

**the
poplar
tree and
mirror**



Li Ming [李明], *The Afternoon on June 1*, 2013, Single-channel video with sound, 38:47 min., Courtesy of the artist and Video Bureau

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)

The Poplar Tree and Mirror

Selected from the archives of Video Bureau,
ISCP institution-in-residence

April 25 - May 23, 2014

Artists:

Huang Xiaopeng, Li Ming, Ma Qiusa, Zhang Peili and
Zhou Tao

Curator:

Howie Chen

Foreword

This publication accompanies the exhibition *The Poplar Tree and Mirror*, an exhibition of work selected from the archives of Video Bureau, a non-profit organization established in 2012 in Beijing and Guangzhou that provides a platform to exhibit, organize and archive video art. At this moment, 25 artists are included in the archive, mostly from China. Video Bureau has recently expanded to work with international video artists.

Since 2011, ISCP has hosted an institution-in-residence as part of Open Studios. This annual residency was originated in the same ethos as ISCP's residency program, and supports cultural exchange by bringing an international perspective into a local context. Both 98weeks (Beirut) and Clark House Initiative (Mumbai) have been in residence at ISCP in past years of this initiative, and it's a privilege to host Video Bureau this year. As part of this collaborative residency, ISCP and Video Bureau invited New York-based curator Howie Chen to China to research Video Bureau's archives on-site, resulting in the *The Poplar Tree and Mirror*. Conversely, Sue Hui, Video Bureau's archivist travelled to ISCP and introduced the project to New York City audiences.

I would like to immensely thank Video Bureau's founders Zhu Jia, Chen Tong and Fang Lu for enthusiastically sharing their time and ideas and for hosting Howie Chen in China. It has been a great pleasure to work with Howie, and the artists in his exhibition: Huang Xiaopeng, Li Ming, Ma Qiusa, Zhang Peili and Zhou Tao. Sue Hui has carefully organized many of the logistics of the residency, along with ISCP's Shinnie Kim, Roberto Jamora and Jessica Chu. Lastly, my gratitude goes to Xiaofei Mo and Meiya Cheng who contributed their knowledge of China towards the realization of this residency.

Kari Conte, Director of Programs and Exhibitions

The Poplar Tree and Mirror

The video works in *The Poplar Tree and Mirror* concern social causality in contemporary Chinese and global culture at large. Chains of events are set in motion everyday: a decision is made, an action performed, the contingent effects registered on others. How does one negotiate these social outcomes, especially when transformative political and economic forces drive them?

Through varying subjects, the video works in this exhibition intimate an uneasy reality in which one attempts to locate human agency in these causal chains. It is evident in the irreversible breaking of a mirror. The struggle to form an athletic body. The defiant misuse of our consumer landscape. The inherent violence of cultural transformation. The unexpected decentering of everyday cynicism.

The Poplar Tree and Mirror is an exhibition of video works by Chinese contemporary artists selected from the research archives of Video Bureau, a not-for-profit organization established in 2012 in Beijing and Guangzhou that provides a platform to exhibit, organize and archive video art.

On view at ISCP is work by five artists from China representing a concise generational cross-section of video art making. Artists included in this exhibition are Huang Xiaopeng (黃小鵬), Li Ming (李明), Ma Qiusha (馬秋莎), Zhang Peili (張培力), and Zhou Tao (周滔). This exhibition is curated by Howie Chen (陳旭峰).

April snow falls in Beijing every year. A blizzard of white down chokes the city, creating itinerant drifts that never melt but instead invade every building interior and facial cavity.

Since the end of World War II, over 120 million poplar trees have been planted throughout Beijing as a mass government initiative to green the appearance of the city and to control the spontaneous dust storms that plague the urban region. The introduction of these non-native trees intensified in the 1960s both in Beijing and at the edges of the Gobi Desert where phalanxes of poplars stood against the creeping advance of lifeless arid sand. Known for their trembling leaves, these tall aspen and cottonwood poplars were part of a fateful decision.

Given their superior adaptive qualities to climate and soil conditions, female poplars were chosen as the dominant roadside tree in Beijing. The resulting gender imbalance of the trees has yielded unexpected consequences for the city and its inhabitants. Every spring, millions of female trees shed their floating petalless flowers into the sky, muffling the landscape with snowy white catkins that drift in the hazy city air and gather in sidewalk corners. For many people, the seasonal attire for April snow is the facial surgical mask to combat allergies caused by the airborne flower and its confluence with sand and other pollen.

Recently, another mass effort is afoot to control the city environment and the polluting effects of the ubiquitous poplar catkin. This includes administering costly sterilizing shots to each tree in Beijing as a type of birth control. The other solution is a 'transsexual' surgery that grafts male branches onto a female trunk. The causal history of the poplar tree in China continues as each human intervention starts a new chain of events that have direct physical and social effects on everyone.

Against this backdrop, Zhang Peili's seminal *30x30* (1988) video in which the artist repeatedly breaks a glass mirror and painstakingly reassembles its increasingly fractured shards reflects this narrative — there is no turning back. Once the tree is planted and the mirror is broken, the effects are often irreparable and full of monstrous beauty. When *30x30* debuted at the important Huangshan Conference on Modern Art in 1988¹, the work presented a performative and visual metaphor for the nascent mass media transformation in China, responding to both the arrival of television in homes and its eventual effect on artistic practice. At the time, the possibilities of this technology rested in the physical access to video equipment and the ability to experiment with the perceptual effects specific to the medium. Securing a camera loan from the local customs bureau, Zhang shot what is widely considered China's first video art work on the bureau's premises. It deconstructs the novel potential of video by showing the mundane administration of reality. Clocking in at three hours (the default length of a video tape), *30x30* pushed a non-illusionistic, temporal experience of video as the very subject of the work.

Two decades later, Ma Qiusha presented a very different temporality in *Embrace* (2011), a video that features divers at an Olympic training school for girls in Beijing. Recorded in slow motion, the divers are seen in perpetual free fall and rotation — their bodies fold and twist in relation to a world unmoored. Despite these conditions, Ma attempts to locate a sense of presence and agency in these subjects: "The suspended partial body movement and the facial expressions are as if they are making an effort to welcome the unknown world that they will fall into. Children, the main characters of the video, are ready to fall out of the picture, with their earnest, positive, brave and hopeful attitude."² In *Embrace*, the divers' bodies strain against gravity and an athletic discipline seeking to form them. These coercive demands have effects on the individual.

¹ A high-profile gathering of artists and critics. The presentations featured in the Huangshan Conference that year marked the inception of conceptual art and the passing of the New Wave art movement in China. Robin Peckham. "In Search of the Alluring: The Art of Zhang Peili", November, 2011, <http://leapleapleap.com/2011/11/in-search-of-the-alluring-the-art-of-zhang-peili>.

² Ma Qiusha, *Embrace* (2011) Artist statement; available from Video Bureau.



Zhang Peili (張培力), *30 x 30*, 1988, Single-channel video with sound, 31:53 min., Courtesy of the artist and Video Bureau



Ma Qiusa (馬秋莎), *Embrace*, 2011, Single-channel video with sound, 2:36 min., Courtesy of the artist and Video Bureau

In *one day (changsha)* (2010), Zhou Tao offers a different cultural subject — himself as a lone performer in China's newly naturalized consumer landscape. For the day-long performance, the artist uses a busy supermarket in his hometown, Changsha, as staging for his everyday home activities, making the store into his domestic space and the merchandise his personal property. "Since almost all everyday items are from there, why not live in the supermarket?", asks Zhou.³ *one day (changsha)* (2010) follows Zhou as he uses the supermarket as if it were his home. He eats his meals from the food shelves, changes his clothes using stuff from the apparel section, grooms himself with available toiletry products, entertains himself with television from the electronics department, and finally makes his bed in the middle of a busy shopping aisle. Throughout the video, supermarket employees and shoppers remain indifferent to Zhou's unusual 'consumer' behavior, implicitly allowing him to continue his day. In appropriating the consumer landscape for his use, he demonstrates a slacker agency that reveals a heteronymous relationship between stealing and consuming in capitalism.

"I was wondering at the moment, what would happen today? I wasn't feeling anything yet. Would I feel anything later?", wonders the narrator in the opening scene of Li Ming's *The Afternoon on June 1* (2013). Mercurial shifts in performer roles and relationships unfold in Li's video in which the artist and his friends (Yang Junling and Lin Ke) make an ad hoc video featuring an older unemployed actress who they encounter in front of the Beijing Film Studio. Filmed in a nearby park where abandoned nuclear plants and ancient pagodas dot the horizon, the video shows the subjects acting out unscripted scenes, loosely based on a narrative of an incestuous relationship between a mother and her sons. What begins in the register of a puerile prank evolves into a complex play of fiction and reality, as these elements soon become indistinguishable to the viewer and the

³ Zhou Tao, *one day (changsha)* (2010) Artist statement; available from Video Bureau.

subjects in the video. Each scene begins to parallel different realities for the performers. For example, the actress's real life relationship with her son, which is revealed later in the video, perversely mirrors the physical interaction between the young men and her character. A surprising reversal in power dynamics happens late in the video as the cast trespasses on the site of an abandoned nuclear silo. The emboldened actress takes the camera and reveals artist Li as a visible performer, no longer the detached director and eye. In this transition, the young men show their vulnerability when they confront the actress's true fearless abandon.

Social antagonisms have different intensities. The latent social violence concealed in bodily and semantic language is the subject of Huang Xiaopeng's *Murder is a Situation* (2006-11). Set in the streets of his birthplace, Shanxi, the video shows a street scene in slow motion so that each movement made by the pedestrians is dramatized in detail. Loaded with implied social tensions, reminiscent of Jeff Wall's cinematographic photo-transparency *Mimic* (1982), the video is soundtracked with a manipulated slow-tempo version of Snoop Dogg's infamous "Murder was the Case" (1995). The lyrics are subtitled both in Chinese and English with both texts having been processed through automatic fast translation software often used in international communication and the pirated DVD trade. Paired with a moving image, the lyric mistranslations produce new confusions and political valences.

Huang asks, "Can we grasp the true meaning of a translation if we do not understand fully the 'other's' culture? Can a whole culture be based on idealizing and emulating another? And, is cultural transformation possible? My video and public installation work explores the inevitable dislocation as a consequence of translating, copying and transforming... Much of my work plays with the idea of a



Zhou Tao (周滔), *one day (changsha)*, 2010, Single-channel video with sound, 26:25 min., Courtesy of the artist and Video Bureau



Huang Xiaopeng (黄小鹏), *Murder is a Situation*, 2006-11, Single-channel video with sound, 6:08 min., Courtesy of the artist and Video Bureau

'Chinese Whisper' between languages through the method of translation and testing the boundaries of meaning. At what point do the multiplying translations begin to lose any sense in either of the languages?"⁴

How do we recuperate this sense of loss? In psychological and philosophical theories, social causality seeks to attribute cause and responsibility to social events that involve physical dimensions. The struggle in causal reality is to locate human agency, first understanding the world and later 'acting' freely in it. Finding ourselves caught in the April snow in Beijing, we can begin to understand it as a version of reality with great social and historical complexity — involving us.

We break off a branch of poplar catkins.
A hundred birds sing in the tree.
Lying beneath it in the garden,
We talk to each other,
Our tongues in each other's mouth.

From "All Year Long" (Anonymous, Six Dynasties)

— Howie Chen, 2014

⁴ Huang Xiaopeng, *Murder is a Situation* (2006-11) Artist statement; available from Video Bureau.

Video Bureau was initiated by Zhu Jia, Libreria Borges Institute for Contemporary Art and Fang Lu and aims to provide a platform to exhibit, organize and archive video art. The mission of Video Bureau is to collect and organize artworks of video artists in order to build a comprehensive and searchable database for researchers, students and collectors. As an institute open to the public, every two months Video Bureau features two artists' video works, and hosts related events, such as artist talks, discussions and symposiums.

Howie Chen is a New York-based curator involved in collaborative art production and research. Chen is a founder of Dispatch, a curatorial production office and project space founded in New York City, later transitioning to a peripatetic exhibition model. His past curatorial experience includes organizing exhibitions and programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art and MoMA P.S.1 among other international institutions.

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