceaseless interplay of physical and psychological activities repeatedly plumb the depths of the medium for its narrative methods. The significance of this individual exploratory practice lies in its provision of a stable individual methodological foundation for Chinese conceptual art, where the internal forces of cinematic language are presented from the level of experiential perception.

After the mid 1990s, Zhang Peili’s explorations of video methodology went beyond a mere continuation of the former traits of psychology to engage a wider exploration of the semantic traits of video as an independent medium. Some examples are its unique methods for expressing time and space (Relative Space, 1995), the similarities and differences between digital and traditional images (25 Repeated Shots, 1993), the appropriation and mutation of ideological footage for video art (Water—Full Dictionary Standard Edition, 1991), the relationship
between positive and negative images (Diary, 1997), the structural relationship between video and installation art (Focal Length, 1996), the differences between the linear narrative qualities of single screen videos and the non-linear narrative qualities of multiple screen videos (Simultaneous Broadcast, 2000), and, especially, visual issues such as the mutual relationship between video and new mediums such as the Internet. But as video and multimedia technology entered into the Internet era, Zhang Peili instead chose an entirely different working method. In the work that followed, his original interest in the "direct time" and "real time" of video slowly began to be replaced by silent memory remnants, and the direct cinema filming methods were replaced by the editing of existing cinema footage. I call this new working method “the montage revision of memory cinema.”

**Montage**

After 2002, there were very clear changes in Zhang Peili’s working methods, beginning with the creation of a series of artworks that appropriated existing footage from old films embedded with political memories, Dialogue (2002), Last Words (2003), Forward Forward (2004), and Happiness (2006). These videos seemed to have brought us into a more complex context and can even cause us to have doubts about his work: Had Zhang Peili begun to discard his “pure art” working process and become interested in political and reality themes? In fact, many critics asked him about this, and his response can help draw us closer to these works:

Beginning in 2000, I no longer used the camera to shoot videos and began to use “readymade” material. One of the methods was to seek out footage among the films being sold on the market. I care about those iconic, formalized elements with a sense of time. These elements are a concentrated embodiment
of the revolutionary heroism and romanticism in the plots of Chinese dramas from the 1950s to the 70s, embodying healthy aesthetic and grammatical habits. I pulled sequences from these old dramas and did some simple rendering to extract them from their original narrative structures and temporal settings. What I’m interested in are the different reading possibilities brought by them.

This explanation might leave us a bit disappointed because the content that we see as critical of history and reality is in his eyes the same as the “temporal” elements found in his previous video works—merely the material of vocabulary and grammar, taking on meaning only
when they are put to use—and all he is concerned with are the "different reading possibilities" they suggest. It's just as Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The meaning of a word is its use in the language."

Removed from language, all meaning becomes void. In other words, the difference in history, politics, and reality between Zhang Peili and other artists is that for him they are just the "apples" under Duchamp's brush, unable to become the "structure" behind them. We often see criticality as the identifying mark of contemporary art, but, perhaps, as Zhang Peili sees it, criticism removed from artistic language and methods faces the same dangers as the target of its critique: It becomes either an opportunistic strategy or an ossified way of viewing and knowing things. In terms of methodology, this leads down the same disastrous track as the very objects that come under contemporary art's criticism.

Zhang Peili has said: "I want to make things with temporal traits into things with no traits." Let us take a look at how he uses his "montage revisions of cinema" to achieve this goal. Montage is the basic technique for connecting and arranging shots in cinema. Through the initial efforts of American director D. W. Griffith and Soviet directors Dziga Vertov and Lev Kuleshov, montage was developed by Sergei Eisenstein into an independent aesthetic rhetorical technique in cinema. Through the adjustment of settings, shots, arrangements, and editing, it directly changes the realistic qualities of film, lending it the function of symbolic and metaphorical rearrangement. Actually, Zhang Peili employed some simple montage-like techniques in his 1990s multi-screen installations, as in the non-linear cinematic effects produced through the juxtaposition of multiple screens in *Imprecise Stimulation* (1996), *Diary* (1997), and *Meal* (1997). The "slippage" effect formed by the juxtaposition of differently timed images on multiple screens or identical images at different speeds such as in *Simultaneous Broadcast* (2000) and *Magic in Loops* (2002) also had a certain montage quality. The difference here is that the use of montage was not to create a unified narrative structure and image content but, on the contrary, to draw the linear narrative into a non-linear state.

Most of Zhang Peili's source material for these videos came from Chinese revolutionary films of the 1950s and 60s that were based on real events: *Sentry under the Neon Lights, The Sino-Japanese War, Strike the Invaders, Ascending Ganling, Daughter of the Party,* and *Red.* These films, representing a specific period, became the memory remnants and visual prototypes for his montage revisions. When removed from their original context, the temporal logic of these films was shattered and the meaning of their narrative removed. In Lev Kuleshov's *Kuleshov Experiment,* various unconnected scenes from an inventory of scattered footage are arranged through montage into a sequence with narrative functions, but in Zhang Peili's experiments, this process is turned on its head: In *Last Words* (2003), the repetitive juxtaposition of similar scenes puts their heroicist content into a state of hibernation. In *Short Remarks* (2006), the control and adjustment of the timing of scenes and an interactive installation does.
not entirely destroy the meaning of the sentence “The United Nations knows me, do I not know it?”; on the contrary, the new context gives it more powerful metaphorical properties. In *Forward, Forward* (2004), two juxtaposed battle scenes interfere with our set value judgments about war, drawing our impressions into an imagining that transcends culture. In *Happiness*, the montage technique becomes more dramatic—the two sequences of “speaking” and “applause” taken from the film *Battling the Typhoon* are repeatedly swapped, creating a brilliant comedic effect.

If we were to view the employment of this montage method as mere satire or a game of pure structure, perhaps it would violate the original intent of such an experiment, but, in fact, Zhang Peili is extremely dedicated to this work. He has repeatedly emphasized that the significance of his work is that it strives through technique and language to attain the greatest freedom for people in terms of senses and spirit. In my most recent discussion with him, he excitedly told me that during his editing of old films he discovered a new psychological topic worth exploring, which is that as he constantly moves his computer mouse, it leads to unpredictable effects in the film. He has become obsessed with this effect, about how the traces of a totally private experience can create a new cinematic relationship with images from public memory.
Scenes

“Scenes” became a new form of grammar in Zhang Peili’s works beginning in 2006, with Fixing the Old Just Like Old, and it imbued his works with more social undertones. Such “scenic” experiments continued until Scenery Outside the Window (2007), Gust of Wind, which was completed in Beijing in 2008, and Mute, completed in Shenzhen in 2008. In these “manufactured fake scenes” and “game-like scenes,” it was still artistic linguistic thinking that was primarily at work.

If “time” was always a central theme in Zhang Peili’s 1990s works and the readymade films he made after 2000, then “space,” or the relationship between time and space in film, became a new theme now. At the No Problem exhibition, held at the site of the old Huqing Yutang factory in Hangzhou, in 2006, he spontaneously engaged in a “just like old” renovation of one of the factory rooms: He renovated half of the room, a forceful intervention in an historical space that led to a new attitude towards space while raising new issues about it. With the work Gust of Wind at a 2008 exhibition at Boers-Li Gallery in Beijing, he considered these issues a paradox about how “a manufactured fact” can influence “real facts.”

The difference between his past work and this current video work lies in the fact that the production of cinematic meaning relies entirely on dual real/virtual spaces. They consist of three groups of settings that are constantly expanding in time: the first group is a high-end, elegant indoor environment that alludes to a serene, dignified, and ideal identity, a normal ideology of life; the second group is footage of the room being blown apart by the wind, which alludes to the unpredictable, imperceptible forces of time and nature; the third group is the ruins left behind after the room is destroyed by the wind, which alludes to an unpredictable dramatic result of this temporal paradox. Zhang Peili has always avoided discussing the specific meanings of the various visual elements in this artwork but has classified their potential meaning as: “Nothing can maintain its original state. Only that which is destroyed is real and eternal. . . . I am only interested in time and this unknown force. I think that is what is really
eternal—time is eternal, that force is eternal.” In explaining this nearly religious nihilistic attitude, he does not forget to emphasize: “This attitude is not religious, because religion is certain and concrete.”

Zhang Peili has always maintained a unique keenness and wariness about the expression of various definitive concepts in his works. “As I see it, I haven’t expressed anything at all. I don’t think that language has a reconstructive meaning. I’m not certain at all about what I want to express, or about language itself. My attitude is very equivocal.” From the original plan to the final plan for the work Mute (2008), we can likewise get a sense of the role of such a working attitude towards the open-ended meaning of an artwork. This is the original plan: The exhibition space will be the virtual scene of an “incident.” The scene will present the remnants (or evidence) of the “incident,” such as a burned out car and the like, and multiple videos (faux news media) will be constantly “reporting” the “incident,” but the videos will be on mute, and because of this loss of sound, the “incident” will lose something as well, becoming neither this nor that.

The doubt raised about the rationality of news events by the loss of sound is the logical starting point of this artwork. In designing the scene of the incident, the artist prepared three different potential plans: the scene of a car accident, the scene of disinfecting a factory-style chicken coop, and the destruction of a clothing (or shoe) factory. He began by discarding the first plan because it could too easily be linked to a specific traffic accident, and the artificiality of the on-the-scenes reporting would relegate the artwork’s setup of the “news” to the superficial and formal. Next, he discarded the second plan, deciding that it too would be easily linked with specific news incidents such as SARS, which would lead to a linear reading of the work’s social import. The third plan, which is the one he finally settled on, became a process full of the “extraction” of meaning. He first decided to create a clothing factory rather than a shoe factory, and then discarded the idea of its destruction, opting instead to move a real factory to the exhibition space in its entirety. This was all in the interest of avoiding associations with recent violent incidents involving European boycotts of Chinese goods—at the
time, Chinese stores had recently been burned down in Italy and Russia. The remaining issues were all technical: “Will it be totally ‘muted’ or muted only momentarily? Should there be background noise from the factory? It could go for a while and suddenly stop, going quiet, only to suddenly have sound emerge again. That’s momentary muting.” The final plan added recordings of the workers on the move in the original factory taken by surveillance cameras. The final exhibition scene at Shenzhen’s OCT Contemporary Art Terminal had two projectors playing footage of the original factory environment, and these two screens intermittently went “mute.”

The strategy of drawing from new reports on social incidents while trying to avoid allowing these incidents to control or interfere with the linguistic meaning of the artwork apparently failed to stop the audience from making associations about the significance and social meaning of the artwork. In fact, it served to expand the dimensions of such associations. Zhang Peili’s work is basically full of this sort of logic: Art does not need to draw from any “correct” political attitudes, standpoints, or signs; it just needs to employ unique narrative methods and linguistic designs, and to constantly wash away people’s conceptual inertia and a priori readings of the artwork. This could be the truly revolutionary quality of conceptualist language.

**Conclusion**

Zhang Peili’s rebellion against a conceptualist heritage is not limited to his superiority complex regarding all “concepts” or his dismissal of political correctness, but also includes his dismissal of the abstract linguistic properties of conceptualist art. He is accustomed to planting all manner of concepts into specific perceptions and states of life, turning them into a series of concrete visual linguistic themes. He has always instinctively struggled against the sacredness of art. This is not out of professional modesty, but, because, as he sees it, the excessive pursuit of these fantastic capabilities of art has led many artists to lose their sense of duty, responsibility, and joy, and has covered up the true significance of art. In order to express his aversion to the excessive attachment of meaning to art, he sometimes has no other choice but to declare himself an artistic formalist in an effort to set himself apart from those who produce images and signs with no view towards the basic logic and techniques of artistic language. Of course, he still believes in the power and moral imperative of the artistic spirit, rather than being a cold, aloof formalist, he is constantly wary of being manipulated by cultural passions and worldly gains. That is because, as he sees it, that would make it impossible for him to become a truly worthy practitioner of art.

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**Notes**