



Group photo after *MAAP in Beijing—Moist* opening, 2002. The dinner at Chama Gundao restaurant was generously sponsored by the owner, Chinese artist Fang Lijun. Front row from left: Young-Hae Chang (2nd), Marc Voge (5th), Jin Hua (6th); from right: Kim Machan (6th), Pi Li (5th), Wang Gongxin (4th), Paul Bai (3rd), Chen Shaoxiong (2nd), Zhang Peili (1st). Back row from left: Johan Pijnappel (1st), Ian Mott (2nd), Alex Galloway (4th), Ma Gang (5th), Tim Plaisted (6th), Peter Callas (8th), Bernd Lindermann and Manfred Wolf-Plottegn (7th & 9th), Stuart Coop (10th); from right: Wang Peng (1st), Zhu Jia (2nd), Takuji Kogo (4th), Julianne Pierce (5th) and Justine Cooper (6th).

2002年“润化” 参展艺术家及相关人员集体合影。摄于茶马古道餐厅，晚餐由餐厅东主及知名艺术家方力钧先生慷慨赞助。前排左起：张英海（第二），马克·沃治（第五），晋华（第六），前排右起：金曼（第六），皮力（第五），王功新（第四），白浦（第三），陈劲雄（第二），张培力（第一）。后排左起：约翰·潘艾珀（第一），伊恩·莫特（第二），阿莱克斯·加洛维（第四），马刚（第五），汤姆·普拉斯特德（第六），皮特·卡拉斯（第八），本德·林德曼与曼费伊德·沃夫·普罗特根（第七、九），斯图沃特·库普（第十）；后排右起：王蓬（第一），朱加（第二），古乡卓司（第四），朱莉安·皮叶斯及佳丝汀·库玻（第六）。

## On curating media art between China and Australia since the 1990s

Kim Machan

The news that Zhang Peili's painting *Flying Machine* (1994) had been donated to the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) was remarkable, not only because of the finite number of paintings that Zhang produced in the 1980s and early 1990s, but also because this particular painting had never been exhibited and was said to have been lost.<sup>1</sup> Adding to its exclusive nature, the work is one of the last paintings the artist made before turning to concentrate on video and electronic media; it is therefore a significant transitional marker in his practice. There was clear logic, then, in preparing a proper context for the painting's arrival in Canberra. The exhibition *Zhang Peili: From Painting to Video* activated several well-known video artworks to bracket the painting, with one work preceding the painting by six years, while others were as recent as 2012.

To expand the context of this exhibition, I would like to describe some early art exchanges and experiences I had in China as a curator of video and media art. While this certainly isn't a full or systematic account of events, it is an attempt to sketch a backstory reminding us that exhibitions are much more than temporal events or products: exhibitions are resting points in shared conversations and relationships. Here, Zhang Peili's practice is brought into focus not only to share his artistic accomplishments but also to counter a recurrent amnesia patterning overlooked histories of artistic exchange between China and Australia. This account goes some way in explaining how the artworks in *Zhang Peili: From Painting to Video* were eventually assembled; how previous large museum projects in China thread into new, concentrated and challenging curatorial

projects in Australia; how the flow of art and artists between China and Australia has been steadily navigated; and how the existing works of an artist like Zhang Peili can be read in new contexts and new iterations.

My first exposure to Zhang Peili's work in an exhibition was in 1999, at the Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, at the Queensland Art Gallery, in Brisbane. With his painting practice having already been shelved for five years, the work *Endless Dancing* (1999) demonstrated his sculptural, cool and interrogative approach to media and subject.<sup>2</sup> Stepping inside the circle of eight monitors was a compelling experience, and a strong vector to an area of conceptual video art practice that I would soon follow back to China. These were early days, when it was still uncommon to see Chinese video and media art practice, not only overseas but in China, too. There were few opportunities to view video art at exhibitions, making studio visits and artists' networks the best entry points into the field. In Australia, however, there were chances to see some of Zhang Peili's first video works. For example, Zhang's single-channel video *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (1991) and his early video installation *Operation No. 1* (1992) were brought to Australia in the 1993 exhibition *Mao Goes Pop*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.<sup>3</sup> The next opportunity was in the 1998 Sydney Biennale, curated by Jonathan Watkins, who included the three-channel video installation *Eating* (1997).<sup>4</sup> In late 1997, *Eating* became the first contemporary artwork by a Chinese artist to be acquired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.<sup>5</sup>

In 2000, an international masterclass of new media art was held in Brisbane for artists and curators to exchange ideas, present work and develop collaborations.<sup>6</sup> Although Zhang Peili was not involved, another Chinese artist working conceptually with video art and installation was. Wang Gongxin's critical approach and insider position were evident in his first-hand accounts of Chinese art and artists. He shared his excitement about the emerging 'new media' art scene, including Zhang Peili's work, and the department of new media that Zhang had been asked to establish at the China Academy of Art, in Hangzhou. This developing rapport was also greatly enhanced by the presence of Brisbane-based Chinese Australian artist Paul Bai. Where language or meaning might have been uncertain, Bai from that time forward participated in the unfolding relationships and projects, enabling clear understanding and a sense of trust.

Wang Gongxin returned to Beijing in June 2000 and enlisted the then emerging Chinese curator Pi Li to curate a video programme for the annual arts festival of MAAP (then known as Multimedia Art Asia Pacific); the festival was scheduled to open just three months later, at the Brisbane Powerhouse Centre for Live Arts.<sup>7</sup> Pi swiftly freighted his selection of single-channel videos and interactive CD-ROM works to Brisbane. Remarkably, over half of the programme had been completed that year, some works just weeks before being screened in Brisbane. For a number of works, it was the first time they would be screened outside of China. The single-channel works included *Lady's* (2000) by Cui Xiuwen, *Fly Fly* (1997) by Jiang Zhi, *City Light* (2000) by Yang Fudong, *Ping Pong* (2000) by Qiu Zhijie, *Ma Gen Ma* (2000) by Feng Xiaoying, *Related to the Situations* (1999) by Hu Jieming, *Body* (2000) by Wu Ershan, and *Fly* (1999) and *Karaoke* (2000) by Wang Gongxin. In hindsight, perhaps even more impressive was the inclusion of interactive CD-ROM works such as *West West* (2000) by Qiu Zhijie, *Landscape III* (1999) by Chen Shaoxiong and *Seven* (2000) by Shi Qing, all of which are seldom seen today. The works that would be compiled in Brisbane arrived individually in a wide assortment of VHS tapes, mini-DV cassettes and CD-ROM discs. While a bulky package of electronic files by today's standards, the portability of video was then revolutionary, and responded perfectly to many artists' drive to have their work seen outside of China.

In April 2001, I travelled to China on a mission to return the artists' works and conduct research through studio visits in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou—the last specifically to meet Zhang Peili.<sup>8</sup> The trip was an opportunity to see as much work as possible at a time when exhibitions were generally held at short notice, in unexpected venues and sometimes for only a day or two. The Ministry of Culture had just issued a decree to all local authorities to crack down on exhibitions and performances that were 'disturbing social order, public morality, and the spiritual health and physical health of the people'.<sup>9</sup> The general political mood was quite tense, particularly in Beijing; it was the year leading up to the anticipated decennial leadership transfer of presidential power, in this case from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao.

Beginning in Beijing, I was able to meet Pi Li for the first time, as well as many of the artists who had exhibited work in Brisbane. Besides returning their works, I had been invited by Wang Gongxin to present Australian video artworks at the Loft New Media Art Space,<sup>10</sup> a chic and somewhat clandestine backroom space within the Loft restaurant, a contemporary New York-style establishment



in Sanlitun, Chaoyang District. This highly active venue held exhibitions, talks and publication launches; it hosted curators, artists, theorists, writers and experimental musicians, both local and international. It was the kind of venue where artists and those interested in art could be assembled at short notice, for a screening or for a talk by a guest from out of town or overseas who may not have pre-announced their visit. Thanks to Wang Gongxin's networks, the audiences at the Loft were highly relevant and attentive, and often surprisingly large. The great energy and sense of urgency in the contemporary art community in Beijing were also apparent, though expressed differently, in Shanghai and in Hangzhou, the city where Zhang Peili lived, worked and taught. While Beijing pulsed with ambitious artists and a sense of danger from the authorities, Shanghai's mercantile characteristics seemed to overshadow art, whereas Hangzhou had a feeling of remoteness and autonomy.

It was in late April 2001 that I first visited Zhang Peili's Hangzhou studio, to view back-to-back single-channel videos. I can still recall the sensation of this first viewing, progressing chronologically, cartridge by cartridge, through Zhang's library of works, the moving image produced by a chunky CRT monitor connected to a rather ordinary VHS unit that gobbled, played and spat out the tapes in succession. I remember being surprised by *30 x 30* (1988) and mesmerised by *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (1991). The works continued: *Water: Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary* (1991), *Focal Distance* (1996) and *Uncertain Pleasure I* (1996)—the last, a four-channel, twelve-monitor work, shown in sequential samples on a single monitor. Although I wasn't able to speak Chinese, Zhang Peili patiently showed me sketchbooks with diagrams of how the works should be installed, and was extremely hospitable and generous with his time.

After viewing the works in Zhang's studio, we went to the China Academy of Art, where he was establishing the New Media Art Centre, and there I was introduced to video curator Wu Meichun.<sup>11</sup> Besides being the co-curator, with Qiu Zhijie, of *Image and Phenomenon* in 1996—considered China's first video art exhibition—Wu would later become the centre's director.<sup>12</sup> I had already heard of Wu, having met with Qiu Zhijie in Beijing, earlier in the research tour, where he gave me publications they had produced that translated key texts about the history of video art. Qiu also mentioned their collaborative curatorial work on video art projects in Hangzhou and his increasingly outrageous 'happenings' created under the banner of 'post-sensibility' in Beijing.

## Focal distance

As a result of this research tour, Wu Meichun's video programme was exhibited in MAAP's Excess media art festival, at its main venue, the Brisbane Powerhouse, in October 2001.<sup>13</sup> The programme included Zhang Peili's *Focal Distance* (1996), presented as I had previewed it in his studio, as a single-channel work, though conventionally known as an eight-channel monitor installation. *Focal Distance* and Yang Zhenzhong's single-channel video *I Will Die* (2001) were exhibited on separate, dedicated CRT monitors, set on plinths, looped to play continuously in the public lounge areas of the Powerhouse's riverside building. Wang Gongxin returned to Brisbane to attend the opening and to install two of his works: *The Prayer* (2001), a single-channel video projection, also in the Powerhouse, and *My Sun* (2001), a three-channel video projection, at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, with the support of the Institute of Modern Art.

During this visit, Wang Gongxin optimistically encouraged me to move the MAAP festival to Beijing the following year. He believed it would be possible to realise the exhibition with local institutional support, and even direct sponsorship from the Chinese government, through the Chinese International Exhibition Agency—and this was the case. I assumed the underlying reason for official support was the Chinese government's aspiration to participate in all aspects of the international transformation of global economies through digital culture. Promoting China's progressive contemporary digital and new media culture was just as important as promoting other tech-savvy sectors, such as medicine, transport, energy and space exploration. Considering the open conflict between artists and the government, both sides were motivated to collaborate under the banner of new media art. Zhang Peili was by this time working exclusively with video and new media platforms, though, as revealed in many interviews and conversations, he was interested in a way to break free of subjectivity, and to explore and experiment in other media. This interest saw many of Zhang Peili's video installations reinterpreted and modified as technologies evolved; some works were updated with new hardware and software enabled by digital file formats.

## Broadcasting at the same time

Zhang Peili was one of the first artists confirmed to produce a project for the *MAAP in Beijing 2002: Moist* media art exhibition, which eventually took place in October 2002, at the Art Museum of China Millennium Monument.<sup>14</sup> With



the help and guidance of Wang Gongxin, Pi Li, Fan Di'an, Li Taihuan and Wang Yudong, the first major museum exhibition and symposium of new media art in China were brokered, expanding exhibition contexts and improving exhibition technical support for artists.<sup>15</sup> Besides the 1,000-square-metre main exhibition space, a unique feature of the Millennium Monument was a screen comprising fifty-six LCD monitors, stacked four high and fourteen across, curving in a thirty-one-metre-long arc, forming the largest high-definition screen in China at the time. Recognising its potential, Zhang experimented with the technology, reprogramming an existing work to insert an Orwellian cacophony into a most symbolic and significant building. *Broadcasting at the Same Time* (2002) played through a chequerboard wall of newsreaders, switching in and out as they announce their equivalent of 'Good morning, this is the news', sampled from over fifty countries, in a cross-hatched myriad of languages. The sea of voices played through the state-of-the-art sound system, combined with the array of faces and the overwhelming screen size, was dizzying, comical and ultimately ominous. In the original work, made two years earlier, twenty-six inward-facing monitors form a circle, surrounding the viewer with the newsreaders' greetings. Serial formats are often employed in Zhang Peili's work; whether in a circular or linear space, whether circular or linear in time, the rules are applied and repeated to deconstruct and reconstruct language, imagery and meaning. His work at the Millennium Monument was no exception.

During the official opening days in Beijing, I was asked to conduct guided tours, initially for officials from the Ministry of Culture but subsequently for a surprising collection of other officials as well. I recall conducting a succession of tours with six to eight people in each, introduced as being from the Ministries of Communication, Science, Health and Transport, among others. A remarkable opportunity for cultural diplomacy had appeared; however, because there had been little notice before the entourage of high-level government representatives arrived, their Australian counterparts were unfortunately absent.

To bring further context to the exhibition in Beijing, it is useful to bear in mind the status quo. At that time, the Chinese government, through the Ministry of Culture, closely monitored public exhibitions, requiring state-run institutions to submit detailed applications—providing images and text for all exhibiting artists and their works—before approval could be granted for an exhibition.<sup>16</sup> It was well known that government sensitivities towards artistic expression were strongest in Beijing; cultural activities in cities to the south such as Shanghai, Hangzhou

and Guangzhou enjoyed more relaxed conditions. The *MAAP in Beijing 2002: Moist* exhibition embodied an important moment: it was able to inhabit a first-tier government-approved exhibition space with artworks that greatly extended the parameters of accepted art practice in China. This was, after all, the very monument that Jiang Zemin had constructed during his presidential term to be the domestic and international focus of China's millennial celebrations, and which he personally unveiled just before midnight on 31 December 1999.

Zhang Peili's wall of high-definition monitors was one of a raft of experimental digital media artworks in the exhibition. Another using the same wall was the *Web of Life* (2002) by Jeffrey Shaw and others.<sup>17</sup> Through the interactive process of scanning the viewer's hand, an algorithmically selected sequence of images was generated across the fifty-six-monitor screen. The first live internet artwork seen in a museum setting in China, this was networked with ZKM in Karlsruhe, ISEA in Nagoya and Emoção Art.ficial in São Paulo. *Call 13641041729* (2002) by Wang Peng adopted a different approach to network technology by inviting the audience to telephone the eponymous mobile phone number, thereby activating a data projector suspended above Wang's gourd-shaped sculpture in the museum. When the number was called, a series of everyday Chinese streetscapes and landscapes were projected within the sculpture while the caller listened to the artist's recorded message, which included an invitation to leave a message in return. Twenty other immersive and challenging works from Asia and Australia were presented, with screening programmes from the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, dLux MediaArts, Asialink and the Hong Kong-based Videotage.<sup>18</sup> All artworks were submitted to and approved by the Ministry of Culture, except for one video that inadvertently included brief footage of a Falun Gong exercise display. When the exhibition opened, it was difficult to believe that just four years earlier, state-run exhibitions could not or would not deviate from the accepted definition of art as a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a plinth.<sup>19</sup>

Although not in a public space or museum, a new media art exhibition from Australia found an inventive platform that bypassed official process. In 1999, Linda Wallace curated six Australian artists into a new media art exhibition titled *Probe*,<sup>20</sup> at the Australian embassy in Beijing, supported by embassy Cultural Counsellor Anthony Taylor and Australian gallerist Brian Wallace<sup>21</sup> and encouraged by Geremie Barmé. The exhibition was mounted in the foyer of the embassy, allowing access through a ticketed invitation that was recycled many times over to an eager Chinese audience.<sup>22</sup> Outside state-run institutions, performance, installation art, and video and media art



continued to push boundaries, eventually triggering another formal government crackdown in early 2001.<sup>23</sup> Despite these restrictions, which led to provocative exhibitions being closed and artists being arrested or detained, the concept of new digital technologies applied to contemporary art was, we were told, considered through a different lens by the government. After the 2002 MAAP *in Beijing: Moist* new media art exhibition and symposium, the Art Museum of China Millennium Monument continued to emphasise new media art, partnering with curator, educator and artist Zhang Ga to produce the Beijing International New Media Arts Exhibition and Symposium in June 2004, at which I presented some MAAP projects.<sup>24</sup>

In March 2005, Zhang Peili returned to Australia to present two works, on an invitation from the then director of the Institute of Modern Art, Michael Snelling.<sup>25</sup> In Brisbane, Zhang installed two single-channel projections, *Actor's Lines* (2002) and *Last Words* (2003), in the main gallery. This became another opportunity for us to meet, without any specific project in mind; and although we met regularly in different exhibition contexts in China and internationally, it would be four years before concrete plans began for another project.

### Standard translation

In 2010, I invited Zhang Peili to produce a site-specific installation in the context of selected public libraries in Australia and China, as part of the project *Light from Light* (2010–12). This project invited five Australian and five Chinese artists to create works that would be installed in the State Library of Queensland, in Brisbane; the Shanghai Library; the National Library of China; the National Art Museum of China, in Beijing; and the Hangzhou Public Library.<sup>26</sup> After considering and responding to the library sites, Zhang decided to revise *Standard Translation* (2008), originally a 4:3 single-channel video work, using newly available hardware and software. Under the same title, the new work (2008–10) transformed the earlier video concept into a custom-built two-metre-long scrolling-text LED monitor, a medium that evokes authoritative news headlines and didactic stock-market information.<sup>27</sup> The development of the work and the exhibition tour kept communications and meetings frequent, including travel by Zhang to Australian and Chinese venues.

At the State Library of Queensland, Zhang's monitor replaced the existing red-text LED news monitor in the Tim Fairfax Newspaper Reading Room. In Beijing, at the National Library of China, the work operated for the duration of the

exhibition atop a prominent though nondescript bookcase to confound and inspire researchers in periods of procrastination or contemplation. The project brought Zhang to Brisbane in September 2010 to work with technical staff at the library, to participate in a symposium and to refine the installation. He also travelled to Beijing, for the opening at the National Library of China, and to the Shanghai and Hangzhou libraries, to direct the installations. Australian artists Janet Burchill, Jennifer McCamley, Paul Bai, Eugene Carchesio, Joyce Hinterding, David Haines and Archie Moore and Austrian artist Josef Strau travelled to Shanghai for the installation and, later, to present at an exhibition symposium arranged with the support of Zhang Peili at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou. The artists toured the art school and presented their individual works and practice at the symposium. In addition, I offered a curatorial exhibition overview to a symposium audience, predominantly students.

Through this extended contact during the two-year tour of *Light from Light*, Zhang and I discussed the possibility of presenting a solo exhibition in Australia. In 2012, when MAAP was opening a new exhibition venue in Brisbane, MAAP SPACE, he agreed to present his work as the opening exhibition. In August 2012, he returned once again to Brisbane to direct the installation of his works, and also generously presented an artist's talk during the first few days of the exhibition. Zhang's solo exhibition included seminal works I had seen in our first meeting in 2001—*30 × 30* (1988), *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (1991) and *Uncertain Pleasure I* (1996)—and *Standard Translation* (2008–10), which had been in storage in Brisbane since the end of *Light from Light*. MAAP SPACE also showed a new work, *Q & A & Q* (2012), the first time it had appeared in a gallery or museum.<sup>28</sup>

### Q & A & Q

This synchronised two-channel video installation is projected into a corner of the gallery, with head-and-torso portraits of an interrogating policeman on the left screen and sequential interviews with two detained petty criminals on the right. The formal, perpendicular placement of each screen is triangulated with a simple hard bench that places the viewer as a central witness to the volley of questions and answers across the implied table. The footage was recorded by two cameras centred on the table, facing in opposite directions, to record each figure individually. Zhang Peili's characteristically neutral approach attempts to present the exchange as realistically as possible. The artist describes the work as a 'Question & Answer conversation recorded by ... installed equipment between two persons, who have opposing identities', and confirms 'it is neither CCTV, nor



is it a manipulated recording'.<sup>29</sup> This is not a rehearsed drama, but nor is it secretly filmed; there is a level of self-consciousness in both the police interviewer and the suspects being interviewed, which Zhang judges to be a better way to achieve a kind of realism.<sup>30</sup>

I returned to China in May 2013, bringing with me the package of DVDs to return to Zhang Peili personally. When I handed over this substantial collection and thanked him for his participation and continued support, Zhang pushed the works back to me, saying, 'You should take these back with you; you might need them.' For me, this was a memorable gesture of trust, as well as, perhaps, a challenge to make another project. The works were securely stored, and it was not until discussions with Olivier Krischer about making an exhibition at the CIW that this significant collection of works began once again to stir and inspire.

Immediately preceding the CIW project was another exhibition on which Zhang and I collaborated between 2013 and 2015. *LANDSEASKY: Revisiting Spatiality in Video Art* (2014–15) was a touring exhibition that evolved with founding support from OCAT Shanghai and further support from the Art Sonje Center, in Seoul; the Guangdong Museum of Art, in Guangzhou; the National Art School Gallery, in Sydney; Griffith University Art Gallery; and MAAP SPACE, in Brisbane. The curatorial focus was on sculptural and spatial approaches to video by selected Australian, Chinese and other international artists, taking as a reference point the international ('global') dialogue in conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>31</sup> The exhibition opened in Seoul in February 2014 with the support of Sunjung Kim at the Art Sonje Center and local satellite commercial art gallery spaces, before travelling to OCAT Shanghai in April. Zhang Peili was one of the artists who joined the project as it developed, with his work *The Distance of One Kilometre* (2010), a two-channel video installation showing two people holding a video camera, walking towards each other in a straight line from a distance of one kilometre until they meet. Additional electronic hardware interfered with the standard recording signal to increasingly distort the visual and audio recording of their approach, resulting in a crescendo of blinding and deafening white noise.<sup>32</sup> The exhibition concluded at the Guangdong Museum of Art in May 2015.<sup>33</sup>

### *Zhang Peili: From Painting to Video*

Now we return to the 'resting point in our shared conversation': the exhibition at CIW that was inspired by the revelation of a painting thought to have been lost. The exhibition brought colleagues to Canberra in August 2016, to once again

meet with Zhang Peili and to appreciate the depth and multiple facets of this long relationship with the artist. Lois Conner, Geremie R. Barmé, John Clark, Claire Roberts, Paul Bai, Katherine Grube, Olivier Krischer and I joined Zhang in the opening celebrations of his exhibition. Zhang also gave the keynote address, ably translated by novelist and cultural critic Linda Jaivin, for a parallel conference organised with the ANU School of Art, titled *Moving Image Cultures in Asian Art*.<sup>34</sup>

The first work encountered in the CIW exhibition, *Uncertain Pleasure I* (1996), has been presented in various configurations since it was first displayed at Galerie de France, Paris, in 1996. This six-channel work is duplicated across twelve monitors and always specifically arranged to suit the exhibition.<sup>35</sup> At CIW, eight monitors were positioned within the gallery, with four monitors outside, as if the dividing glass entrance doors were of no consequence. Sliding through the verge of the gallery, the work broke into the public foyer, emphasising the spatial experience of Zhang's video artwork. The physical positioning of *Uncertain Pleasure* inside and outside the gallery activated an awareness of other boundaries and thresholds, signalling the inclusion of other, incidental views through the gallery's north-facing glass wall: the expansive grounds, the Australian native shrubs, the mature gum trees and Sullivans Creek. Placing the monitors on the ground, fanning out into the foyer, allowed sight lines to other works within the gallery space. From the entry foyer, looking over the dozen monitors showing the iconic skin-scratching imagery, the luridly coloured sliding text of *Standard Translation* could be seen in the background, perched high on the dark-grey back wall.

Noticeable also from the entry was the incandescent 'video blue' background behind the newsreader in *Water: Standard Translation from the Cihai Dictionary* (1991), set on a plinth against the left wall and indirectly facing the painting *Flying Machine* (1994). The hard-edged helicopter shape in *Flying Machine* is surrounded by a very similar blue, making a palpable link between the artist's representation of Chinese official-media imagery in video and in this painting made three years later. The identity of the helicopter in *Flying Machine* is indeterminate, though the shape looks to be transposed from a newspaper photo or television footage. Zhang again provokes questions about how reality is represented in television and print media, with each work seeming to adopt official media templates, though emptied of practical information and original subjectivity. The painting was hung in a section of the gallery with a relatively low ceiling height and in contrast to the grey walls, the surrounding section of this wall was painted white, intensifying the brightness of the blue. Closely examining the painting's surface, one can identify the brush work and masking technique that is used to articulate



the shape of the 'flying machine'. It occurs to me that the treatment of paint in this work is uncommon in comparison to his *Swimmers* (1985), the saxophone player in *Musical Pause* (1985) or the *X?* series of glove paintings (1986–87). Rather than the very flat and often thin appearance of paint in these works, the helicopter shape is patterned with an accumulation of informal drips and splashes of paint, evidencing an abstract impulse, only to be reined back to reinstate a 'neutral' subjectivity by masking the outlined shape of a helicopter and painting the surrounding canvas, to the limits of the painting, flat blue—a rare technique in Zhang's painting practice.

Beyond the monitors of *Uncertain Pleasure* and the brightness of *Flying Machine*, the sight of a modest twenty-four-inch CRT monitor on a plinth drew you further into the gallery, to *30 × 30* (1988), Zhang's first use of video. The audio was set low, without headsets, coexisting with the louder, stern audio feed from *Water: Standard Translation from the Cihai Dictionary* nearby. We chose to display these works on modestly sized monitors, in keeping with the original technology and sympathetic to the gallery's dimensions. Turning to the right, the view down the end of the gallery rested on yet another twenty-four-inch CRT monitor offering a glimpse of *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (1991). As this work has no sound its proximity to the entrance of the last work in the exhibition, *Q & A & Q*, posed no conflict; in fact, the control and ultimate submission of the repeatedly washed and rinsed chicken spoke thematically to the issues of control and submission within the repetitive interrogation sequences of *Q & A & Q*. Behind the wall that supported *Document on Hygiene No. 3*'s simple plinth and monitor was the final exhibition room. Two simple wooden chairs faced the corner where the two-channel projection *Q & A & Q* looped endlessly, with the audio playing from speakers. This final work completes the exhibition context that supports Zhang Peili's painting *Flying Machine* in the Canberra setting.

In this way, the origins of *Zhang Peili: From Painting to Video* can be traced across three decades, involving a cohort of artists, curators and academics in uncalibrated waves of meetings, exhibitions and relationships with the artist and many of his peers. Our intermingled stories, at once professional and personal, combine to make a particular account of cultural exchange, collaboration and friendship.

- 1 Huang Zhuan and Jing Wang, eds., Zhang Peili: *Yishu gongzuo shouce* [Artistic Working Manual of Zhang Peili] (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu Chubanshe, 2008), 184–85.
- 2 This installation displayed the scene of ballroom dancers from eight fixed camera positions filmed from outside the dance floor; the imagery is turned in on itself by playing that vision on the eight monitors turned to the inside of the circular formation. Commissioned and acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery for the Third Asia Pacific Triennial, in 1999, this work was also exhibited in the *Zhang Peili: Record. Repeat.* solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2017.
- 3 *Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) was the smaller, Sydney iteration of the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, principally organised by Beijing critic Li Xianting and Hong Kong gallerist Johnson Chang Tsong-zung, held at the Hong Kong City Hall and Hong Kong Arts Centre between January and February 1993, as part of the Hong Kong Arts Festival. Sydney was the first overseas destination for the show, which then toured to Melbourne, Vancouver and five venues across the United States. In Sydney, the writer Nicholas Jose, who had been Australia's cultural counsellor in Beijing between 1987 and 1990, acted as curatorial advisor to the MCA.
- 4 Jonathan Watkins, an art history graduate of the University of Sydney, travelled to China in 1997–98 to research artists, with the support of the critic Huang Du. Jonathan Watkins, email to author, 11 July 2017.
- 5 This followed from MoMA curator Barbara London's September 1997 research trip to China, for which she made a blog titled *Stir-Fry: A Video Curator's Dispatches from China*. See [www.adaweb.com/context/stir-fry/index1.html](http://www.adaweb.com/context/stir-fry/index1.html). MoMA then held *Zhang Peili: Eating* to exhibit the work, 28 October 1998–2 February 1999. The museum also acquired *Document on Hygiene No. 3* (1991), possibly in 1998. See [www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_386972.pdf](http://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_386972.pdf).
- 6 Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) director Amanda McDonald Crowley organised the event, held from May to early June 2000, which included fifty-eight artists, tutors and curators from Europe, North America, Asia and Australia. I participated as an invited curator. Wang Gongxin was the only artist from China, but among other Asian artists were Shilpa Gupta and Monica Narula from India, Partha Pratim Sarker from Bangladesh, and Hartanto and Christiawan from Indonesia.
- 7 Pi Li completed his doctorate in 2010 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, in Beijing. He was then curator and gallerist at Boers Li Gallery, Beijing, from 2005 to 2012. In July 2012 he became senior curator at the M+ Museum of Visual Culture, Hong Kong.
- 8 This was the preferred method for returning artworks, to reduce freight complications with customs.
- 9 Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong, Timezone 8, 2006), 274–75.
- 10 The Loft New Media Art Space had been operating for just eight months, having opened on 10 August 2000 with an installation by Gu Dexin. An account of projects and proposals are documented in the self-published booklet *Welcome to the Loft* (2002), as a special project for the 2002 Gwangju Biennale. The programme in this booklet was curated by Wang Gongxin and Pi Li, with an additional text from Lin Tianfang.
- 11 *Image and Phenomenon* was held in a gallery space at the China Academy of Art on 14 September 1996, featuring video works by fifteen artists, most of which were multi-channel installations.
- 12 Zhang Peili established the New Media Art Centre at the China Academy of Art in 2001. The first students were enrolled in 2003, and Zhang worked closely on curriculum development throughout 2004 and 2005. The first class of new media art students graduated in 2006.
- 13 For details of the special screening programmes and video installations that were also presented, see [www.maap.org.au/exhibition/maap-2001-excess](http://www.maap.org.au/exhibition/maap-2001-excess).
- 14 Produced by MAAP in partnership with the Art Museum of China Millennium Monument, the Beijing Gehua Cultural Development Group, the China International Exhibitions Agency, the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the Australian embassy in Beijing.
- 15 Besides the independent artist, Wang Gongxin, Pi Li was then an assistant researcher at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing; Fan Di'an was vice president of CAFA; Li Taihuan was artistic consultant for the Chinese International Exhibitions Agency; and Wang Yudong was vice director of the Art Museum of China Millennium Monument. Organisational support also came from Linda Hao, a cultural relations officer at the Australian embassy.
- 16 The process of gaining permission from the Ministry of Culture is ongoing; in fact, with advancing technology it is widening to include further venues open to the public.



- 17 Other artists and contributors to the *Web of Life* were Michael Gleich, Bernd Lintermann, Torsten Belschner, Lawrence Wallen and Manfred Wolff-Plottegg. Lintermann and Wolff-Plottegg travelled to Beijing to install the work as well as to participate in the symposium and related events.
- 18 For the catalogue of art works, screenings, residencies and related events at the Art Museum of China Millennium Monument and the Loft New Media Art Space, see [www.maap.org.au/publications/#moi](http://www.maap.org.au/publications/#moi).
- 19 After the 1989 exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, there would be restrictions avoiding the presentation of Chinese contemporary art in state-run museums until 1998.
- 20 Linda Wallace was a PhD student at The Australian National University and this exhibition was an outcome of that research. On Wallace's practice as a video artist and curator, including her work in Asia, see [www.machinehunger.com.au/new.html](http://www.machinehunger.com.au/new.html) and [www.scanlines.net/person/linda-wallace](http://www.scanlines.net/person/linda-wallace) (which includes video clips).
- 21 Brian Wallace first travelled to Beijing in 1984, returning in 1985 and eventually staying on to work and study, including earning a degree in art history from the Central Academy of Fine Art. In 1991, he opened the first foreign-owned contemporary art gallery in Beijing, Red Gate Gallery, which was initially in the China World Trade Hotel, before moving into the Ming-dynasty era Dongbianmen watchtower, one of the few remaining buildings from Beijing's city walls.
- 22 This more relaxed access to the Australian embassy changed after the September 11 attacks in New York, and the subsequent proclamation of a war on terror. For exhibition details, see [www.machinehunger.com.au/probe](http://www.machinehunger.com.au/probe).
- 23 Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 274–75.
- 24 Zhang Ga, then based in New York, was teaching at the Parsons New School of Design. In 2008, the exhibition evolved into the Beijing International New Media Biennial, moving to the National Art Museum of China with the support of its director, Fan Di'an. MAAP partnered with the project, presenting Australian artists Stelarc and Transmute Collective, as well as Kim Kichul from Korea and Paul Lincoln from Singapore. In 2011, it became the International Triennial of New Media Art. MAAP again partnered with the 2014 edition, *Thingworld*, supporting projects by Australian artists Wade Marynowsky, Keith Armstrong, Lawrence English, Petra Gemeinbach and Rob Saunders.
- 25 Communications to support this invitation were assisted by MAAP and Paul Bai.
- 26 This public art project was awarded the Australian Ministry of Arts inaugural Australia Arts in Asia Award—Visual Art in 2013. For the exhibition catalogue, see [www.maap.org.au/publications/#ifl](http://www.maap.org.au/publications/#ifl).
- 27 The LED messages, displayed in an array of lurid colours that are intentionally uncomfortable to read, are generated by a 2010 version of Google Translate software. The original or source text, the Chinese proverb *hao han bu chi yan qian kui* 好汉不吃眼前亏, which refers to having the wisdom to retreat from otherwise certain defeat in battle, is translated into English by the software to read 'Heroes do not eat the immediate loss'. In this way, the proverb is systematically misrepresented and degraded through more than twenty-five languages.
- 28 Boers-Li Gallery in Beijing had shown this work at Art Basel, Switzerland, earlier that year. After MAAP's exhibition in August, it was exhibited at the Shanghai Biennale, from 2 October 2012.
- 29 Zhang Peili, artist's statement, in the catalogue to the Ninth Shanghai Biennale (2012), the first year it was held at the Power Station of Art. In Li Xianyang and Xu Jiang, eds., *Reactivation: 9th Shanghai Biennale: DS Inter-city Pavilion Project* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2012), 138.
- 30 Zhang, artist's statement, 138.
- 31 Artists included Jan Dibbets (Netherlands); Yang Zhenzhong, Wang Gongxin, Wang Peng, Zhu Jia and Zhang Peili (China); Kimsooja, Yeondoo Jung and Sim Cheol-Woong (South Korea); Paul Bai, Lauren Brincat, Barbara Campbell, Derek Kreckler and Craig Walsh (Australia); Giovanni Ozzola (Italy); João Vasco Paiva (Portugal / Hong Kong); Shilpa Gupta (India); and Heimo Zobernig (Austria). Curator Kim Machan. Full details of the project are available at [www.maap.org.au/exhibitions](http://www.maap.org.au/exhibitions). The catalogue is also online: [www.maap.org.au/publications/#lss](http://www.maap.org.au/publications/#lss).
- 32 This work was commissioned for the exhibition *Not Only Time: Zhang Peili and Zhu Jia*, at REDCAT, Los Angeles, but was titled *One Line, One Kilometer* in the exhibition brochure: [www.redcat.org/sites/redcat.org/files/gallery/linked-files/2011-06/NOT\\_BROCH\\_15A.pdf](http://www.redcat.org/sites/redcat.org/files/gallery/linked-files/2011-06/NOT_BROCH_15A.pdf).
- 33 For documentation of the installation at Guangdong Museum of Art, and a full list of participating artists, see [www.maap.org.au/exhibition/maap-gdm0a/](http://www.maap.org.au/exhibition/maap-gdm0a/).

- 34 The conference *Moving Image Cultures in Asian Art* (26–28 August 2016) was convened by Chaitanya Sambrani (ANU School of Art) and Olivier Krischer (CIW), with the support of the ANU College of Art and Social Sciences. See [www.soa.anu.edu.au/event/conference-moving-image-cultures-asian-art](http://www.soa.anu.edu.au/event/conference-moving-image-cultures-asian-art). Zhang's keynote lecture, titled 'Text and Context', and the subsequent Q&A session are online: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTu7e2gn-Gg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTu7e2gn-Gg).
- 35 In 2012, at MAAP SPACE, in Brisbane, an expansive ten-metre-wide by twenty-two-metre-long warehouse-style, darkened exhibition space was dedicated to this work.



At the opening of *Light from Light* exhibition, Zhang Peil talks about his work *Standard Translation* to the audience at the National Library of China in 2011.

在中国国家图书馆举办的“光源自光”展览开幕式上张培力向观众讲解他的作品《标准翻译》。