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Essay: A Studio Visit With Zhang Peili

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A Studio Visit With Zhang Peili

Among the most committed of the younger generation of Chinese installation artists, Zhang Peili constantly forces probing questions on the state of the viewer's consciousness.

By Joan Lebold Cohen

"Hangzhou is paradise on earth," goes an old Chinese saying. It is true that the capital of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) still has idyllic gardens that line the shore of West Lake, and that soft mists surround the mountain—the place where installation artist Zhang Peili lives part-time. In Asia the "Hangzhou paradise" is as vivid as a Westerner's vision of the Grand Canal in Venice immortalized in the paintings of Canaletto. Thus, when the invitation to Zhang's *Temporary Scenic Spot* in New York's Greenpoint section of Brooklyn in May 1995 arrived, it was hard to know what to expect. Despite its name, Greenpoint is well-coated in New York's urban grime, and is a mixed industrial-working class neighborhood of abandoned wharves and rusted machinery, without redeeming architecture or parks.

The *Temporary Scenic Spot* turned out to be a wall of newspapers neatly stacked in a loft. Piles of newspapers formed a barrier so tall that no one could see over it. Only free-standing stairs offered a peek over the newsprint barrier. For four hours, Zhang performed behind the newspaper wall—tearing newspapers. There was the noise of the paper tearing and a pipe banging, and occasionally, his hands could be seen. The torn papers went into plastic-lined bins on wheels, ready for recycling.

Is that art? Or, more precisely, where is the art in this installation-performance? The artist explains, "There was a certain

suspense as to when you would see my hands above the paper wall amid the noise from tearing paper and banging pipe. Newspaper is the only durable medium. It only functions for one day as current information and then most people treat it as if it were no longer useful, even though sometimes it contains important information. Thus, the meaning [of each paper and each item within it] is transformed into one symbolic meaning as a whole. The piles of old information have a tragic feeling. Eve-



Zhang Peili, Best Before 6/28/94, 1994. Installation: TV monitors, videotapes, heating plates, kettles, water, chicken.

rything is past and forgotten. Just as if the individual were meaningless.

"The stairs in front of the wall of papers offer different views, a new way of looking at the papers and information. The new angle doesn't come naturally because the paper has a prefixed point of view. The bins that carry away the torn papers for recycling further rob all individuality and that presents a contrast to the papers inside and outside the wall."

Zhang Peili has done many installations in China, Europe, and America, incorporating video, as found objects and live performance. His *Report on 1988 Hepatitis* shown at the 1989 China Avant-Garde exhibition at China's National Art Gallery featured a desiccated rubber glove installation that assaulted the Chinese art establishment with its non-art, better-left-mentioned topic of disease and its use of materials. To allude to the ever present hazard of hepatitis was understood as a negative view on the image of China's public health situation. The Chinese Communist official view of art's function is to teach and encourage the masses into health, beauty, and virtue, not to shock them into reality that is frequently ugly. Zhang had been a sickly child and one assumes from his composition that he carries with him a nightmare of surgical gloves.

In response to the question how do his pieces relate to one another, Zhang said, "They are connected through life. I use everyday materials. My primary concern is the meaning of time. Just as the newspapers change color over time, so do the gloves disintegrate—nothing stays the same. I want the audience to see the transformation. That is my role as artist."

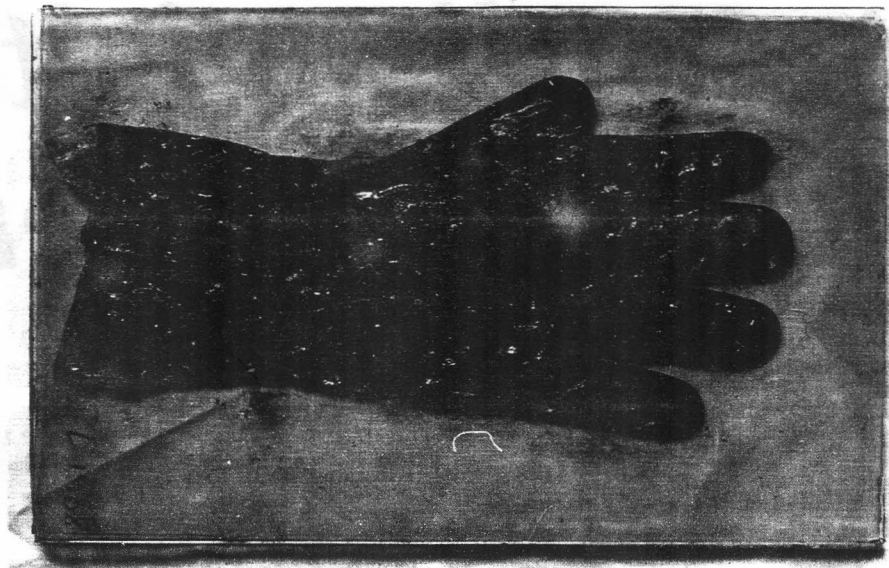
Queried about the gloves, Zhang said, "I did those gloves ten years ago, and I can't really remember why I did them. But my most important point is to raise the audience's consciousness that there is not one single way to look at anything. I strive for the multi-angle. I want to position my

work half way between art and life."

Zhang's preoccupation with consciousness-raising concerning the existence of various views is hardly surprising considering the totalitarian rights and wrongs that were forced on him as he grew up in China. His quest for different versions recalls Kurosawa's classic film *Rashomon*, which doubts the possibility of a single "truth."

In 1991, Zhang showed *Private Letter*, an installation in a garage show in Shanghai. It consisted of a series of plexi boxes containing marbles and bits of plaster and wood in different patterns displayed on a white slab. The scraps of plaster chips were scattered evenly over the bottom of the box. In another box, marbles were frozen in a silvery plaster that assumes the shape of a pie. The objects had no special beauty or ugliness but were simply things. Zhang said, "The materials I put into museum boxes are a joke. And as soon as I put such bits into a transparent box and preserve it, the box makes them look as if they were worth saving. But, the point is, one can't really show one's private thoughts or preserve them. I was responding to the pressure of private life. It is hard to please a mass audience [which Chinese artists are directed to do]. Only the artist knows his own object's meanings. Moreover, once I present my own private view to an audience, I have lost it. Everyone avoids talking about his private life but wants to know about others."

Many of Zhang's video pieces involve repetition of an action or word. *Children's Playground*, 1992, exposes different angles of a battery-operated toy bird that climbs to the top of a stair that slides down a looping track. At the end of the slide the bird re-enters the base, climbs the



Zhang Peili, *Report on Hepatitis*, (detail), 1988, glass, rubber gloves, plaster, varnish.

stair and slides down again, endlessly. The toy's own clanking sound creates the video's obsessive soundtrack. Zhang said, "Video is the best medium to show transformation." Thus the artist's goal was to raise the viewer's consciousness in order to get beyond the toy into another realm.

A more unusual example of the same idea was *Document of Hygiene No. 3*, made in 1991 and shown in 1993 at the Berlin China Avant-Garde Exhibition. It is a video showing Zhang washing a chicken in soap and water continuously for one hour. Repetition and transformation. The artist further developed this idea in his piece *Best Before 6/28/1994*, which includes TV monitors, videotapes, hot plates, kettles, water, and chickens. A cluster of slow-motion videos show the action of dissecting, cleaning, slicing, eating, and licking a chicken. Hot plates with pans of boiling chicken soup are placed in front of

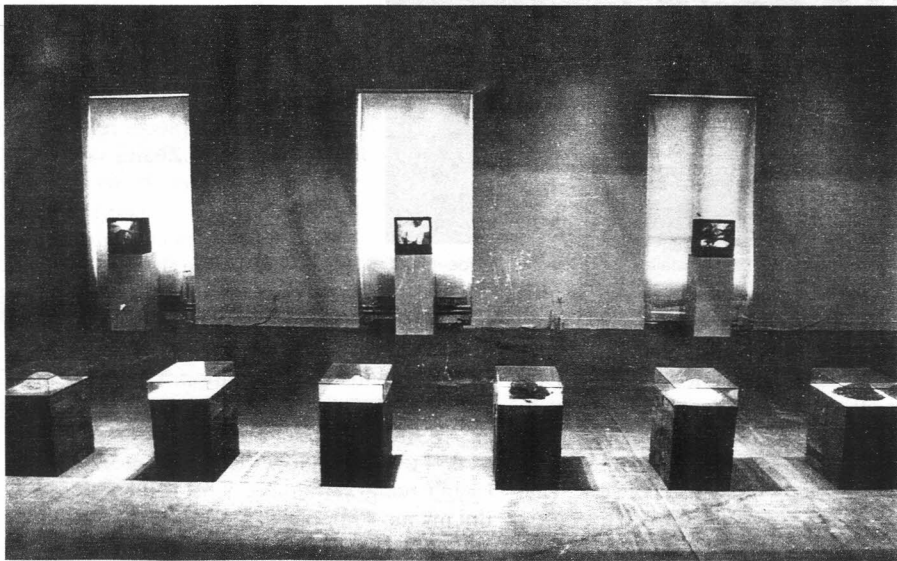
the TV monitors. The chicken in the soup cooks slowly and continuously with water added daily.

Zhang says: "Chickens are the birds paid least attention by humans who say they want to protect animals. People have great feelings for dogs but not chickens. My video washing the chicken is meant to provoke people into questioning: am I helping or hurting, protecting or abusing the chicken?"

Yet another video, *Assignment No. 1*, 1992, shows a magnified, slow-motion view of blood being extracted for testing. Again it was shot at different angles, and different versions were shown on various monitors simultaneously.

Zhang's pieces all have a sardonic humor and far-out comments on the mores of so-called civilization. By distancing himself from the usual and politically correct point of view, he reveals the absurdity of our lives and asks the viewer to make his own conclusions. This is very much in the new style of interactive TV used in many teaching situations. Zhang is definitely part of the post-modern generation—plugged into the international artistic internet: there is no cultural time-lag between his work and the artists working in the West.

As we approach the end of the 20th century, Zhang's installation *Not For Sale*, 1993, is millennial. He shows ten types of powder from the everyday life of humans, animals, and industry in plexi boxes set on bricks. Samples of salt, iron, hair, fur milk, soap, salt, sawdust, bone, and lime are dignified with such a museum setting. "They are the last evidence of cultural activity," says Zhang. Δ



Background: Zhang Peili, *Document on Hygiene No. 3*, 1993, video installation. Foreground: Zhang Peili, *Not For Sale*, 1993, installation: 10 types of powders, plexi glass, bricks,

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