

# VIDEO



## CHAPTER 5

## From Film to Video

Like photographs, the moving image was imported into China in the nineteenth century. Indigenous film production, mostly centered in Shanghai, burgeoned in the 1920s, much influenced by foreign—especially American—methods and models. The 1930s, a time of multiple Shanghai studios and glamorous stars, also generated an emphasis on class issues and ordinary people, political struggles, and the threat posed by Japan. With the 1937 invasion, production companies evacuated, notably to Hong Kong, but Shanghai (whose foreign concessions mitigated Japanese control) continued to create a number of films that eluded the usual proselytizing mode fostered by the occupying power. After Japan's 1945 defeat, Shanghai cinema briefly and gloriously revived, only to be commandeered by Mao's propaganda machine four years later. Some filmmakers fled to Taiwan, while those who remained faced tough new restrictions against pre-Liberation (1949) films and all non-Soviet imports. Film students and young industry professionals were sent to the USSR for training. In the mid-1950s, the national film school was founded in Beijing, where ideological oversight was strict.

Gong Li in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), directed by Zhang Yimou

Following a slight easing of party scrutiny in the first half of the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution slammed the industry to a virtual halt. Distribution of earlier



Chinese films (to say nothing of foreign imports) was forbidden, and the few new productions were politically didactic and woodenly acted. But after 1976, Chinese cinema—like every other art form in the country—came to life again, returning to genuine populist entertainment that reacted to the influx of competitive influences from abroad and even occasionally dramatized the woes of the Cultural Revolution.

The famous Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s, the same period as many '85 New Wave artists emerged, including those such as Zhang Peili and Wang Jianwei, who pioneered the use of video as an art medium in the PRC. With such works as *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1991; below) and *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), these filmmakers reached international audiences and established a model for worldly success at a time when most avant-garde artists were scratching out a bare existence in places like Yuanmingyuan and the East Village. Today market-savvy artists may emulate the lifestyle of movie directors, and Yang Fudong may draw heavily on the legacy of Shanghai cinema, but most video makers—because of the distinct nature and history of their medium—remain closer in spirit to underground filmmakers and documentarians.

Video, after all, allows for and even prompts a level of personalization normally unattainable on a major movie set. Its development outside China was tied to the post-World War II dissemination of television—which brought moving images on an intimate scale into the private recesses of the home—and to the growing availability, from the mid-1960s onward, of portable video cameras and ever-more sophisticated editing devices. The first major experimenter, Nam June Paik, began by distorting conventional TV broadcast images and, in 1965, obtained his own video-making equipment. His first efforts were more or less documentary (capturing a pope's visit to New York, for example), but by the time video technology entered the broader market in the 1970s, artists were already staking out the possibilities of the medium: recording real-life situations, typically shot close-up and personal; documenting performance-art events; appropriating existing film and video footage; emulating film or TV narrative, often with deliberate

subversions and disruptions of the form; fragmenting or proliferating scenes onto multiple screens; manipulating time perception to unconventional extremes; projecting images onto walls and objects. Almost immediately, video was seen as an image-flow that can be either a viewing experience in itself or a structural component in an encompassing installation.

Because of the Cultural Revolution, extensive information about video art did not reach China until the 1980s, nearly twenty years after its inception abroad, and the means to view and produce it effectively developed even later. Television became widespread in the People's Republic only in the late 1980s; the internet and small portable cameras only in the late 1990s. Consequently, the evolutionary history of video was drastically foreshortened. The full range of its technical potential and the formal innovations of such figures as Paik, Bruce Nauman, Gary Hill, Bill Viola, and Tony Oursler arrived almost simultaneously, as a range of options for Chinese artists to draw on—and, in many cases, to duplicate—without first working through the developmental stages experienced elsewhere and without concern for proprietary intellectual interests. Hollywood movies, experimental films, Chinese cinema of all periods, French New Wave, Italian Neorealist classics, Indian musicals, Hong Kong action flicks, Japanese horror movies and animation, Korean melodrama, music videos from Asia and the West, domestic and foreign TV shows and commercials, video games and the internet, as well as the experiments of serious video artists from around the world fed an avant-garde imagination



Zhang Peili, *30 x 30*, 1988

newly freed from Socialist Realist restrictions. So rapidly and astutely were these influences absorbed that all the video artists covered here were showing internationally—many at no less a venue than the Venice Biennale—within a few years of making their first work.

## China's First Wave

The dean of Chinese video is Zhang Peili (b. 1957), who conducted some of the earliest experiments with the technology and today presides as head of the sleek, well-equipped New Media Art Center at his alma mater, the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. The two-decade span of his career to date encompasses the whole history of video in the People's Republic, from its private, technically crude beginnings to its current global, futuristic cachet. A graduate of the Zhejiang Art Academy (as it was known before 1993), Zhang had studied oil painting and gained his first notoriety as a member of the Pond Group, which included painter Geng Jianyi and a dozen others. In overnight guerrilla actions in 1986, the group twice tried to engage the general public with art by putting up oversize human silhouettes (once in papier-mâché on a wall, once in freestanding cardboard), the white figures striking tai-chi poses in outdoor areas used for that exercise every morning by the people of Hangzhou.

The artists then turned to more private endeavors. Geng produced the seminal *Second Situation* grisaille faces, and Zhang tacked up sheets of paper bearing intricate instructions for an action in which several people would observe through a peephole while two others engaged in a highly regulated dialogue (*Art Project 2*, 1987). He also painted many subdued oil-on-canvas studies of isolated objects—gloves, a saxophone—and, during a 1988 hepatitis outbreak, Zhang mailed rubber gloves to his acquaintances and displayed some, evidencing various states of damage, in grids under glass.

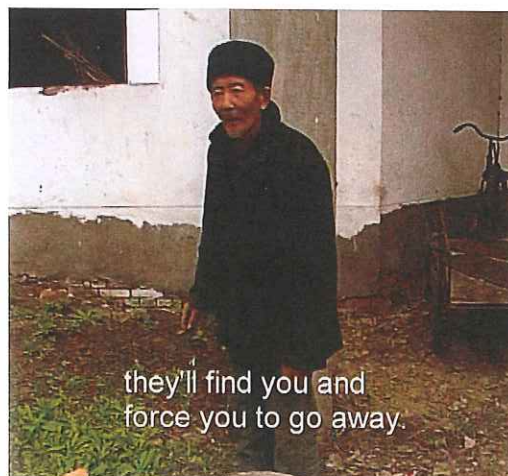
Hands working in gloves figured prominently in Zhang's initial video, *30 x 30* (1988; page 165, below), one of the earliest if not the very first art video made in China. Taking its inspiration from patience-trying

works by Warhol, Nauman, and others, it depicts—from a single, fixed point of view—gloved hands breaking a mirror, laboriously gluing the fragments back together, and then breaking the pane again. The title refers in deadpan, high modernist fashion to the size of the glass (thirty centimeters square), and the performance goes on for an intentionally mind-numbing three hours. (Zhang made the piece to test the bona fides of his colleagues at a conference on experimental art.) *Document on "Hygiene" No. 3* (1991), thought to be the first art video shown in a public venue in the People's Republic (it appeared in a 1991 exhibition in an underground garage in Shanghai), continues the concern with absurdly ritualized behavior, a constant theme in China from the imperial past to the Communist present. Shot at a time when the government was promoting public sanitation as a patriotic duty, the video work shows Zhang repeatedly washing a compliant hen.

Two years later, in a related vein, Zhang persuaded the well-known state TV news anchor Xing Zhibin, a woman of impeccable demeanor and diction, to read from a dictionary every word beginning with "water" (*Water—Standard Version from the Ci Hai Dictionary*, 1992, page 165 above). With disastrous floods much in the news, she delivers her methodical, nonsensical stream of words with the impassivity expected of a professional China Central Television broadcaster—replicating the neutral, reassuring tone she employed three years early when conveying the Party line on events in Tiananmen Square.

The fascination that some painters find in seriality Zhang seems to discover in repetition, occasionally reinforced by installations using numerous monitors. During the 1990s his focus was on common acts: toy penguins endlessly climbing stairs and sliding down a ramp (*Children's Playground*, 1996), human body scratching (*Uncertain Pleasure*, 1996), a man consuming a meal as recorded in multiple tight close-ups (*Eating*, 1997), and couples executing their ballroom maneuvers (*Endless Dancing*, 1999).

But of late Zhang's emphasis has been on appropriated footage, edited and combined to subvert its original meaning. *Actor's Lines* (2002) lifts a scene from Wang Pei's 1964 propaganda classic *Soldiers under Neon Lights*. An exchange in which a patriotic soldier



Wang Jianwei, *Living Elsewhere*, 1997

tries to win the confidence of a troubled young man is repeated and repeated, while the characters' words are also multiply echoed until the propaganda vehicle becomes a Dadaist exercise. In the dual-screened *Last Words* (2003), death scenes from various Chinese movies are endlessly reiterated until neither death nor life seems to have any finality. *Charge* (2004), a montage of clips from Chinese and American war films, shows officers ordering their embattled troops to attack. The juxtaposition stresses a formal similarity in sign-systems and a humanist message affirming that we're all the same in certain situations. And in *Happiness* (2006), statements uttered by characters on one screen elicit wild applause—of the Cultural Revolution's programmed-response variety—from crowds on another screen, excerpted from a different movie. Nowhere in Zhang's oeuvre, so attuned to the transmogrifications his country is undergoing, does authenticity seem certain, or even feasible.

That issue has a lingering resonance for Beijing-based Wang Jianwei (b. 1958), who grew up as the son of military parents in Sichuan Province and underwent "re-education" in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution before graduating, at the age of thirty, from the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou. Trained as a painter, he opted, in the aftermath of Tiananmen, for more conceptual projects: fact-based texts and project notes composed in solitude; a grain-growing experiment entered into with a Sichuan farmer; petition of officials in the city of Chengdu to have a statue of Mao cleaned, while he videotaped the ambivalence-inducing process.

Wang's best-known video is *Living Elsewhere* (1997; page 167), the record of four displaced peasant families inhabiting the shells of luxury houses left unfinished for years on the outskirts of Chengdu. Symptomatic of the disruptions wrought by China's massive move toward industrialization and urbanization, their "floating population" status is offset somewhat by their patience and ingenuity—they farm the hard earth of the derelict suburban development—even though they know they will eventually have to move on.

Some of Wang's videos carry respect for being factual to the point of boredom, effectively duplicating the experience they study. Such is the case with *Production* (1996), with its endless teahouse conversations, or

*Connection* (1996; opposite), which on one screen presents family members, apparently watching TV or singing home karaoke, while various scenes from their favorite DVDs play on a facing screen. Other works, employing a technique akin to Zhang Peili's, memorialize and subvert old films by reediting their rhetorical structure. *Is Bukharin a Traitor?* (2002), for example, constantly reiterates a scene from the 1939 Russian film *Lenin in 1918* (once a big hit in China), until the images deteriorate and only the titular question—asked on the soundtrack about one of Lenin's fellow revolutionaries—lingers on repetitively in the air.

Like many of his fellow New Chinese artists, Wang also makes considerable use of blatantly artificial staging. His *Spider I* (2004) and *Spider II* (2005) employ white porcelain masks, color lighting, and enigmatic stylized body movements to explore the psychological intricacies of corporate life in a mysterious high-tech environment. *The Flying Bird Is Motionless* (2006; page 170) presents mythic, ritualized combat scenes enacted on a theatrically lit stage set where players costumed in headbands and flowing white tunics engage each other with swords, bows, and spears.

*Dodge* (2006), a sculptural installation of sleek, over-size, plastic-looking humanoid figures tumbling down a rippled slope—matched with a red "tunnel" resembling the interior of a huge rectangular colon (or vagina)—takes its title and thematic cues from the accompanying video. The staged footage shows crowds of people in a limbo-like state of waiting, some singing karaoke to pass the time, suddenly intruded upon by doctors and nurses escorting a patient along the corridor, causing a waiting man to fall down a flight of stairs. Like Wang's earlier work *Square* (2003; page 171), which intercuts shots of people enjoying themselves in the present-day Tiananmen Square with flashbacks to the orchestrated rallies, troop revues, and marches of the recent past, the video implicitly questions whether benign neglect is not superior to mismanaged purposefulness.

Comic videos—especially animation works that use humor as a cover for acerbic social commentary—have become the trademark of Zhou Xiaohu (b. 1960), a native of Changzhou in Jiangsu Province and a grad-



Wang Jianwei, *Connection*, 1996



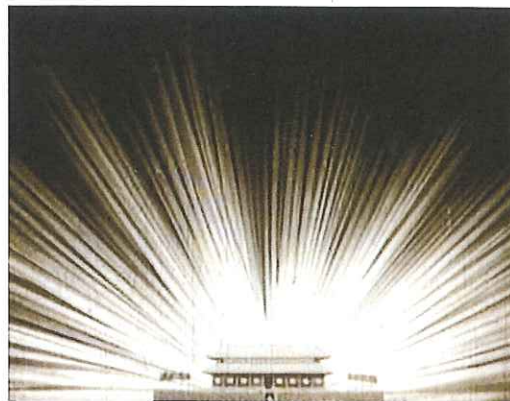
uate of the oil painting program at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. Working originally as graphic designer, he began applying computer technology to his independent art projects in 1997. The video installation *No Malice Intended* (1999), one of his early forays into critique, features two men, on separate monitors, talking about a woman who goes about her private bed-and-bath routine in oblivious silence on a third monitor.

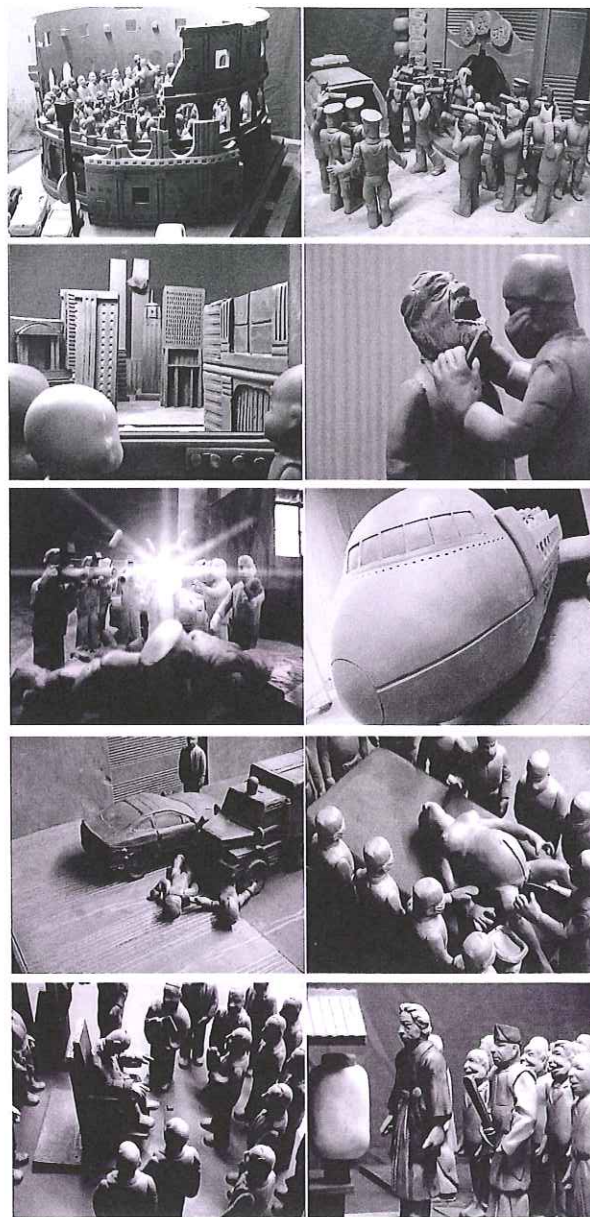
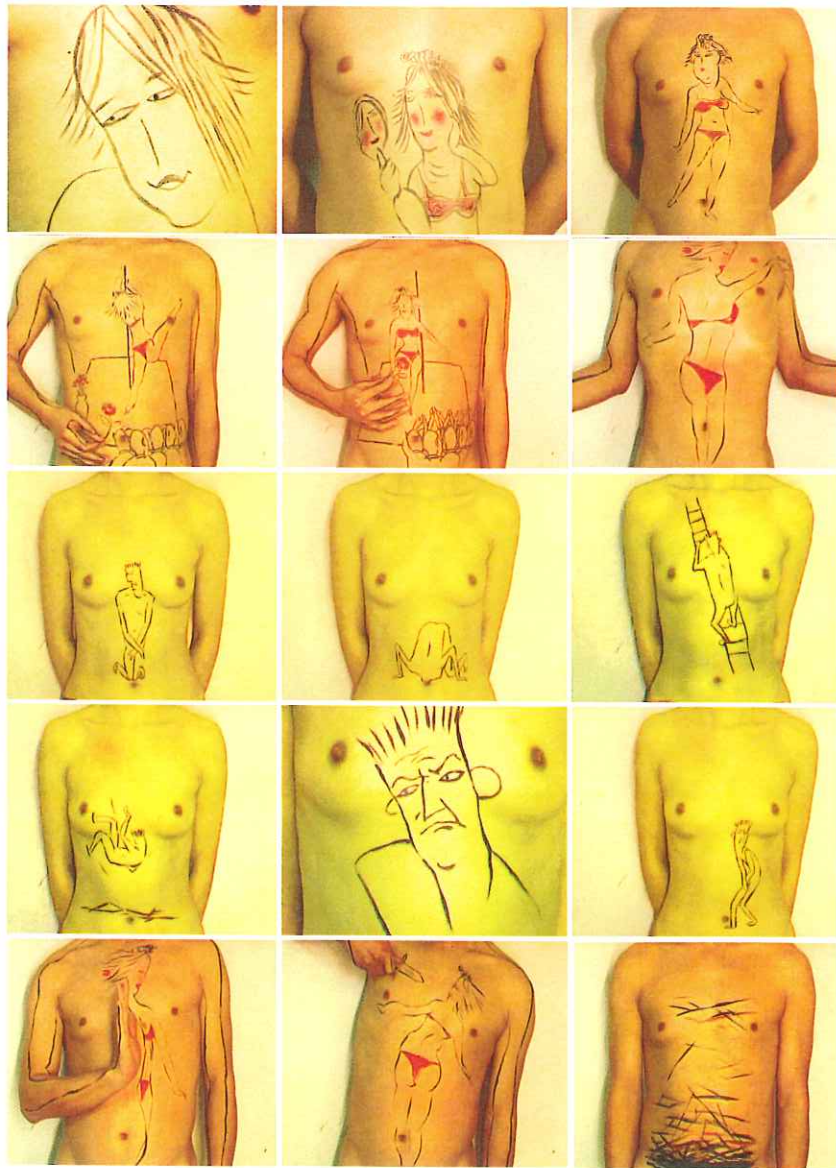
But Zhou came into his own—and has gained his greatest international notice—with stop-action works such as *The Goopy Gentleman* (page 172) and *Utopian Machine* (both 2002). The former, a broad satire of sexual preoccupations, centers on the nude torso of a man upon which a cartoon lady in a red bikini primps girlishly, pole dances, and accepts flowers from enamored fans. At times, the male torso morphs into a nude female torso hosting a naked male figure who climbs a ladder, clambors about the model's feminine contours and even sticks his head into her navel. *Utopian Machine*, in a shift from the elemental to the geopolitical, is a Claymation parody of the nightly TV news, replete with diplomatic exchanges, natural disasters,

crimes, a conference by the Long March Project, and scenes from the 9/11 attack.

Although Zhou still exhibits loosely painted figurative canvases (such as *Floater-Scenery* of 2006, showing a spread-armed man flying like a terrorist airliner toward the skyline of Shanghai), critical attention persistently gravitates to his videos. His torso-drawing technique turns up again in *Conspiracy* (2004), while *Crowd Around* (2005; page 173), an 11-minute compilation of Claymation shorts, zips through such subjects as Saddam Hussein, abortion, boxing, political assassination, and death by electric chair. In *Self Defense* (2006), a life-size female mannequin repeatedly trounces the men who accost her at every turn during an average day at the office. This “revenge of the sex object” theme is, in various guises, Zhou’s mischievous response to all forms of exploitive authority.

Wang Jianwei, *Square*, 2003





Zhou Xiaohu, *Crowd Around*, 2005. Mixed media, black & white animation video and color clay sculptures

## Born in the Media Age

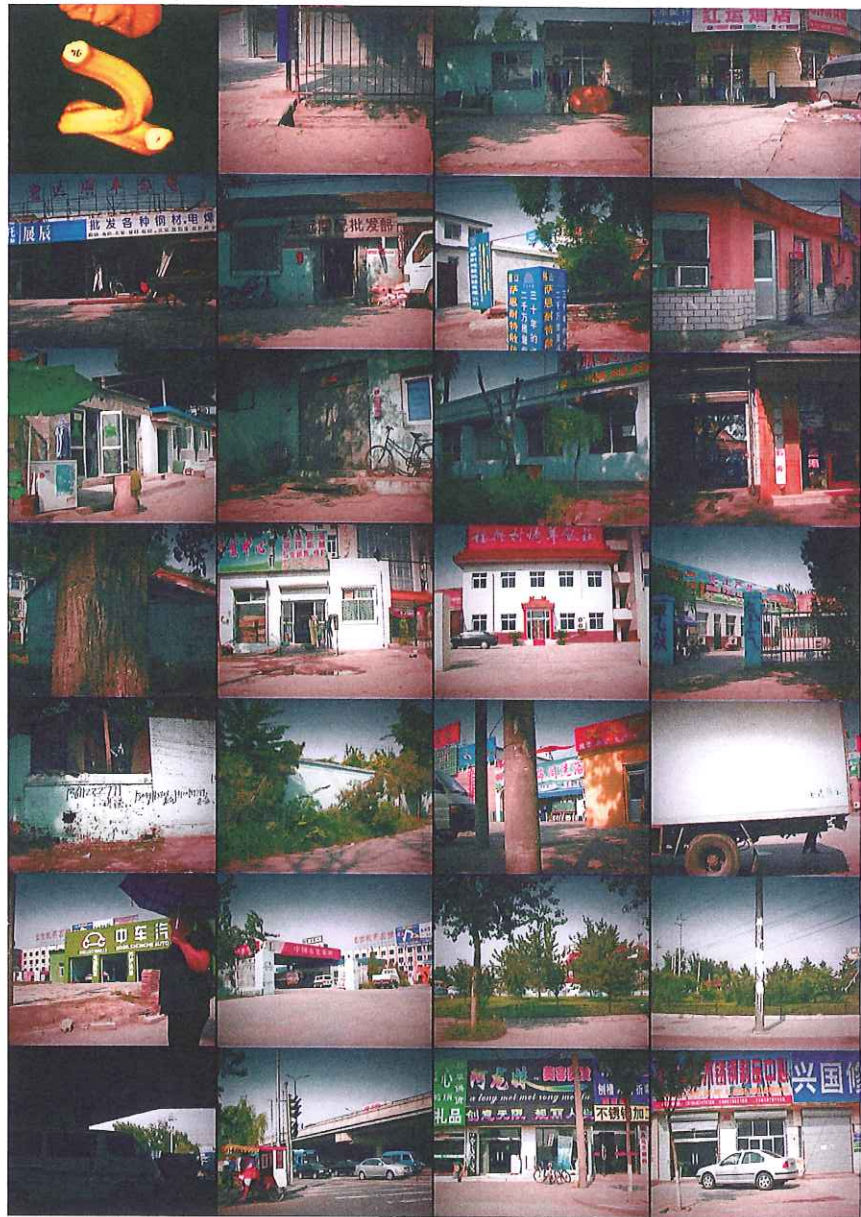
Feng Mengbo (b. 1966), who trained at the School of Arts and Crafts and the printmaking department of the Central Academy in his native Beijing, has undergone a remarkable aesthetic transformation, from familial sentiment to cyber-warrior swagger. Fascinated by new technology (his father was an engineer), he at first made oil paintings based on electronic screen images, such as his improbable pixelized double image of Mao Zedong hailing a cab (*Taxi! Taxi!*, 1994). But Feng's artistic identity was established internationally with the modest and heartfelt *My Private Album* (1996), a CD-ROM archive of extended-family photographs and documents.

By the following year, however, he had begun to apply computer-game technology to social issues, both historical and current. *Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy* (1997), created by hacking and reprogramming, melds the interactive video game *Doom* with clips from a film version of one of the Cultural Revolution's model



operas, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, in which a People's Liberation Army contingent pursues and ultimately destroys a band of Kuomintang fighters. *QU U* (2002; below) ups the ante with multiple self-portrait avatars—video camera in one hand and blazing rifle in the other—whom human players must blast away at in a variation of the super-violent *Quake III Arena*. Such works are sometimes installed with multiple screens linked to trigger devices that force participants to respond with their entire bodies in a kind of high-tech dance of death. Feng also plays obsessively online, engaging a worldwide community of gamers.

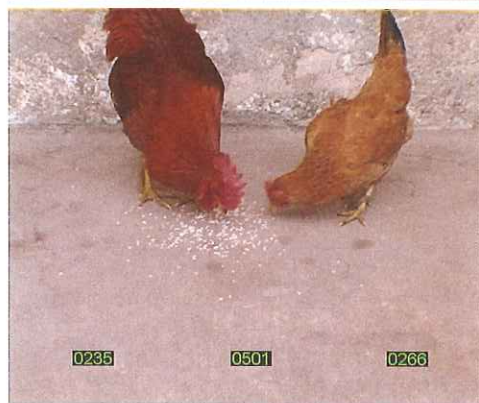
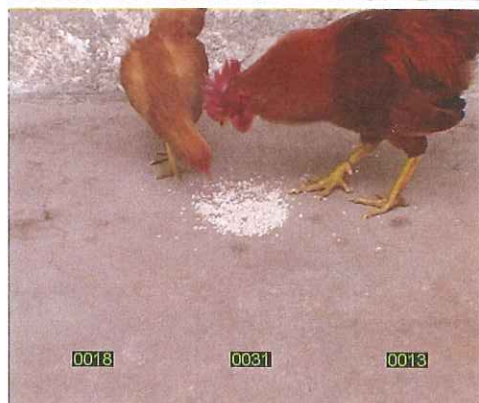
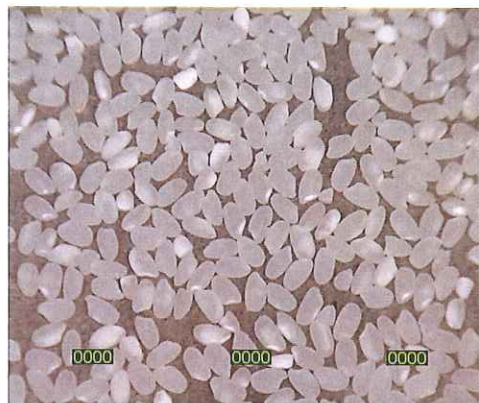
Yang Zhenzhong (b. 1968)—a Zhejiang Institute of Silk Technology graduate who also studied at the China Academy of Fine Arts, both in his native Hangzhou—is a sometime photographer and curator in addition to being a video artist resident in Shanghai. His photo series *Lucky Family* (1995–99) uses chickens as stand-ins for variously sized human families, from contemporary one-child couples to



Feng Mengbo,  
*Into the City*, 2004.  
Video stills



Yang Zhenzhong, 922 Rice  
Corns, 2000



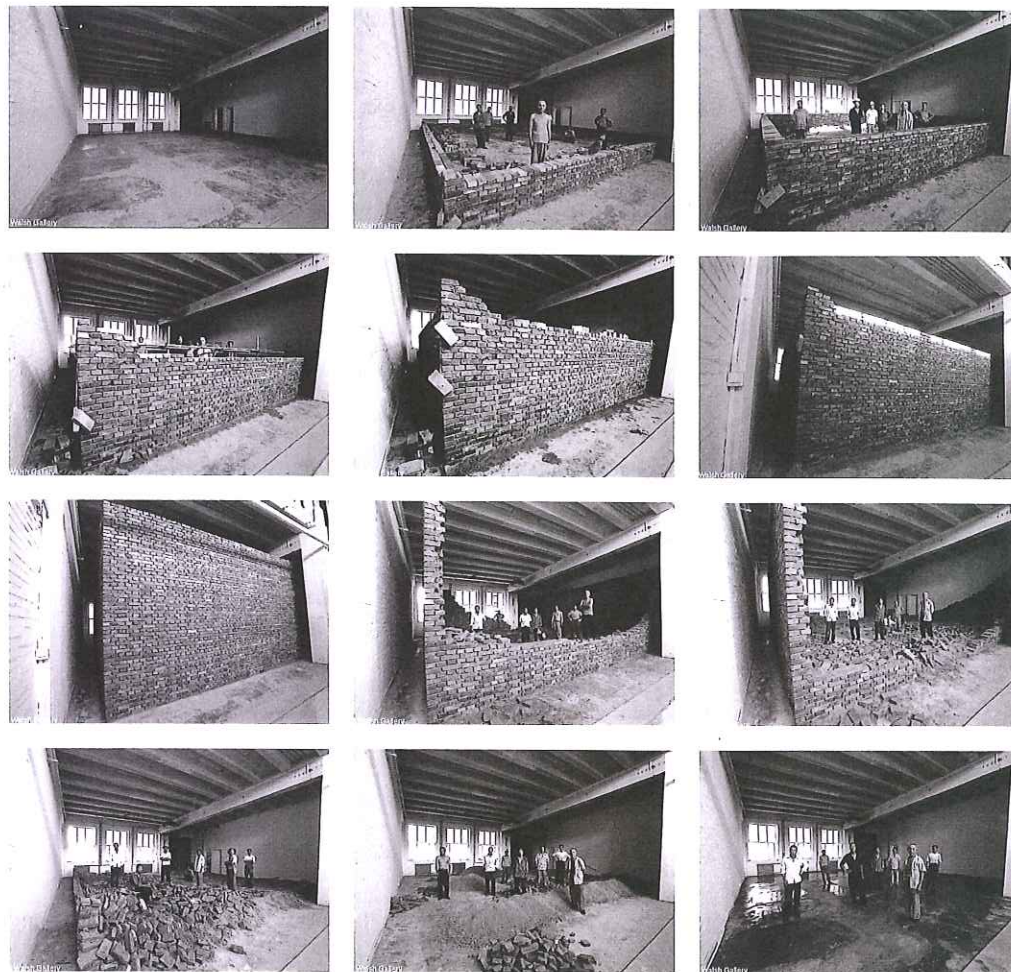




traditional big broods. The video *922 Rice Corns* (2000; page 177) gently skewers gender competitiveness. A rooster and a hen peck rice grains in a courtyard, while the voices of a man and a woman call out the respective running tallies, which are also shown in electronic counter strips at the bottom of the screen. Equally engaging but much more sympathetic to the human condition is the incisive (*I Know*) *I Will Die* video series, begun in Shanghai in 2000 and repeated in numerous international cities thereafter. In each installment, person after person—caught in their everyday surroundings and attire—looks straight into the camera and says the words “I will die.” The existentialist chestnut about the nobility of human consciousness (man being the only creature who

knows he will die) is thus given a highly diverse, realistic, and nuanced reading, even as the strategies people employ to enunciate that terrible truth—bravado, humor, embarrassment, dread, resignation, defiance—reveal its ultimate unacceptability.

Almost as if drawing back from the abyss, Yang then turned to making such comedic fare as *Let's Puff* (2002; page 176), whose pretty, tank-topped girl blowing mightily on one screen seems to physically disturb the city scene projected on another screen. In *Light as Fuck* (2001), the artist appears to balance the entire upside-down Shanghai skyline on his fingertip, and the photo series *Light and Easy* (2002) repeats that digital feat with a number of massively heavy



Wang Wei, *Temporary Space*, 2003



objects like an automobile, a traditional stone lion, and a Ronald McDonald sculpture.

The desire to make reality conform to one's wishes also may be the subtext of Yang's 2003 video *Spring Story*. Titled after a sentimental song by a popular People's Liberation Army singer, the compilation shows 1,500 cell-phone factory workers each saying one word or a short phrase from a famous speech made by Deng Xiaoping on his southern tour in spring 1992, when he articulated the state-capitalism policies that have since transformed China. The statement is thus reconstructed, assembly-line-fashion, by individuals who owe their way of life—mechanized but economically much improved—to its epochal content.

Wang Wei (b. 1972), a lifelong Beijing resident who graduated from the Central Academy, manifests an almost obsessive concern with confinement—physical, psychological, and social. Assigned a job as a photographer for the *Beijing Youth Daily*, he took a personal interest in the lives of the people—especially common people—he documented for the widely read publication. In *Post-Sense Sensibility* (1999), a seminal exhibition organized by artists Qiu Zhijie and Wei Meichen for an invited audience in a Beijing basement, Wang exhibited his first artwork, *1/30 of a Second Underwater*

(1998; page 178). The piece is a walkway of photo light boxes containing color close-ups of men's bubble-streaming heads underwater, their noses and fingers sometimes pressed against the transparent sheet upon which viewers tread, as the subjects enact struggles against drowning. (The show, which also included Zhu Yu's corpse-arm-and-rope *Pocket Theology* and Sun Yuan's *Honey*, with its dead face and fetus on ice, was in part a response to London's notorious 1997 Sensation exhibition.)

Wang's sculptural installation *70 Kilograms and 3.4 Square Meters* (2000) is a tall steel box, surrounded by bits of raw pig flesh, that evokes—via an internal soundtrack and video clips glimpsed through ragged punctures in the walls—a man struggling urgently to break out. *Hypocritical Room* (2002) is a movable tent-like chamber whose sides serve as screens for projections of the surrounding architecture—a shifting but always circumscribed chamber walled by the illusion of open space.

All of Wang's thematic and formal interests conjoin in *Temporary Space* (2003; page 179), which encompasses performance, installation, photography, and video. At the 25000 Transmission Center, a Long March Project venue in Beijing, the artist brought together ten brick scavengers (in this case, migrant workers displaced



Yang Fudong, *An Estranged Paradise*, 2002

from the town of Zhangjiakou). These enterprising laborers retrieve and clean old bricks from demolished buildings and sell them at the city's countless new construction sites for a profit of about \$5 a day. Over a period of three weeks, following Wang's directions, the workers amassed twenty thousand bricks and built, within the former industrial space of the art center, a roughly 1,100-square-foot, 13-foot-high structure without doors that confined visitors to the gallery's periphery—a fate reflecting the workers' own social marginalization. They then systematically dismantled the cryptlike edifice. It would be hard to conceive a more concise, concrete, and hauntingly visual meditation on the economic disparities, and constant physical and social disruptions, accompanying China's frantic urban growth.

More acidic in his provocations is Xu Zhen (b. 1977), a lifelong Shanghai resident who graduated from the city's School of Arts and Crafts in 1996 and made a name for himself on the art scene two years later with the art-action *Throwing a Cat*, in which he hurled a dead cat about a room for forty-five minutes, swinging it forcefully by tail or limb, until the carcass was shredded pulp—an event documented in his video *I'm Not Asking for Anything* (1998).

*Shouting* (1998) records the turn-and-look reactions (at once fearful, curious, and annoyed) of passing city crowds to a sudden, loud human cry. For *Art for Sale*, an exhibition he co-organized with Yang Zhenzhong and Fei Pingguo (also called Alexander Brandt), Xu made *From Inside the Body* (1999) which depicts a young couple trying to locate the source of a bad odor by sniffing their own bodies and each other, first clothed then unclothed, in a parody of heightening sexual arousal. In *Rainbow* (1998) a nude torso is struck repeatedly (though we do not see the actual blows), turning progressively redder until it approaches bruise-blue. Nothing fascinates Xu more than the elusive, it seems. A couple sitting in a boat in the black-and-white *We Are Right Back* (2001), unzip each other's pants but do no more than pull cosmetics, cigarettes and a lighter from their partner's crotches.

Over the years, Xu has created numerous installations that explore the issue of reality vs. representation, of contrasting truth as (or if) it exists versus the "truth" as it is reported by those with vested interests. *In just*

*the Blink of an Eye* (2005; page 180) is a recurring installation that features individuals posed as if in mid-fall, though actually supported by hidden braces. The video *18 Days* (2006) details the misadventures of Xu and friends as they attempt to "invade" neighboring countries, finally breaching Myanmar with an array of remote-control toys. His installation *It* (2007) features of a speck of dirt that, viewed through a microscope, discloses a replica of Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon—an event that conspiracy theorists allege was faked by the U.S. news media for Cold War advantage. Most ambitious of all, *8848 Minus 1.86* (2005) consists of "the summit of Mount Everest" in a huge refrigerated vitrine, accompanied by photos and a video showing Xu and his expedition team as they purportedly scale the world's tallest mountain and remove 1.86 meters of its peak, thus reducing its official 8848-meter height by the equivalent of Xu's body length (if one believes that Xu is over six feet tall).

Perhaps the key to Xu's shtick lies in the juxtaposition of three works: the video *Roadshow* (2000), in which he carries on like a maniacal pop singer; the photo series "Fought . . ." (2005–6), wherein he and his crew beat up iconic world figures (e.g., Bill Gates, Kofi Annan); and the video *An Animal* (2006), which shows a panda—the sentimental symbol of China—being jerked off by a handler in order to harvest semen for artificial breeding. That the totem animal of the world's most populous country is notoriously poor at procreation may be more than an easy joke here, recalling as it does China's relative impotence—until quite recently—in the geo-cultural arena. These three works, taken together, might well represent the dreams not just of Xu but of the contemporary Chinese avant-garde as a whole—personal celebrity, triumph over the West, and a pointed, though often superficially gleeful, critique of tradition and authority at home.

## Video Vedettes

Working in video, a medium in tune with the times and unburdened by tradition, gives an air of freshness and freedom to certain artists, who have quickly become prominent on the international scene. Yang Fudong (b. 1977) is the Chinese video artist everyone

# The First Intellectual

Yang Fudong,  
*The First Intellectual*, 2000.  
Photograph





Yang Fudong, *Honey*, 2003

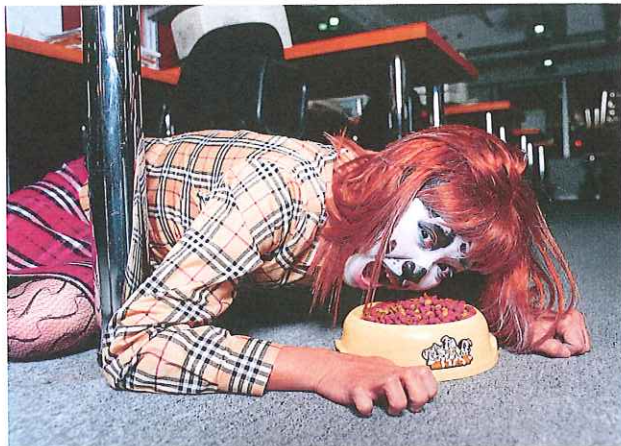


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Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest*, 2003

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Cao Fei, *Rabid Dogs*, 2002

"knows," even if they have heard of no other. He has had, for example, major appearances in Documenta (2002) and the Venice Biennale (2003, 2007). His work, like many of his actors, appeals by being good-looking and vaguely exotic, combining elements of Old China, Shanghai cinema of the 1930s, and MTV chic. Other frequently cited influences are the French New Wave and Jim Jarmusch. The exceptional depth and clarity of Yang's imagery is due in part to the fact that the majority of his pieces are shot on 35-mm film, then transferred to video for ease of display. Son of an army officer and raised in a military complex near Beijing, Yang studied at the preparatory school for the Central Academy but decided instead to attend the more liberal China Academy in Hangzhou. An oil painting major, he developed an interest in photography and film, and demonstrated experimental tendencies in his second year with the self-initiated project *Living in Another Space* (1992)—a silent, three-month performance during which he communicated only by writing on any available surface.

Returning to Beijing for three years, Yang in 1997 began production on his first film, *An Estranged Paradise*, shot mostly in Hangzhou and completed (with a score by a young Shanghai composer) in 2002 (page 181). The moody, black-and-white study concerns a young man, embroiled with his fiancée in that "heavenly" town during the rainy season, who feels himself afflicted by a vague, undiagnosable illness. The dialogue is sparse and oblique, the pacing glacial, and the atmosphere (the work's dominant element) one that blends social and physical changes with the protagonist's persistent ennui.

Yang moved to Shanghai in 1999 and worked for a time at a computer-game firm while he created numerous shorts of his own. *Backyard: Hey! Sun Is Rising* (2000) follows four contemporary young men who, for no apparent reason, carry swords and engage in quasi-rituals as they go about in an urban milieu. *City Light* (2000), in color, centers on a pair of robotically moving young businessmen engaged in activities



Cao Fei, *Cosplayers*, 2004



such as brandishing umbrellas, dancing with a young woman in a sun-drenched, hyper-new office, or acting like tough guys with guns on the streets at night.

Yang first gained wide recognition in China with a set of three color photographs, each labeled in English "The First Intellectual" (2000; page 183) and each showing a disheveled male yuppie, his face bloodied, clutching a brick to ward off his unseen attackers as he stands in the middle of an empty highway (clearly a fantasy) that leads to an office-towered cityscape. Like Wang Qingsong, whose *Night Revels of Lao Li* was produced the same year (pages 158–59), Yang is much concerned with the marginalization of contemporary Chinese intellectuals—a category that for him apparently includes artists and well-dressed young people from the new commercial elite. Is it a mere coincidence that Yang's subjects—like those of Wang, Zhen Guoguo, and Yang Yong—seem emotionally marooned? Lacking any real ability to affect society, they simply mark time. Their freedom from physical drudgery yields only a stylish anomie: a disconnection from the past, the world around them, and each other. Another photo series advises, *Don't Worry, It Will Be Better* (2000) in red, Barbara Kruger-style text slugs, but the color images—languid, dressed-up youths staring out of windows or looking blank-eyed at the viewer—belie the brave, ironic title. At least these youths live in a world far removed from that of the back-street hookers whom the artist portrays in their mundane, nonworking moments in the staged photos of his *Shenjia Alley* series (2000).

At times, Yang's preoccupation with vacuous beauty verges on self-parody. The color video *Flutter, Flutter . . . Jasmine, Jasmine* (2002) is a veritable three-screen music video, replete with two hip, impossibly attractive young lovers mugging emotional rapture and distress on a city rooftop. *Honey* (2003; page 184) is a kind of obscure detective story focused on pretty young people wearing odd clothes (e.g., a chain-smoking girl with cropped, red-dyed hair, attired in a golden faux-fur skirt or swank faux-military garb) as they lounge around a brightly furnished apartment.

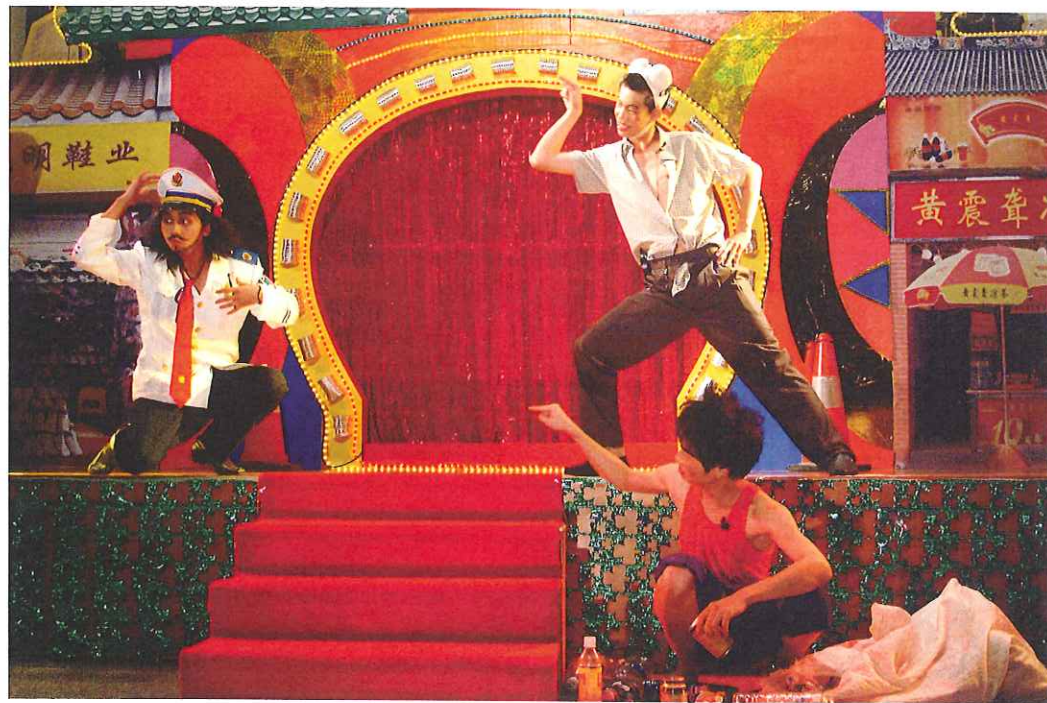
Yang's best-known work, the five-part, black-and-white *Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest* (2003; page 185), is billed as a modern-day take on the folk tales concerning the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove.

Yang's so-called intellectuals—more handsome, tight-lipped young things, posing in upscale clothes among the eerily scenic pine trees, rocks, streams, and hot springs of the Yellow Mountain preserve in Anhui Province—seem closer in spirit to an Abercrombie & Fitch cast than to the colorful third-century poets, scholars, generals, and philosophers who retreated from worldly affairs in the original tales. (Liu Ling, for instance, a hard-drinking poet given to receiving his guests in the nude, was trailed everywhere by a servant with a wine vessel and a shovel, ready to attend with equal promptness to his master's thirst or his death.) One looks in vain for such passion and wit among Yang's living mannequins. One of Yang's most recent works is a startling departure from glamour, affluence, and urban settings. *East of Que Village* (2007) observes, from a distance and in the bleak colors of the impoverished northern countryside in winter, the labor of peasants intermingled with—and visually echoed by—the scavenging of a pack of dogs. Are we witnessing the birth of a deeper social consciousness in the artist, spurred by the widening economic disparities and countless provincial displacements that attend China's new urban bonanza? Only time will tell.

With Cao Fei (b. 1978), a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in her native Guangzhou, such awareness is never far to seek. Indeed, she has assimilated the economic turmoil of the Pearl River Delta—south China's most rapidly industrializing, aggressively mercantile region—to such a degree that cultural disjunction pervades her work, even following her recent move to Beijing and her turn toward fantasy-laced new-media projects.

A vein of subdued eroticism runs through Cao's early works. *Talk without Speaking* (2001) features performers using the sign language of the deaf to convey bold statements and questions ("Do you make love with your daughter?"). *Dancing* (2001) concentrates on the rhythms of a partially disrobing female figure. And in *Public Space—Give Me a Kiss* (2002), a man stands by the roadside doing something between dance movements and gymnastics, and asking passers-by for a kiss.

Exposed to countless experimental films from abroad through the cinema club established by her male



companion, the writer, editor, filmmaker, and avant-garde gadfly Ou Ning (b. 1969), Cao turned broadly satiric in *Rabid Dogs* (2002; page 186), which shows young office workers made up with canine faces and decked out in various Burberry-plaid garments, as they cavort like dogs let loose in a modern office. The ridicule of ravenous consumerism and how it can cause subhuman behaviors among well-trained workers is heavy-handed but memorable.

*Burners* (2003) flirts with soft-porn fantasies, but it was followed immediately by more oblique examinations of identity challenges (and games) in contemporary China. The black-and-white *San Yuan Li* (2003)—with its fast-paced editing and driving techno-beat soundtrack—explores the jarring physical and social changes in a former village, once a base of resistance in the Opium Wars, now swallowed up in the urban sprawl (and modern-day drug problems) of Guangzhou.

Brightly colored and, at first blush, seemingly lighter at heart is *Cosplayers* (2004; pages 162–63, 187), which follows the fantasy enactments of young people who dress up like video-game characters and play out dreams of magical powers, mythic sexiness, and cathartic violence amid the mundanely surreal settings of real-life Guangzhou. The visual contrasts, especially with the players' own no-nonsense parents and their circumscribed, lower-middle-class lives, reveal the stifling discontent behind the costumed players' games. That bittersweet dynamic is echoed in *Milkman* (2005), which contrasts the daily reality of a deliveryman with his vivid aspiration to be a Beijing Opera performer.

Cao's work also extends to dance pieces and installations. For the second Guangzhou Triennial, she put together the experimental theater performance *PRD Anti-Heroes* (2006; above), in which bright sets, wacky

Cao Fei, *PRD Anti-Heroes*, 2005. Multi-media opera, Guangzhou Triennial



costumes, and exaggerated performances by a large cast were used to explore, agitprop fashion, the social and economic dislocations to which the Pearl River Delta populace is now subject. The humor was broad and the political sentiments daring by China's one-party standards. In 2006, at the Taipei Biennial, Cao spanned several generations and an ideological divide by inviting her father, well known for his heroic bronzes, to sculpt a clay bust while surrounded by some of his earlier portraits of Sun Yat-Sen (1866–1925), the first president of the Chinese republic and the universally acknowledged father of modern China. For the past several years she has taped Asian people of all ages in many different locales (including Guangzhou, Fukuoka, and New York) busting moves for her Hip Hop series, a paean to the liberating, culture-spanning power of physical joy.

When she won the Best Young Artist prize at the 2006 Chinese Contemporary Art Awards, Cao presented an installation of objects, photos, and video dealing with the daily reality and future-life fantasies of workers in a lightbulb factory in southern Guangdong Province. The piece, mounted at the Zendai Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai, pulled no punches in depicting the hard work and tough living conditions of the employees: a curtained bunk bed, for example, evoked dormitories in which the laborers live ten or twelve to a room, their personal possessions piled around them on mattresses and shelves. Yet Cao was equally objective in showing that the plant's working conditions are clean and the employees diligent and mutually cooperative—in part, perhaps, because the \$120 they make each month is an economic step up for these former country dwellers. In the dream-realization segments of the video *Whose Utopia? What Are You Doing Here?*



(2006; above and opposite), the workers form rock bands, dance in princess costumes, or discuss what an accompanying tabloid calls “a well-off life” for young couples: “rent an apartment, obtain the city’s household registration, buy a house, and raise some children.” (A slightly spicier version has a young woman returning to her home village one day with “sharp clothes and styled hair” to present her wealthy businessman beau to her family.)

Since early 2007, Cao has shifted much of her artistic activity online to the interactive realm of Second Life. There, operating under the name China Tracy, she has constructed the high-tech dystopia RMB City (which means roughly Money Town) and developed various soulful storylines with her foxy avatar. At the 2007 Venice Biennale, where she showed the cyber piece *i. Mirror*, she was one of four women artists repre-

senting China in its newly authorized national pavilion. Clearly, her eyes, like those of the factory workers in *Whose Utopia?* are turned toward the future. In the sequence of shots with which that video culminates—one earnest laborer-dreamer after another staring steadfastly back at the lens—we return, in a sense, to the Big Faces that announced the emergence of China’s post-Mao avant-garde. But much has changed. Cao’s headshots are not iconic visages blown up to assert that personal autonomy has displaced patriotic regimentation and the cult of Mao. Rather, they are the living countenances—imperfect, nuanced, questioning, hopeful—of real people confronting what we might call, paraphrasing Geng Jiyi, a “third situation”: that of the roiling New China of the twenty-first century.